Fortunately for Ichiro, he was able to afford it. And then some. In the fall of 2000, he signed a three-year deal worth $12 million with the Seattle Mariners, negotiated by his new American agent Tony Atanasio.

He was finally on his way.

THE MEANING OF ICHIRO

We still can't get over the fact that he is a real hero to Americans. We still can't see that.

Satoshi Gunji, Book Editor, Kadokawa Publishing, November 2002

Ichiro is the first cool Japanese I've ever met.

Unidentified American Sportswriter

There had always been a special conceit in the land where baseball was born that a small man could not play in the major leagues. A small Japanese man, that is. That particular species was viewed with the same disdain which Americans used to have for products bearing the label “Made in Japan”—once a synonym for poor quality.

As the first position player ever from Japan to seek his spot in the major leagues, Ichiro was considered too slight and too fragile. An advertised 5’9” 156-pounder, his seven batting titles in Japan were regarded as insignificant by the vast majority of MLB insiders, Bobby Valentine and company notwithstanding, because they believed the Japanese played a second-rate, Ping-Pong type of game. Sure, there might have been a few pitchers capable of performing at the top levels of the American game, but they were the exception. Playing every day was something else.

Suzuki’s detractors snootily declared that the bigger and stronger
MLB pitchers would cut the 27-year-old wisp down to size with high inside fastballs. ESPN's Rob Dibble, in a preseason interview with the Seattle Mariners' then manager Lou Piniella, had stated flatly that he would strip naked and run through Times Square if the little squirt won a batting crown.

Actually, size turned out to be less of a problem than people had anticipated. From mid-2000 to the spring of 2001, while no one was really watching, Ichiro had gained nearly 20 pounds on top of his listed weight of 156 pounds through intensive weight training. In fact, when he reported to the Mariners camp in sun-drenched Arizona, the uniform they had readied for him was too tight, thanks to new muscle mass in his arms, shoulders and legs. This raised suspicions in some quarters, although never proven, that he had been taking steroids, suspicions fueled by the fact that he had refused to join other NPB stars and play on Japan's baseball team in the Australian Olympics. Reporters speculated that he was afraid to take the required drug tests. Whatever the reason, Ichiro was stronger than he had ever been. He also insisted that the Mariners' 5'9" height listing was off by nearly two inches.

Ichiro did, in fact, endure a period of adjustment. Initially, he found it difficult to get used to the pitching motion of American hurlers, which was much quicker than the "one-two-and-three" herk-and-jerk style of many Japanese pitchers, incorporating as they usually did a brief pause at the height of their delivery to throw off a batter's timing. With Americans, he discovered, there was simply no "and." They just wound up and came right at you. Because of this, Ichiro found it necessary to eliminate the pendulum-style leg lift he had used all his years in Japan and employ a new, more compact stance that, ironically, would have pleased his former manager Shozo Doi.

His new manager, Piniella, also had his doubts. After watching his expensive rookie bat in the first several games of the exhibition season, during which he hit balls nowhere but to the opposite field, Piniella took him aside and asked, in some frustration, "Don't you know how to pull the ball?"

"Sure," came the reply. "Anytime. That's easy." It was just that for the time being, he was focusing on a more important task: building a zone for himself in his head. He was working on chopping the ball to left field and, in the process, creating a mental "wall" in the outer part of the strike zone, for use as a permanent point of reference. Once he had done that, he would shift his focus to left-center and when he had that mental zone down pat, he would hit to center, then right.

Piniella was not impressed. "Why don't you show me right now that you can pull the ball to right," he said.

So in the very next exhibition game, Ichiro banged out three sharp line drives to right field and put a permanent end to all discussion about whether he could and could not hit the ball.

Piniella later confessed his astonishment that a batter could have that much bat control.

Ichiro wound up batting an impressive .321 for the exhibition season, and once the season started, it did not take long for the man (now sporting a new spiky hairdo and Day-Glo sunglasses) to serve notice that he was indeed special—that it was the pitchers who would have to learn to adjust to him and not the other way around.

On opening day against Oakland, in front of Nobuyuki Suzuki (who had been robbed on his way in from the airport) and 43,000 other fans at Safeco Field, Seattle's beautiful, sparkling new gem of a park, he collected his first two official MLB hits, including a perfect drag bunt single in the ninth inning that left the Oakland infielders searching for their athletic supporters. That surprise tactic led the Mariners to a dramatic come-from-behind victory and earned the famously reserved Japanese star a big, wet, sloppy kiss from the famously extroverted Piniella, an impulsive display of appreciation which the embarrassed Ichiro bore with some discomfort. As he told a Japanese TV crew, "It's something that makes most Japanese men want to throw up."

Back-to-back hitting streaks of 15 and 23 games followed, highlighted by three four-hit performances and a 10th-inning, game-winning home run in Texas. By the first week of June he was on the cover of Sports Illustrated (in the same week that the movie Pearl Harbor opened nationwide, ironically enough), leading the American League in hits with an overall batting average of .366. He also had a mark of
over .500 with the bases loaded, totally obliterating the misconception that Japanese batters could not handle major league pitching.

Opposing pitchers discovered that he could hit everything they threw at him: curves, sliders, changeups, split-fingers and pure unadulterated heat, in-high or low-and-away. It didn’t matter. He was an equal opportunity batsman. So exceptional was his hand-eye coordination that it was calculated he swung and missed only 6 percent of the time. These were figures that had not been seen since Wade Boggs was in his prime.

Although the Japanese flash could smack line drives to either gap and pull the occasional pitch into the stands, his specialty was slashing pitches in the dirt to the left side of the infield and then beating the throw to first base—his time down the line was a Mantleque 3.6 seconds, the swiftest in the major leagues. In fact, he was so quick out of the box that it looked to most observers as though he was running even before he had hit the ball. Opposing teams radically revised their infield defenses to cope, moving in only to leave larger holes through which Ichiro punched one-hoppers to the outfield.

This was, it should be pointed out, not exactly the Ichiro that Japanese fans were used to seeing. In the major leagues, Ichiro had half again as many infield hits as he had ever had in Japan, where he was rather more noted for whacking line drives over the infielders and for occasional bursts of power. The change was largely due to Piniella, who, when not showering his new star with affection, was ordering him to eschew the fly ball and chop pitches into the dirt, the better to take advantage of his blinding speed and force errant throws.

Seattle, a team that had heretofore relied primarily on home run power from its former slugging stars Ken Griffey Jr. and Alex Rodriguez, was now transformed into a gang of scrappers, scoring runs on infield hits, stolen bases and sacrifice flies, thanks to the spark plug from the Orient. In fact, the Mariners frequently scored a first-inning run before their cleanup hitters even had a chance to bat. Their offense was so diabolically effective that by mid-June, they found themselves leading the American League West by more than 22 games and were on pace to match the all-time single-season win record.

The new guy on the team also turned out to have one of the best throwing arms on the planet. In one frigid night game in Oakland, he launched a 200-foot missile that nailed Oakland baserunner Terence Long attempting to go from first to third on a single to right field. Long, who had expected to make the trip easily, was so astonished to be thrown out that he turned, faced right field and tipped his cap.

"I'm not the fastest guy in the world," he said later. "But that has to be the best throw I've ever seen." ESPN agreed. "The Throw," as it came to be known in Seattle baseball lore, quickly won a spot on the sports channel's highlight clips.

By the midseason break, the verdict was in. A survey of baseball managers, conducted by Baseball America, voted Ichiro the best baserunner in the American League, its second-best hitter and its third-best defensive outfielder. Catching great Ivan Rodriguez declared flatly, "Ichiro is the best player in the game."

In the voting for the All-Star Game, held fortuitously enough in Seattle, Ichiro garnered 3,373,000 votes—an all-time record, as was the 800,000-vote margin he boasted over his nearest rival. Although he had benefited from newly instituted Internet polling as well as convenience store voting in Japan, where zealous fans were notoriously un-shy about voting multiple times, he had also dominated the hard ballots filled out at stadiums across North America.

Piniella, sitting atop the baseball world, couldn't believe his good fortune. "This guy Suzuki, he hits, bunts and steals," he said. "He scores before you know it. He sets the tone for the team. He's phenomenal. . . . I'll bet if you ask the managers today what they really want, it's a leadoff man like him. And of course Ichiro is the best in the game." Said Mariners veteran first baseman John Olerud to a Japanese reporter, "He's without question the driving force on this team. He's the one who makes it go."

The effect that Ichiro's presence had on the city of Seattle and the entire Northwest was electric. Attendance at Mariners games surged, on its way to a new single-season record. Ichiro posters, T-shirts and jerseys flew off the shelves. Autographed Ichiro baseballs went for $500. An Ichiro bobblehead doll, a Mariners promotional giveaway in July, caused a 30 percent jump in ticket sales. One man drove all
the way from Boise, Idaho, just to get one of them, purportedly for
his son.

In addition, airline and hotel reservations rose 20 percent, the lat-
ter thanks primarily to visitors from Japan who were paying up to
$2,000 for baseball package tours. This caused the subsequent de-
but of sushi stands at Safeco, selling “Ichirolls” (tuna rolls for $9), for
example. Headbands emblazoned with the kanji slogan for “Water
Warrior” (a Mariners nickname) also went on sale, and a large Nis-
san sign in Kitakama was erected inside the park. The Pacific North-
west had never seemed more Japanese.

Analysis predicted that the Ichiro factor—when one included
ticket sales, souvenirs and advertising—would move over $100 mil-
lion into Seattle’s economy over a five-year span.

NHK, Japan’s quasi-national television network, which had
opened up a permanent booth in the Safeco upper deck, was tele-
casting live all Seattle games—182 of them including exhibition
and playoff games—back to Japan, where Ichiro was suddenly the
talk of the land. Almost overnight, solely because of him, Japan had
gone from a country that sporadically watched American baseball
to one that watched Seattle Mariners games with something ap-
proaching religious fervor, even though the 16-hour time difference
meant that the games were televised in the morning.

Tokyo taxi drivers plied the streets with their radios tuned to the
Mariners’ play-by-play in Japanese, while the numerous sports
dailies—14 in all with circulations of up to several hundred thousand
each—carried detailed reports on every move Ichiro made. His suc-
cess in the big leagues was the story of the year in Japan, the story of
the decade, perhaps. He got more attention than the Emperor and the
Prime Minister combined. Everybody wanted a piece of him, from the
mainstream newspapers, with circulations running well into the mil-
ions, to the myriad network TV shows, as well as the weekly and
monthly magazines. The Yukan Fuji, an evening tabloid, featured the
exploits of Ichiro on its back page every single day and saw its sales
jump dramatically. The Yomiuri Giants, a national institution whose
games had been televised nationwide nearly every evening since April
1954, saw their ratings drop.

With homegrown baseball suddenly relegated to second-tier sta-
tus, “How did Ichiro do today?” became a new way of saying hello
in Japan.

The Mariners had given credentials to 166 reporters dispatched
from Japan, many of whom were to take up permanent residence in
the Puget Sound area and follow Ichiro around 24-7 the entire sea-
son. This caused not a few headaches for the Mariners media rela-
tions department, bombarded as they were daily with requests for
information.

The Japanese reporters on the scene were on orders from their ed-
tors to file something new and interesting about Ichiro every day,
along with photos. This was not easy, because the object of their at-
tentions followed the same unvarying, if lengthy, pre- and postgame
routines with such religiosity that a minor event such as the delivery
by Ichiro of a bentō of pickled onigiri packed by Mrs. Suzuki for Bret
Boone (or even a gratuitous nose-picking) qualified as news. After
one workout, a Japanese writer approached Seattle coach John Mc-
Claren and asked, “Yesterday, Ichiro swung 214 times in batting
practice. Today he swung only 196 times. What is the problem?”

Desperate for something different, reporters staked out the house
on Mercer Island where Ichiro and his wife lived. They sifted through
the Suzuki family garbage and badgered the neighbors for infor-
mation. When a pictorial scandal magazine offered $1 million for a pho-
tograph of Ichiro in the nude and photographers took to hiding out
in the bushes near his back yard, Ichiro was forced to move to a high-
rise condominium to protect his privacy, as well as shower in private
at the ballpark. (He declined an offer from an insouciant fellow
Mariner to take a snapshot in the altogether and split the money.)

Observing all this, ESPN reporter and noted wit Jim Caple was
moved to remark, “This is what it would have been like if Princess Di
had played baseball.”

As the season wore on, Ichiro proved impossible to intimidate. Op-
posing pitchers who tried to knock him back with high, inside
pitches found his bat so quick he could snake their offerings down
the line. Knock him down and he’d get right back up and stand that
much closer to the plate. Send him to first with a pitch in the ribs and he’d promptly steal second, maybe even third for good measure. He was, in the words of fellow outfielder Mike Cameron, “one feisty little sucker.”

The longer schedule (152 games in 180 days in the MLB in 2001 as opposed to 140 games in 199 for the NPB) and a much heavier travel load than he had ever experienced in geographically compact Japan also proved to be less of a problem than many had predicted. Indeed, the only pitch that proved effective against Ichiro was an unexpected curve thrown by a long-legged 20-year-old Japanese exchange student—a young lady whom Ichiro had reportedly met at a hostess club for expatriate Japanese in San Francisco.

After a game in Oakland one night, as the story went, Ichiro had invited her to his hotel room at the Westin for a romantic encounter. He was unaware, when the young lady arrived, that the cell phone in her handbag was turned on and connected to a number that would record their subsequent activities.

A transcript of the recording subsequently appeared in the pages of Friday and caused a huge scandal. Among other things, it had Ichiro saying, “I’d like to tie you up with the bathrobe sash. The thought of it really turns me on.” Some readers compared its contents to the infamous Charles and Camilla tapes.

The embarrassment of it all plunged Ichiro into an 0–21 slump, his batting average plummeting from the .347 mark he had taken into the All-Star classic all the way down to .325 and prompted a flurry of wisecracks in the Japanese media. Typical was that of a Shukan Post journalist who wrote, “Ichiro might have great bat control, but this is one time he forgot to exercise it.”

Reportedly, Ichiro’s wife did not speak to him for a long time after that, while Ichiro and relief ace Kazuhiro Sasaki, who had joined Seattle a year earlier from the Yokohama BayStars, launched a brief boycott of the Japanese press for hounding them in such a manner.

Operation Tapegate proved to be only a temporary setback, however. In time, Ichiro regained his old stroke and by the end of the season he was leading the American League in a multitude of categories. He won the batting title, hitting .350, and led the league in hits with 242 (59 of the infield variety). The latter was an American League rookie record, as well as a Seattle Mariners team record and was the highest total anyone had seen in 71 years. He also led the AL in runs scored (127) and stolen bases (56), as Seattle finished with 116 victories, which broke the American League record for total wins heretofore held by the New York Yankees, with 114 in 1998. Ichiro had helped the Mariners achieve victory in the AL Divisional Playoffs (collecting 12 hits) before losing out to New York in the AL Championship Series in five games. He was chosen the American League’s Most Valuable Player as well as its Rookie of the Year (only the second man in history to earn both honors in one season) and won a Gold Glove. All in all he broke 13 MLB, AL or franchise records and his former critics now were saying that he had the ability to become the first man in over 60 years to hit .400.

Rob Dibble, true to his word, ran through Manhattan wearing nothing but a G-string.

American Hero

Americans liked Ichiro because, for one thing, he was a throwback to another time. He had reintroduced them to a style of offense that many MLB fans, accustomed to andro-induced sluggers and tape-measure home runs, had forgotten—an attack based on the single, the hit and run, and intrepid baserunning that had once defined the game. Said the Washington Post’s Thomas Boswell, the MLB poet laureate, “To see Ichiro hit is to be taken back almost a century to the hit ’em where they ain’t technique.” Some commentators compared him to Ty Cobb, Rogers Hornsby and other old-time greats. It was telling that before long, his teammates began copying his technique of slashing the ball to the opposite field.

But there was far more to his appeal than that. Fans had never seen anything quite like the contortionist ritual Ichiro put himself through before each and every at bat: an unvarying set of squats, stretches, shoulder rolls, quad stretches and practice swings designed to keep him relaxed, to empty his mind and, at the same time, to prevent him-
self from looking at the opposing pitcher before he was ready to mentally confront him.

Then, standing in the batter’s box like some modern-day Musashi Miyamoto (a famous 16th century swordsman), he would hold his bat one-handed, swinging it over his head in a clockwise arc, pointing it directly at the pitcher. Bending his elbow to touch his right shoulder and tug on his uniform sleeve, he would lock his arms and cock his hands, then, drawing a breath, he would wait for the first pitch in utter concentration.

It was a form of attack that, with its unvarying routine of getting set, breathing, exhaling and emptying the mind, then directing all concentration into two movements after being perfectly still, enabled Japanese practitioners of the martial arts, from zen archers to kendo combatants, to see their philosophy at work. It was also a way of hitting that Little League ballplayers all across America began copying.

On top of that there was Ichiro’s perfectionist attitude and a work ethic which put his teammates to shame. His pregame workouts were models of consistency and persistence—a demanding regime of running, calisthenics and weight lifting, followed by the detailed viewing of videotapes of the day’s opposition, that surpassed what everyone else on the Mariners did. It prompted Mariners second baseman Bret Boone to say, “I get tired just looking at him.”

Ichiro, in fact, opined that if his teammates spent more hours on the practice field they’d be even better off. He had expressed disappointment that in the Mariners’ spring camp, Piniella had eschewed practice games and gone straight into the exhibition matches, and that the team did not really start to play hard until opening day. There were no defensive relay drills for the infield and outfield, or other fundamental drills. It was greatly different from the Japanese camp where such things were practiced in great detail. If, on the one hand, he had found Japanese camps a little too rigid and had admired the way the American system allowed its athletes to relax, he, on the other, was concerned about MLB’s neglect of fundamentals.

“Their was the type of practice that made you wonder whether they could really play the game or not,” he said. “Many times during the season we made errors and I thought, ‘If we had just worked on that in camp.’”

In time, many of his teammates did begin imitating aspects of his practice routine, following the sophisticated set of stretching exercises he performed before games, as well as the special tee batting exercises he did. In fact, in 2003, a new manager, Bob Melvin, would incorporate some of Ichiro’s ideas on defensive practice in his camp and pregame regimens, and so would Tony LaRussa of the St. Louis Cardinals, after having a lengthy off-season discussion with Ichiro about the differences between Japanese and American spring training.

Ichiro’s dedication also showed in the respect he accorded his equipment. As his father had taught him, he religiously cleaned and oiled his glove after every game. He shined his shoes on a daily basis. He kept all his bats in a humidor and his game bat beside him in the dugout, propped against a pair of wooden tongue compressors taped together by the trainer. (His substitute bats were cradled on a rack above his head.) Once he reportedly felt so bad about throwing down one of his bats after an unproductive plate appearance that he brought it back to his hotel room and polished it. None of these habits were followed by American players, a state of affairs that Ichiro had a hard time grasping.

“I couldn’t understand how my teammates could sit down on a glove I’d just cleaned and placed on the bench,” he once complained. “I couldn’t understand why they didn’t take care of their equipment more. How can you play well and improve if your equipment is not in good condition? Cleaning the glove cleans the heart. It’s all part of a 24-hour process, in which everything—eating, sleeping properly, doing correct pregame workouts—is all intertwined.”

Chikara wa keizoku (“continuity is strength”) was his personal motto.

In some ways, Ichiro seemed a cypher. With him, there were never any untoward displays of emotion, which was something else that separated him from many of his American colleagues. As had been his habit in Japan, there were no excessive celebrations of victory; no wallowing in the pain of defeat. No pumping of his fist in exultation after a home run. Not once during his time in Seattle did he ever lose his
temper or his cool, even when victimized by a bad call or a fastball in the ribs. (That was a lesson from his father, who repeatedly cautioned him that such boorish behavior would only affect his mental state and lead to a lapse of concentration on the next play.) At the same time, he never ever seemed to get rattled under pressure no matter what the situation—as his fat batting average with the bases loaded would indicate.

“I get nervous and upset like everyone else,” he said, “but I just don’t want others to know it or see my fighting spirit on the surface.”

He needn’t have worried.

As an admiring Japanese baseball philosopher put it sometime later, adding his own spin on the cool Ichiro persona, “Ichiro knows the mu or nothingness of zen.”

Ichiro tapped into America’s nostalgia for baseball the way it used to be in still other ways. After pregame workouts, he would amble over to the fans in the stands down the right-field line and sign autographs—yet another thing that fewer and fewer major leaguers could be bothered with. Following a season that most players could only dream about, no one heard him complaining about his relatively low annual salary of $4 million. Indeed, prior to coming to America, he had told his agent Attanasio that he did not care how much money he made in MLB as long as he could play there. He would also turn down $35 million in endorsement offers by 2002, because he thought the products would either detract from his image or the effort required would impede his concentration on baseball in some fashion. He continually displayed a profound reluctance to discuss his accomplishments. Summing up his record-breaking first MLB season in a special 90-minute documentary for NHK, he said:

I really don’t like the word success or a lot of talk about records. Records are a way of saying a person is better than another. People use them. It’s a way of comparing players. I don’t mean to say that they have no value or are insignificant, but the most important thing is doing your best, preparing, giving your all. If you get a record without preparation, it’s not satisfying. If you really prepare, try hard, do your best and you succeed in surpassing yourself, that is really satis-

fying. If you do that and someone else surpasses you, then shogonai, it can’t be helped. So instead of thinking about who is number one and who is number two, you should think about whether you have given your best.

It was the kind of intelligent, well-thought-out statement that Ichiro was capable of. If the spirit moved him, but one that American fans seldom got to hear, partly because of the language barrier, but also because of, well, Ichiro’s chronic and unfortunate distaste for interviews.

After a game he would sit in front of his locker, massaging his feet with his back to the gaggle of reporters standing behind him. He would direct his answers to their questions through an interpreter or intermediary who then relayed them to the gentlemen and ladies of the press. American writers, who had never encountered anything like it, wondered, “Is that the way it’s done in Japan?” “Is that Zen?”

Well, yes and no. It certainly wasn’t the way things were done in NPB because access there was more controlled and reporters were never allowed inside the clubhouse. Even in permitted interview settings, however, there was a premium was placed on taciturnity. There was a saying in Japan that: “The man who says nothing, says everything.” And that indeed was zen.

But, even in a country where evasive answers were par for the course, Ichiro had been known as a notoriously difficult interviewee. A writer who made the mistake of asking him what his objectives were in baseball was apt to be dismissed with an abrupt: “I’m working toward my own inner goals. As for what those goals are, I can’t tell you.” Another common response was “I find that question too vague to answer.”

Said well-known sportswriter Masayuki Tamaki, a longtime Ichiro watcher, “He’s a control freak. He thinks that if he stays quiet then nobody will know what he thinks and he won’t be criticized. He’s a great player, but he’s also arrogant. Deep in their hearts, most people in the media in Japan don’t like him because he is so uncooperative. Most of them were hoping he would fail in the U.S.”

Ichiro’s general aloofness had not endeared him to all of his former Japanese teammates either. Said one Orix player, “He didn’t join us in
our morning walk. He was always the last one on the bus. He didn’t care if he kept his teammates waiting. He was a standoffish guy.” Nor had his attitude captured the hearts of Japanese residents of greater Seattle, who criticized him for not socializing more with them. Said a Seattle-based Japanese businesswoman in her 40s, “It’s too bad that someone like him had to be the one to represent Japan to the American people.”

Be that as it may, Ichiro still managed to connect with his American teammates—Bret Boone, for one, who had become addicted to the bentō (boxed lunch) Ichiro’s wife made for him—as well as his fellow MLB players. He would go out of his way to try to speak Spanish to the Latin players and English to the others. Cynics said that he tried harder to integrate in the United States than he did back home.

Not, it might be remarked, without a substantial measure of success.

**Seattle**

Asked once what he thought the significance of his accomplishments in the U.S. was, Ichiro replied simply, “I think I have narrowed the gap between America and Japan.” And indeed, he had. For openers, he had introduced his country to a segment of the American population that had never given Japan much thought. Twenty years earlier, most Seattleites had not even known what sushi was. Now they were eating it at the ballpark and shouting “gambaré,” along with other demotic Japanese phrases of encouragement. It was no small achievement.

Seattle had, in fact, undergone a remarkable transformation over that time—morphing from an insular, redneck, blue-collar industrial town of mostly aircraft line workers, loggers and fishermen, to a white-collar, high-tech, sophisticated corporate city of “Microsers,” home to three of the world’s 10 richest men, even after the NASDAQ meltdown of 2000.

With that transformation had come a desire to white out all that had been small-town and small-minded about Seattle’s past—which was not inconsiderable. The events portrayed in the bestselling novel *Snow Falling on Cedars*, a story of a murder set in Puget Sound in the 1950s amidst lingering memories of World War II and internment camps, were not altogether fictional—involving as they did racial prejudice, forbidden love and a falsely accused Japanese-American fisherman, a lifelong resident of the area.

Against that background, a kind of historical watershed occurred in 1991 when then Mariners owner Jeff Smulyan was on the brink of moving his team, a perennial loser with depressed attendance, to Florida. In an effort to keep the club where it was, a group of Seattle politicians and business leaders led by Slate Gorton prevailed upon Nintendo president Hiroshi Yamauchi, whose firm’s American branch was based in Redmond, to buy a majority share in the franchise. Yamauchi, an eccentric Kyoto aristocrat whose passion for go far exceeded his minimal interest in *bōsōzoku* and who had never been to Seattle to see the Mariners play, agreed to do it as a “gift” to the community.

However, the idea of a foreigner, or rather a Japanese foreigner, buying an MLB team was not warmly received in the country at large, thanks to the growing economic friction with Japan. At that particular time, Japan was at the height of its economic power. Its firms were buying up U.S. landmarks like Rockefeller Center, Pebble Beach and Columbia Pictures. The U.S. trade deficit with that country was so huge, courtesy of burgeoning Japanese automobile and electronics exports, that many Americans had begun complaining of a “Japanese invasion” and the threat it posed to the future of the faltering U.S. economy. It was a time when the rhetoric flew hot and heavy.

In January 1992, for example, in response to U.S. Japan-bashers, the Speaker of the Lower House of Parliament in Japan had termed the Americans “lazy and illiterate,” while Shinzō Abe, a popular novelist turned politician, claimed that Japanese could always make a better product than the Americans. That latter remark prompted U.S. Senator Ernest Hollings to retort undiplomatically that Ishihara was forgetting who made the atomic bomb. In a visit to a weapons factory in South Carolina, Hollings suggested employees “draw a mushroom
cloud and put underneath it: Made in America by lazy and illiterate workers and tested in Japan." In a highly charged incident some months earlier, a group of U.S. lawmakers had been photographed smashing a Japanese car with a sledgehammer.

Against this background, Philadelphia Phillies owner Bill Giles declared his opposition to the sale of the Mariners to Nintendo. "It's a patriotic issue for me," he sniffed, while Major League Baseball commissioner Fay Vincent announced it was not in the best interests of U.S. major league baseball to have foreign ownership by any other than a Canadian organization. A poll conducted at the time revealed that 70 percent of Americans queried were opposed to having Japanese own a major league franchise.

However, Seattleites, for their part, were beginning to view their region as part of the Pacific Rim. Not only did Asians constitute by far the largest minority in the Puget Sound area, the territory was dependent on the exports of Microsoft and other companies to Japan and the rest of the Asian economies. Many jobs also depended on the very Japanese imports that were taken to task in the country at large. There were enough folks who appreciated Nintendo's record as an upstanding member of the corporate community in the Pacific Northwest to successfully push the idea of Japanese ownership through, although it did not survive completely intact.

Although the major leagues had eventually agreed to Yamauchi's acquiring 60 percent of the Seattle franchise, they did so only on the humiliating condition that he restrict his voting interest to less than 50 percent. It was a restriction described by Donald Hellman, director of the Institute for International Policy at the University of Washington, as "out and out racism."

Nonetheless, Yamauchi, described by one business writer as "a likeable crab," agreed to pay $75 million of the estimated $125 million total price of the team, and consented to leave the day-to-day management of the Mariners to Nintendo America's chief, Howard Lincoln. Lincoln hired Pat Gillick as general manager, a man who had a reputation for creating competitive teams on less than exorbitant payrolls, and the Griffey/Rodriguez era was launched. Then in the winter of 1999, Gillick signed Kazuhiro Sasaki, relief ace of the Yokohama BayStars, who became an instant success with the Mariners, winning the 2000 Rookie of the Year award with a record of 37 saves and an ERA of 3.16. That year, the Seattle Mariners made a profit (of $10 million), the first in the history of the franchise. And, of course, they made even more money in 2001 when Yamauchi suggested the team acquire Ichiro Suzuki. By the end of that year, Japanese was virtually a second language at Safeco Field, with ideographs featured in advertisements all over the park. Suzuki was unable to walk in downtown Seattle without being mobbed.

Ironically, those owners who initially opposed Yamauchi's acquisition wound up benefiting from it heftily thanks to MLB TV broadcasting contracts with Japan that proved to be worth tens of millions of dollars.

Author Shawn Wong, an Asian-American professor of English at the University of Washington who had himself experienced discrimination, was particularly happy about the way things ultimately turned out. He was so moved by the sight of 45,000 people in Safeco Field chanting Ichiro's name when he came up to bat (and yelling "sanshin" when Sasaki struck out an opposing batter) that he declared the people of Seattle had become global citizens without leaving home.

In an article he wrote for the *Seattle Times*, he praised the respect and loyalty, "distinctly Japanese traits," exhibited by Ichiro and Sasaki. The latter had quietly signed a contract extension without the bargaining in the media that was standard for American stars. When it was over Sasaki made the simple public statement, "I love the city of Seattle and my teammates." Wong also movingly described a little white boy holding up at sign at Safeco which read, "I want to be Ichiro when I grow up."

"Today," wrote Wong, "the corporation known as Major League Baseball is looking like a global missionary, marketing its products in Japan and around the world. . . . I'm beginning to think that an entire city can understand how race changes their culture and society and can embrace and even encourage that change."
The View from Japan: Members of the World

For Japan, the significance of Ichiro's accomplishment was a slightly different matter. His success was one of those great postwar moments for the Japanese that inspired a sense of triumph—like the exploits of Rikidozan, a former sumo wrestler who popularized pro wrestling in Japan by defeating oversized American wrestlers in carefully orchestrated matches. Rikidozan's first match, in 1954, was seen by a record 24 million people, nearly one-third of the nation's population at the time, who crowded in front of promotional TV sets set up in public squares around the country and watched in delicious joy as their hero pounded an American, Ben Sharpe, into submission.

His matches gave an enormous boost to the nascent television industry in Japan, as well as an inestimable lift to the pride of the nation, still trying to recover from defeat in war. Seid Matsutaro Shoriki, the president of the Yomiuri media conglomerate that had telecast the Rikidozan matches, "Rikidozan, by his pro wrestling in which he sent the big white men flying, has restored pride to the Japanese and given them new courage."

Another triumph was the conquering of the U.S. auto market in the 1980s. This inspired an enormous wave of self-congratulation, endless platitudes from political leaders in Tokyo and hundreds of books and TV documentaries about the end of the U.S. century and the rise of the Japanese one. The Japan That Can Say No, a saber-rattling polemic by the aforementioned Shintaro Ishihara, one which essentially extended a middle finger to the U.S.A., sold a million copies.

The Ichiromania that swept Japan was certainly no less intense, as evidenced by the full-frontal blast of coverage in the ubiquitous sports dailies, featuring large photos and detailed pitch-by-pitch charts of each Ichiro at bat. In NHK's twice-daily broadcasts of Mariners games (shown once live, once on tape on the network's thirteen-year-old satellite channel), viewers were treated to endless shots of their idol doing knee bends in the outfield, joking with his teammates on the bench, stretching in the on-deck circle. These were interspersed with taped replays of his pregame warm-ups, autograph signing sessions and, of course, earlier at bats, ad infinitum. After watching all this for half a season, one Tokyo-based TV reviewer suggested sarcastically that NHK change the name of its daily gamecast from "Major League Baseball" to "The Ichiro Show."

The telecast of the 2001 All-Star Game by the Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS), a major commercial TV network, represented a new high in such narcissistic reporting. It marked the first time in history that two Japanese players had appeared in a Major League Baseball All-Star Game and a bevy of Japanese TV personalities appeared on the program to offer color commentary on the newest hero. When Ichiro was taken out of the game in the early innings, a luncheon show featuring guests singing Ichiro's praises came on to occupy all but a small corner of the screen, where the all-star telecast continued. It stayed that way until the other Japanese participant, Ichiro's teammate Kazuhiro Sasaki, was called into the game to pitch the ninth inning. Then, suddenly, the live full screen baseball telecast resumed. The priorities could not have been clearer.

A similar, although lesser, media display had occurred when Hideo Nomo first entered the major leagues, pitching every fifth day. But Ichiro was the first to appear front and center every single day—a slender Japanese among pumped-up musclemen, sparkling his big American teammates to victory—and the public could simply not get enough of this delectable sight. It was an unprecedented opportunity to massage the national ego and the press took full advantage of it.

There was no small degree of irony here, because, outside of the BlueWave home city, hardly anyone had watched Ichiro play in Japan. He had been the country's premier player, with a string of batting titles under his obi, and owned the highest paychecks in either league, not to mention his own clothing line, numerous endorsements and his face adorned billboards all over Japan. Yet he nearly always played to half-empty stands, in games that were almost never telecast nationally. This sorry state of affairs was largely due to the existence of the Tokyo Yomiuri Giants, Japan's oldest and winningest and most beloved franchise. The Giants are owned by a puissant media conglomerate that includes the largest daily newspaper in the world, the Yomiuri Shimbun, with an average daily circulation of about 13 million including morning and evening editions,
and the largest commercial television network in the land, Nippon Television. They were the only baseball organization so blessed.

The *Kyojin* (Giants) were the living definition of the term “wretched excess.” Thanks to their habitually winning ways (31 pennants in their first 70 years) and the fact that they had always attracted the best players in the land, they drew capacity crowds to nearly every game they played, attracting over three million fans a year. Tokyo Giants primetime telecasts had enjoyed consistently high ratings, which peaked in 1982 to a nationwide Nielsen rating of 27.5 percent for the season. Surveys regularly showed that one out of every two persons who followed baseball was a Giants fan, which meant that no matter where the *Kyojin* ventured, at least half the stands were rooting for them.

They were in the forefront of the nation’s consciousness for so long that, cynics argued, the country had essentially been brainwashed into following them. Even when the team finished in last place in 1975, or in the second division as they did in 1991 and 1997, far out of contention, they still outdraw all the pennant contenders. Indeed, many viewers complained of suffering withdrawal symptoms if a Giants game was rained out and there was no nightly fix available—not matter where the team was in the standings.

Yomiuri was the reason the Central League had an average attendance of about 13 million a year while the Pacific League drew only around 10 million. In Ichiro’s breakout year, the Orix BlueWave attracted 1,700,000 fans—not bad, if still far behind the Giants—but then attendance slipped in succeeding campaigns as the novelty wore off. Tabloids that featured Ichiro on their back cover in 1994 and 1995 found that his drawing power did not last as the public turned back to more familiar Giant heroes. The number of times Orix played on nationwide TV during Ichiro’s entire Japan career could be counted on one hand. Elvis could have come back to life and played in the BlueWave outfield and the result would have no doubt remained the same, such was the enduring allure of the magical *Kyojin* name.

Although Ichiro could certainly attract a crowd on an afternoon stroll through the Ginza, and complained constantly about intrusions into his private life by the media, it was, if the truth be told, the lack of attention from *bōsōbōru* fans that prompted him, at least in part, to make the move to the States. He viewed himself as a far better player than his contemporary, the Giants’ popular center fielder Hideki Matsui, now with the Yankees (see Chapter 10). Matsui was a home-run slugger, but, as a general all-around player, he was, in Ichiro’s quoted opinion, “ichi-ryū ja nai” (not first class): an athlete who had yet to take his game to the level that was demanded of a superstar. Despite this, however, Matsui continued to command the headlines almost daily over Ichiro—even after the Orix BlueWave had defeated the mighty *Kyojin* in the 1996 Japan Series.

“I could hit .400,” Ichiro muttered, “and still they would not come to see me.”

Thus it was not until he left his homeland to play in the U.S. that Japanese fandom finally gave him the attention he deserved. Only then did he go from being a star player to a nationwide phenomenon and one who, ironically, caused a significant drop in the Giants TV ratings. These actually fell to single digits at times in the 2001 season, the first time that had ever happened to the team during *Goruden Awa* (“Golden Hour”) as the Japanese referred to prime time. Moreover, while their games still played to capacity crowds, discount tickets were now easy to come by, a circumstance most people had once thought impossible.

Ask Japanese why they suddenly became so fixated on Ichiro and they would give you a variety of reasons. He helped people take their minds off the bone-wearying recession that had infected Japan since the early 1990s. He proved the high level of baseball in Japan—prompting even the Japanese baseball commissioner to say, improbably, as he watched his NPB lose its best talent to the major leagues, “It’s an honor for me as commissioner to see Ichiro playing well in the U.S.” And he also validated the national ego, as evidenced by the turgid encomium of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, who announced to all citizens, “Ichiro makes me proud to be a Japanese.”

Indeed, the response of an NHK announcer, when asked if she worried that the local professional game was being reduced to a farm sys-
tem for MLB, was telling, “No,” she replied, “Japanese are excited because this shows Japanese superiority over America.”

However, there was something even deeper going on here. For decades, Japan had impressed itself on the world’s consciousness, primarily through its products, its currency, its visible cross-border acquisitions (like the Mariners), and its well-disciplined tourists flush with cash. Japan was seen as a place where highly trained and largely faceless “organization men” marched efficiently in lockstep—a place that produced few stars or exceptional talents worthy of mention.

But now, finally, here was Ichiro, a real live human being in Oakley Juliet sunglasses, besieged for autographs everywhere he went. American kids loved him. Their parents admired him. His fellow players respected him. TV sports announcers all across America were giddily singing his praises. Famed writer Frank Deford hailed him in a piquant documentary for Bryant Gumbel’s Real Sports. Jeremy Schaap did the same for Sports Center, while S.L. Price penned a loving profile in Sports Illustrated.

The Ichiro-in-America phenomenon was a fantasy that many Japanese had long wanted to experience, if only vicariously. It had special resonance in Japan because it gave the people something they had never quite had before: a full-fledged Japanese hero who was idolized by Americans themselves. It was the Asian version of Damn Yankees. It was something the Japanese had not been able to do in the political arena or the entertainment world, or anywhere else.

These baseball triumphs also seemed somehow more substantive than the economic triumphs of years past. Ichiro’s rookie hit record mattered; it would retain its significance over time. True, during the peak of the Bubble, the Nikkei hit an all-time high of nearly 40,000 and was hailed as an economic Seventh Wonder—until the ensuing collapse revealed the smoke and mirrors that had disguised the underlying weakness. In Ichiro’s case, however, no one was going to come along in ten years and claim that his p/e ratio was out of whack.

At the same time, many Japanese back home found it difficult to fully grasp the idea that Ichiro was truly, madly and deeply accepted into the fold by the American public, given the unpleasant history the two peoples shared. The sense of insecurity was palpable enough that some Japanese sought confirmation from their American acquaintances that Ichiro was indeed as popular as they had been led to believe and not simply the beneficiary of overzealous and slanted reporting, as was often the case in Japan.

They found it odd that although he had made a sustained assault on the long-standing single-season hit record of 257 held by George Sisler and had monopolized the batting leader board all year, he received almost uniformly positive treatment by American fans and media—his success failing to activate any nativist, xenophobic strain in the American character. To Ichiro fans, this was puzzling because it was in marked contrast, for example, to what American sluggers in NPB had experienced when chasing titles or attempting to break Japanese records.

In point of fact, the pride and satisfaction in Ichiro’s achievements coexisted with a strange, indelible desire in Japan to hold the world at arm’s length—as reflected in 2001 by the remark of one Ministry of Justice official who explained, to a UN representative, the minuscule number of refugees Japan took in annually by saying, “Japanese don’t like foreigners.” This attitude, which waxes and wanes, has been dubbed a “gaijin allergy” and its sneezes continue to resonate through many areas of Japanese society.

Some historians trace this allergy to the centuries of isolationism dating back to the Tokugawa Shogunate, whose rule of Japan from 1600 to 1686 was marked by the fear that interference by foreigners and foreign ideas would threaten its hegemony. The shogunate had initiated a policy of national seclusion that banned foreign travel. With a few minor exceptions, anyone caught trying to leave or return to Japan was liable to face execution.

After Commodore Matthew Perry and his Black Ships arrived at the white sands of Shimoda in 1853, demanding that the shogunate abandon its isolationist pose and open its ports, that era was supposed to have ended.

But it hadn’t. Not quite.

With the fall of the shogunate and the ascension of the reform-minded Emperor Meiji to the throne 15 years later, Japan began a campaign to absorb foreign learning and technology in order to catch
up and overtake the more industrially advanced West. The phrase which, for the most part, characterized this effort, wakon-yōshi (Japanese spirit, Western skill), meant, essentially, Give us your technology but don’t intrude in our society or disrupt our national spirit of wa or harmony.

The resulting bi-polar relationship with foreign culture was marked by an intense interest for the Japanese in how they sized up against the West. The country’s self-esteem soared to new heights when Japan defeated Russia in the war of 1905 and expanded its military power throughout Asia, eventually pulling out of the League of Nations. It sank to new depths in the aftermath of World War II when it was utterly dependent on the outside world to keep from starving. Then it rose once more in the postwar era, during which Japan threatened to flood the world with exports.

Boasting of technological superiority, Japanese companies manufactured and exported high-quality products, but the country had not been successful in producing human beings who could truly interact with others in foreign lands. In the eyes of many consumers of Sonys and Hondas, the Japanese themselves remained two dimensional—a sort of caricature taken from Madame Butterfly and the numerous published accounts of Japanese corporate groupthink.

Midori Masujima, a prize-winning sports journalist, touched on this when she wrote in 2002, “We’ve never really been a member of the world community, not in the Edo period, not in the Meiji era and not today. Though we may have been a guest, or a provisional member, or a member-in-training, we have never been a full-fledged, card-carrying member.” She addressed what she called Japan’s “complex”—a language complex stemming from a chronic inability to master the English language, and a sports complex stemming from its inability to prevail in international sports events, save for the odd marathon or judo triumph. Thus was there a craving for approval from overseas, for a vindication of Japan itself, that attached itself to the athletes who made their way across the Pacific.

The measure of the success of Ichiro, Nomao and the others is, in Masujima’s words, that “these Japanese athletes had taken the Japanese sports inferiority complex—the sense that Japanese are not physi-
sense of where the finish line is, you're eventually going to peter out. Certainly, that was the case with Ishi. He's got it now, I bet you. You watch."

We watched.

And Ishi came through with a record of 9–7, 3.86 ERA and 147 IP—which included a stint on the disabled list with an injured knee.

GODZILLA

Japanese fans are finally standing up to Japanese sports, which for so long have resisted internationalization by using every trick in the book to hold on to its popularity like a desperate dictator. And the Giants have been the biggest offenders. To wear a Kyojin-gumi uniform is no longer every schoolboy's dream. The stars of the future are looking to follow in the footsteps of their heroes Nakata and Ichiro—to become soccer stars in Europe or baseball stars in America. Giants' owner Tsuneo Watanabe may continue to do his utmost to reverse this trend. Yet, Watanabe and the Giants are fighting a losing battle. They can not reverse the tide of Japanese people finding the confidence to succeed on an international playing field.

YO TAKATSUKI, ASAHI SHIMBUN, 2002

Of all the players to come to the MLB, Matsui was the one who most represented the Japanese personality. He was the most normal.

YUSUKE KAMATA, PRODUCER, FUJI-SANKAI COMMUNICATIONS

Matsui reflected a wider spectrum of Japanese society than Ichiro and Nomu who, while excelling at what they did, were somewhat alienated and unhappy because they really didn't fit in anywhere.

MARK SCHREIBER, LONGTIME TOKYO-BASED AUTHOR

IT WAS FINALLY TIME TO FACE THE CAMERAS. BASEBALL SLUGGER Hideki Matsui looked at the battery of reporters in the banquet room of Tokyo's plush Imperial Hotel and cleared his throat.
Into the breathless silence, he delivered a grim-faced, 40-minute monologue. His words were unhearsed and he occasionally stuttered with the emotion of it all. He had consulted with scores of family members, friends, teammates, former teachers; he had even asked God for guidance. He had tried to tell himself he needed to stay for the prosperity of Japanese baseball. But in the end, the nine-time all-star’s love for his team had given way to a stronger personal ambition. He was opting to become a free agent and go to America to play.

Although others had preceded Matsui to the majors, he was special. A left-handed hitter with 332 career home runs and three MVPs under his belt, Matsui had batted cleanup for most of his career on the legendary Giants, a spot occupied by some of the greatest names the Japanese game had produced: Tetsuharu Kawakami, the “God of Batting”; Shigeo Nagashima, “Mr. Giants”; Sadaharu Oh, who hit more lifetime home runs than the great Hank Aaron; and matinee idol Tatsunori Hara, Matsui’s manager in 2002. It was a sacred trust and Hideki Matsui had been the latest keeper of the flame. Abandoning such a prestigious post, not to mention leaving the proud Kyotan, simply wasn’t done.

Until now, that is.

Matsui bowed his head and apologized profusely to Giants management, teammates and the fans. But then, after expressing more contrition for his selfishness, he said, “I have to do this. Even if people think I’m a traitor.”

It was hard to envision an American superstar like, say, Barry Bonds making such a speech, but fans of Hideki Matsui would have expected nothing less. For nine years, the 6’2”, 210-pound hero toiled industriously for the Giants, never missing a game despite a plethora of injuries. His streak of 1,250 consecutive games played was the second longest in Japan. With an unparalleled work ethic and unglamorous ways, he was a diligent poster boy for the Japanese everyman, an empathetic hero for those who wondered if their endless, anonymous toil as salarymen, or office ladies, might ever pay off. In an era where Japanese heroes tended to be pop stars with spiky hair and equally spiky personalities, he was reassuring evidence that the old ways still survived.

An unabashedly nice guy, always ready to accommodate his adoring Japanese fans with an autograph and reporters with an interview, Matsui had never been known to complain about anything to anyone—not even to an umpire. He was a living monument to the words of Yomiuri founder Matsutaro Shoriki, whose deathbed wish several decades earlier was “May the Giants always be strong and may they always be gentlemen.”

So respected, in fact, was Japan’s iron man that when he announced his seismic move to MLB, the daily Nikkan Sports noted that it was the first selfish act Matsui had committed in his 28 years.

Mercurial Yomiuri Giants honcho Tsuneo Watanabe had done everything he could to keep his star. He had lashed out at players like Ichiro for abandoning their country and had accused Ichiro’s team, the Orix BlueWave, of “selling out Japan” when they accepted $13 million for Suzuki’s rights via the newly instituted posting system. He even equated MLB’s invasion of Japan to the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry and his Black Ships a century and a half before, prying open that closed island nation to world trade after two and a half centuries of isolation.

In May 2001, Watanabe had appeared at the Giants’ home ballpark, the Tokyo Dome, with his cronies, the former prime minister and noted right-wing hawk Yasuhiro Nakasone, symbolically at his side, imploring his fellow owners, in an impromptu press conference, to exhibit a little more “sports patriotism.” (The irony of such a plea surely did not escape these other 11 men, who for some years now had watched him raid their teams.)

In light of this PR offensive and the likelihood that the departure of a star of Matsui’s magnitude would cause the Yomiuri fan base to further erode, most fans had assumed that the Giants cleanup hitter would be loath to go against his powerful boss’s very public wish that he stay put. Thus, at the end of the year, when Matsui turned down a $64 million, six-year offer from Yomiuri—the highest in NPB history—the nation was collectively astonished. Japan’s most
Bio

Hideki Matsui was born in snowy Ishikawa prefecture on the Sea of Japan on June 12, 1974, the second of two sons, and was raised in the small industrial hamlet of Neagari. His father, Masao, worked for a computer software company and also managed a private church founded by Hideki’s grandmother Ruriko Matsui, a shaman faith healer who specialized in sick children and who reportedly had the gift of second sight. It was called the Ruri Kyōkai (Church of Ruri) and was affiliated with the 50,000-member Tenso Kökyō, a nationwide religion that attempted to consolidate the teachings of Christianity, Buddhism and Shintoism, admonishing its followers against greed, anger, gluttony, dishonesty and other evils proscribed by all three.

Athleticism ran in the Matsui family. Hideki’s mother may have been so traditional that she kept her opinions to herself in the presence of men, but she had also been a star volleyball player in her school days—the daughter of a kendo expert and younger sister of a third-degree black belt holder in aikido. Young Matsui, always a head taller than his classmates as a boy growing up, was himself a multi-sport phenom, earning a first-degree black belt in judo and winning a city-wide walk-on sumo tournament.

It was yakyū, of course, where he really blossomed, participating in competitive playground games with his older brother (who eventually gave up the sport to join a rock band). A natural right-hander, he was so good at béisbolu in primary school, even when playing against boys several years his senior, that he was forced to handicap himself by batting left-handed, which is how he came to be a portside hitter.

In junior high school, a baseball coach gave young Hideki a copy of Sadaharu Oh’s famous book on hitting, Daisuiwingu (“Downswing”), in which the great slugger described how he practiced his batting form with a sword, attempting repeatedly to slice in precise halves a piece of paper suspended from the ceiling. The only way to accomplish this extremely difficult feat was to angle the swing down and snap the wrists, which also happened to be extremely useful in developing bat control. After reading the Oh opus, Matsui adopted the downswing dictum and practiced it with uncommon zeal, often staying up until three or four in the morning to work on it, according to his father. Hideki spent so much time swinging that his hands were perpetually covered in blisters and calluses, while his favorite bat was stained with blood at the grip end. Able to hit the ball harder and farther than any other middle school student in memory, he destroyed so many balls in practice that his team had to ask for an increase in its baseball budget to purchase more.

As a junior high school standout, Matsui was recruited by Seiryo High School in Kanazawa. Seiryo was a Western Honshu powerhouse, a regular participant in the national championship tourney at Koshien Stadium and an institution that was known for its Spartan training.

As one former player said of its rigorous regimen, “You didn’t feel as though you had a real practice until the manager had slapped you in the face two or three times.”

Matsui moved into the Seiryo dormitory and began year-round practice that included numbing workouts before and after school, as well as intensive summer and winter camps. On days the ground was covered with a thick blanket of white snow, colored balls might be brought out for increased visibility in practice or else the manager might simply suspend normal drills and order everyone to make a lung-bursting run through the snow up and down a small nearby mountain.

It was at Seiryo that Matsui, who pitched and played third base, was first nicknamed “Godzilla”—a moniker which, at the time, was as much for a severe case of adolescent acne as it was for his tape-measure blasts. Legend has it that the young athlete once launched a ball in batting practice that cracked the tiles on the roof of the Seiryo manager’s house, nearly 140 meters (460 feet) away. In Matsui’s three-year career at Seiryo, he hit 60 home runs in toto and
made four appearances in the hallowed National High School Baseball Championships. His seven RBIs in the opening game of the 1992 spring invitational tournament tied a record, as did his tourney total of three home runs. He was the only schoolboy player in Japan with his own tailor-made long ball sign. In addition to the usual instructions of “swing” and “take” that were normally flashed from the bench, Matsui’s manager at Seiryo had devised one which stood for “Hit a home run.”

Matsui’s outsized reputation was clinched in the final game of the summer tournament when he was intentionally walked an unheard-of five times by the opposing team, Meitoku Gijuku High School, with a capacity Koshibei crowd of 55,000 fans and a nationwide TV audience watching openmouthed. The actions by Meitoku, which went on to win the tournament, were regarded as unsportsmanlike by many observers and prompted uncharacteristic catcalls from the stands as well as heavy criticism in the media the next day.

However, Matsui’s stoic, emotionless conduct during those at bats drew great praise from tournament officials and reporters alike. Said the manager of Ikeda High School, another Japan powerhouse, “He was wonderful. You wouldn’t know he was a high school student. That settled, calm attitude. You can’t achieve a state like that without a lot of practice.” Beamed an admiring sportswriter who had witnessed the game, “He was magnificent. Just like a samurai faithful to the code of bushido.” At the end of the tournament, a representative of the High School Federation stood up and officially declared, “All students should learn from Matsui’s attitude.”

Matsui credited his restraint to a severe public slapping he had received from his junior high school manager, the punishment delivered after Hideki had thrown a bat in anger at an opposing pitcher who had similarly refused to challenge him.

“It was a valuable lesson for me,” he said, recalling the encounter as an adult. “From that day on, I resolved never to lose control of my emotions in a game again.”

The manager’s behavior, which resulted in his ejection, was triggered in part by the actions that season of Seibu Lions hitting star Kazuhiro Kiyohara, who had hurled his bat at a pitcher in retaliation for being hit in the side by a fastball in a nationally televised game. Matsui’s mentor was concerned that his star pupil was emulating what he believed to be highly disgusting behavior. But equally important, he was alarmed over Matsui’s careless treatment of his bat.

“Players have to show respect for their equipment,” he said, echoing what baseball leaders had been saying in Japan since the Meiji Era.

Matsui was the most coveted player in the 1992 draft lottery and as luck (or, as some paranoid participants believed, a fixed draw) would have it, the Yomiuri Giants won the right to negotiate with him. Upon formally signing with the Giants in a nationally televised event, Matsui received the first of thousands of unsolicited medicines and letters of advice from Giants fans who had been shocked to see close-ups of the savage boils on his skin. (It was a problem which, in fact, took several years to clear up, leaving him with a leathery, pockmarked face.)

Matsui was given uniform number 55, highly symbolic in that it stood for the single-season home run record held by Sadaharu Oh, a mark that everyone fully expected Matsui to challenge one day. Like Oh, Matsui had not been a naturally gifted hitter. It had taken Oh three years of hard work and effort after turning pro to emerge from mediocrity and the same would prove true for Matsui. In his early seasons with the team, he was known to swing the bat as many as 800 times in two-hour batting practice sessions, working hard to develop even more discipline at the plate. He frequently reported to the home of his manager Shigeo Nagashima for morning batting instruction sessions in Nagashima’s basement gym.

“Concentrate all your nerve endings on the sound of the bat when you swing it,” Nagashima would say cryptically. A “whish” was no good. But a “whoosh” was.

In 1996, after three years of steady, if unspectacular growth as a pro, Matsui had his breakout season. He batted .314 with 38 home runs and 99 RBIs, and won the Central League’s Most Valuable Player award.

Said his admiring batting sensei Nagashima, “He got so he could sit on the fastball and still hit the breaking pitch. He could slap the curve to the opposite field or pull the inside speedball down the line. His bat speed was something.”
Matsui repeated his 1996 performance the following year, swatting 37 homers, batting .298 and driving in 103 runs, as he settled in for a long run as the Central League’s marquee player. (For those who want the details in black and white, here they are. He batted .292 in 1998, leading the league in both homers [34] and RBIs [100] for the first time. In 1999, it was .304, 42 and 95; in 2000, it was .316, 42 and 103. In 2001 he won his first batting title with a .333 average, hitting 36 homers and driving in 104 runs.)

Matsui had also polished his defensive skills, evolving into a gold glove centerfielder who compensated for his less-than-spectacular throwing arm and foot speed with all-around baseball sense and an unparalleled work ethic.

Matsui’s pregame workouts were a model of doryoku. In addition to sweat-inducing sessions at a batting tee and in the batting cage, they included an exhausting fly-ball-chasing routine in the outfield—30 balls hit over his head, to his left, to his right—and then 20 wind sprints from foul pole to foul pole. Visiting San Diego scout Gary Nickel, who witnessed one of these tiring midsummer displays, could only shake his head in admiration. “Here is the best player in Japan in a pregame situation working his butt off,” he said. “How often do you see that in our game?”

In 2002, Matsui elevated his game to a higher plane. In that season, with a slightly shortened, line-drive-producing stroke, he hit 50 home runs and batted .334 with 107 RBIs. It was one of the best all-around performances in memory and he barely missed a triple crown when Chunichi Dragons Hiroki Fukudome edged him out for the batting title by nine points. Matsui also led the Giants to the Central League championship and a successful sweep of the Seibu Lions in the Japan Series, marking the Giants’ third national title and fourth pennant in the Matsui era. By this time, his annual salary had risen to nearly $5 million a year, the highest, for a Japanese player, in NPB—a figure which he doubled with bonuses and endorsement fees, donating substantial sums to various charitable organizations.

Through it all—the awards, the adulation, a life constantly in the limelight—he remained almost unnervingly low key. He should have made more money. Some foreign players were making over $8 million. But Matsui humbly continued to accept modest raises throughout his career. (As he put it, after one particularly unproductive contract negotiation when he failed to get the huge raise everyone had predicted—finishing up his fourth year in the pros, the one in which he had hit .314 with 38 home runs and 99 RBIs—“Team officials told me that I’m actually worth more than my salary, but that they had to keep it low in line with those of other players. It’s doesn’t bother me.”

Moreover, he wore no earrings, no rock star sunglasses, no outlandish hip-hop togs of the type favored by contemporaries like Ichiro Suzuki and other luminaries of the new Japanese consciousness. Flash and youthful irreverence were just not Matsui’s style, even if the conservative Giants hadn’t frowned on such outré displays. Instructed to stay in the team dormitory and refrain from dating during the first several years of his career, so as to devote all his concentration to baseball, Matsui complied, without a whimper, his manner a model of proper deportment.

He liked to tell people of the vow he had made to his father at age 14—occasioned by the bat-throwing, face-slap incident—never to say or do a hurtful thing to another living human being ever again. It was a vow he insisted he had kept. And it was a measure of the respect he commanded in his own country that most people believed him.

Tailed constantly by a serum of Japanese reporters eager to record any Matsui moment for the devoted and insatiable Japanese media machine, Matsui invariably wore a smile—unlike the prickly Ichiro. “I asked for this life,” he would say. “Nobody forced it on me and I have a duty to the people who put me here.” He refused to charge admission at the Hidoki Matsui House of Baseball back home—a practice which stood in marked contrast to the Ichiro Museum in Nagoya, where a ticket costs $8. It just wouldn’t be fair, he explained.

Some cynics called Matsui simpleminded, a workhorse without the brainpower to comprehend what all the attention really meant or the sophistication to mimic Ichiro’s studied cool. But Matsui, who in fact had been an attentive student with high marks in math (one who
actually sat in the first row of the classes he attended), would shrug and say, in his coarse baritone, “I’m just an ordinary guy.” He liked to have an occasional beer. He liked to shoot the breeze with the security guards and maintenance personnel, and he liked to trade tapes from his extensive library of adult videos with reporters. (His reply, when asked about his eccentric hobby, was a droll “Doesn’t everybody do this?”)

Said one Japanese journalist, describing Matsui’s affinity for such unique Japanese cultural institutions as no-panties shabu-shabu and hostess nightclubs, “Matsui is very unpretentious. All of us are homy guys more or less. But Matsui doesn’t attempt to hide the fact. That’s a refreshing attitude which is one reason, I guess, why fans took to him so much.”

As the end of the 2002 season approached, Matsui endured public and private appeals from new Giants manager Tatsunori Hara and others connected to the Giants, all orchestrated by Watanabe, calling on Matsui to stay for the sake of team and country. There were letters from Yomiuri officials to Matsui’s parents asking them for their cooperation. Shigeo Nagashima, the just-retired “manager emeritus,” even took the unusual step of writing an op-ed piece in the Yomiuri Shim bun’s archival, the Asahi Shinbun, urging his former charge not to desert. His teammates needed him, the nation of Japan needed him. If Matsui left the proud Kyojin, then would nothing be sacred anymore? It could very well mean the end of Japanese baseball, not to mention the civilized world as the Giants braintrust knew it.

But Matsui was feeling other pressures as well. With the whole country buzzing about Ichiro Suzuki, if Hideki Matsui, the jewel of the Central League, did not try his hand, people would say he was a wimp, that he had no guts, no konjō. It was a double bind. No matter what he did he would either be called a traitor or wimp. In the end, his manhood—and his curiosity—won out, although he looked like a man on the way to the gallows, when he delivered his sayonara speech, rather than one about to realize baseball’s biggest dream.

Freedom

Despite whispers among Yomiuri management that Matsui was a deserter, the star’s decision was largely applauded by the Japanese baseball-viewing public. The affection baseball fans held for Matsui was evidenced by the thunderous standing ovation he received at a postseason exhibition game at the Tokyo Dome following his final appearance in a Tokyo Giants uniform—and this from a crowd not known for such spontaneous displays of emotion.

They were also responding to his sincerity and the fact that he truly seemed torn between his affection for his fans and teammates and his desire to go to the U.S. But the ovation also showed how much things had changed in Japan. (As Oh had put it when he heard the news, “In my era, if I or Nagashima had said we wanted to go to the major leagues, 90 percent of the fans would have been against it. Now, it’s reversed, 90 percent the other way.”)

The public’s feelings were summed up by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, who told TV reporters, “It’s sad he won’t be at the stadiums in our country anymore, but on the other hand, more and more Japanese sportsmen are making their mark on the world stage. I think that is admirable.”

Public interest in Matsui’s migration to the U.S. was, if it can be imagined, higher than that for Ichiro. For one thing, Matsui would be the first full-fledged power hitter from NPB to make the trans-Pacific leap. As the first Japanese to go bicep to bicep with the andro-enhanced musclemen who had come to dominate North American baseball, it was hoped that he could single-handedly erase the image of Japanese as practitioners of “small-ball.” Then there was the fact that he ultimately decided to play for the New York Yankees, whose owner George Steinbrenner had been lusting after a Japanese star of his own after seeing what Ichiro had done for the Seattle Mariners’ winning percentage and subsequent bottom line. After the Yankees had lost in the first round of the 2002 playoffs to the Anaheim Angels, Steinbrenner’s scouts had told him that Matsui was just the man to revitalize his team.
The Yankees already had great name value in Japan, thanks to Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig and Joe DiMaggio, all of whom had played in exhibition games there during their careers. DiMaggio had even come to Japan on his honeymoon with Marilyn Monroe. Yankee Stadium, with its great tradition, was special to the Japanese and so was the city of New York. Seattle was one thing, but the Big Ring—hey man, that was the top of the heap. If Hideki Matsui could make it there, that would mean that Japan would, in a very real sense, make it there as well.

However, even after declaring free agency, the process of extricating himself from the grip of the Giants to join the Yankees had not been a simple matter for Matsui. Although on the surface it appeared that he had cleanly severed his ties with his former team, in reality, it wasn’t quite so. Japanese society was in great measure about personal relationships, about on (obligation) and giri (duty) and meniscu (face). These were concepts that meant something to Matsui, and because it was his desire not to displease anyone more than he already had, he continued to let the Giants participate in and influence his future—actually allowing them to act as a go-between in negotiating with MLB and choosing which team he would play for. Thus, although many MLB teams had expressed interest in the slugger’s service, when Watanabe announced to reporters that if Matsui absolutely had to go to the U.S., then he should go to the Yankees, the only team in the United States deemed to occupy a social stratum equivalent to that of Kyojin, the matter appeared to be settled for all and good (which was fine, by the way, with Matsui; he had been a Yankees fan for a long time).

However, there was, as usual, more going on than met the eye. During 2002, officials from the Yankees, including vice president Jean Afterman, had been invited to Japan several times to discuss a working arrangement between the two organizations, to discuss players exchange and development, among other things. Yomiuri was especially interested in a tie-up between NTV and the Yankees’ cable sports network YES, whereby the Yomiuri Group would be first in line to obtain the rights to telecast the New York Yankees games in Japan—once the old MLB contract with NHK had expired at the end of 2003. This would naturally have enormous appeal if Japanese slugger Hideki Matsui were in the Yankees lineup and would make for an ideal sports viewing schedule: Matsui/Yankees games in the morning and Yomiuri games in the evening, with Yankees game highlights flashed between innings. They also wanted to convince YES to televise Yomiuri Giants games in North America, which, indeed, was something that could come in handy in the event of another MLB strike.

The Yankees, for their part, were interested in player development and training, and, of course, Matsui. Related to this was the presence of Yankees stars Bernie Williams and Jason Giambi on an all-star squad of major leaguers that visited Japan for a goodwill series of games against Japanese competition in the fall of 2002, a tour that was sponsored by the Yomiuri Shimbun. (The Yomiuri Shimbun and the Mainichi Shimbun had been alternating sponsorship of the event on a biannual basis for years.) Not once had Yankees owner George Steinbrenner ever allowed any of his players to participate in such tours. This time, however, Steinbrenner sent over his two stars as emissaries to woo Matsui and smooth relations with Watanabe’s people.

Incredibly, the Giants introduced the word “rental” into the negotiations—another bizarre indication of how differently the Yomiuri group interpreted the term “free agency.” The Giants wanted an option clause put in Matsui’s contract whereby the Yankees would “rent” Matsui for a period of, say, three years, after which he would be sent back to the Tokyo club, against his will, if necessary. Said one involved official, “The Yomiuri people did not seem to understand how the U.S. system and option clauses worked, because such an arrangement under MLB rules was not possible with a Japanese team without Matsui’s consent, which he was in no position to give at the time. I found it amazing that they would try to set conditions like that.”

In the end, the Yankees and the Giants did cobble together a working agreement for player development, but one which did not include rights to Yankees games (which, in any event, New York was forbidden to sell overseas without permission from the MLB commissioner’s office) or rights to Yomiuri games in the States or any quid
pro quo involving Matsui. In December, after the agreement had fi-
nally been signed, Matsui hired Jason Giambi’s agent Arnl Tellem to
negotiate his Yankees contract, one which set no conditions on the
Japanese star’s future availability to his former team.

Yanks

Just exactly how Matsui would do in his new milieu was a subject
of much discussion in Japan during the postseason winter months.
Numerous big-league scouts had praised his patient, disciplined ap-
proach at the plate and his skill at running the count to 3–2. This,
combined with his natural power, they believed, would enable him
to make the adjustment to big league pitching. They saw him ben-
fiting from hitting in a lineup that included an unusually high num-
er of batting stalwarts like Derek Jeter, Jason Giambi and Bernie
Williams, not to mention the Stadium’s famously short right-field
fence. Said Sammy Sosa, who had given Matsui batting instruction
in 1996 while visiting Japan on a postseason tour, “Man, that dude
will hit .300 with 25 to 30 home runs.”

Others were not so sure. Succeeding as a power hitter in the
biggest of leagues was a different proposition, given that the unfa-
miliar assembly of pitchers Matsui would have to face (nearly four
times as many, in toto, as he saw at home in his six-team loop) gen-
erally threw at a greater velocity than those in the Japanese leagues
and were not afraid to intimidate a rookie batter by throwing high
and inside. Moreover, many of them threw a two-seam fastball, a
pitch rarely seen in Japan, that breaks or slides down and away from
a left-handed batter when thrown by a right-handed pitcher. Ichiro
Suzuki was able to succeed against such formidable opposition
because of his speed. Even when he only managed to get a piece of
the ball and send it spinning on the ground, he could leg out infield
hits. However, a power hitter like Matsui had to hit the ball squarely
or else watch his outs climb. And Matsui would no longer have the lux-
ury of playing in the atmospherically challenged Tokyo Dome (mod-
eled after the Minnesota Twins Metrodome), where the ball traveled
farther. Among the skeptics was Sadaharu Oh, who was quoted as
saying that it would likely take Matsui the better part of a year to
reach his stride.

Some fans even questioned whether or not Matsui had the right
personality for success in MLB. In a worrisome precedent, he had
performed miserably in that 2002 goodwill series with MLB all-stars.
Playing under intense media scrutiny, he failed to hit a single home
run, batting an embarrassing .161 in the process—this despite the fact
that his less heralded Japanese teammates pummeled top pitchers like
Bartolo Colon and Brad Penny.

By Game Five, Matsui’s inability to hit home runs had so upset
the Yomiuri sponsors that they hastily arranged a home run contest
between Matsui and MLB slugger supreme Barry Bonds. But even
then Matsui could only muster four out of the park blasts to Bonds’s
nine, batting against an easy-throwing batting practice pitcher. After-
ward, Bonds snootily declared that Matsui would be lucky to hit 10
to 15 homers in his first season in America (an assessment that
would prove to be accurate, if unkind).

Hay Group executive and baseball fan Minato Asakawa, who
spent years watching baseball in both Tokyo and New York, pre-
dicted, “I think Matsui will have a hard time, at least in his first year,
because he’s too Japanese. Ichiro and Nomo are not like other Japanese.
They are independent. Too independent, perhaps. But to suc-
cceed in the U.S., you’ve got to debug your own Japaneseess. Matsui
is too humble, too reserved, too accommodating. He’ll have a hard
time . . . at least in his first year, until he becomes less Japanese.”

Former Giant captain Kiyoshi Nakahata told New York Times cor-
respondent Ken Belson, “He is so kind that his kindness doesn’t
mesh well in the game. In games he is not so bold. His strong point
is that he’s nice. But also his weak point is that he’s too nice.”

Japan’s oft-lurid tabloids found other potential difficulties for
Matsui to fret about. One series in an evening daily warned that in
addition to problems arising from language, food and travel, there
were potential dangers from the rising use of steroids, amphi-
tamines and marijuana in MLB.

One newspaper article breathlessly noted recent revelations about
gays in major league baseball and stressed the need for Matsui to be vigilant in the Yankee Stadium shower room when he bent over to pick up the soap. That same article mentioned the reportedly keen interest of the San Francisco gay community in Tsuyoshi Shinno’s “tight little butt” and Ichiro’s boyish charm. The writer quoted ex-Expos and Mets hurler Masato Yoshii as saying he had been propositioned by a San Francisco taxi driver, and reported the interesting fact one player always carried around a condom just in case he was raped in the U.S.; he wanted to be able to provide protection.

In January, after being sent off to the U.S. by a small gathering of 800 of his closest friends at a downtown hotel, Matsui finally crossed the Pacific and signed his contract ($21 million over three years) at a ceremony presided over by New York mayor Michael Bloomberg. Then he headed for the Yankees training facility in sunny Tampa, Florida, trailed by more than 150 reporters, photographers and other media personnel from Japan, who gave new meaning to the term blanket coverage.

Matsui’s first batting practice in Tampa was televised live back to Japan at one o’clock in the morning. His first exhibition game home run earned several pages of analytical articles in each of the leading sports dailies. And when he missed practice one morning because of a root canal, a photo of his open mouth adorned the front page of the Sports Nippon daily newspaper. All in all, there were more Yankees preseason games televised live nationwide in Japan than were shown in New York City.

The presence of so many Japanese reporters—the Yankees filed 90 separate requests for interviews with Matsui on Opening Day alone—quickly became an irritant to the Yankee front office, which had to deal with their constant demands. George Steinbrenner growled at his media relations personnel to exercise more control, and they in turn began to vent their frustrations at the unending requests for entry. (Said a representative of Time Asia, repeatedly rebuffed while pressing for a photo shoot of Godzilla, “It was the first time in my career anyone yelled at me just for requesting access.”)

The Yankees would eventually restrict admission to the Yankee Stadium home locker room, limiting entry for the reporters from Japan to groups of three at a time, moving them in and out in shifts of five to ten minutes each, like tourists in the Sistine Chapel, while putting no such limits on the 25 or so New York–area based reporters who regularly covered the team. Since space in the Yankee Stadium press box was limited, most of the Japanese contingent was consigned to a dank workspace in the bowels of the stadium where the field was visible only on TV monitors. The dismal state of affairs prompted more than one Japanese media man to label the individuals ultimately responsible for the restrictions “racist.”

The only person who seemed unfazed by all the media hoopla was Matsui himself, who, after all, had spent years enduring such scrutiny in Japan. He patiently sat for interviews, wearing a smile of seraphic sweetness on his face, answering the same banal questions in session after session in a marathon display of courtesy. One memorable evening, he even took a dozen New York baseball writers to dinner at an expensive restaurant, playing host through his interpreter and the smattering of English he was picking up from the textbooks he studied daily, charming his guests with his polite attentiveness. It was a first in Yankees history.

“Talking to the press and signing autographs as often as I can is my way of fulfilling my obligations as a player,” he told startled and bemused MLB reporters. It was a view decidedly out of sync with the vast majority of current big leaguers.

After charming New Yorkers with appearances on Regis and Kelly and the Late Show with David Letterman, Matsui started off the official season with a bang, smashing a dramatic grand slam home run in his first game at Yankee Stadium, a feat which understandably caused paroxysms of joy back in Japan. The historic ball was immediately flown back to Nagasaki, where it was enshrined in the Matsui museum. Said one aging farmer, staring at the ball in wonder as a TV crew filmed him, “You can see Hideki’s character in it.”

Then, however, came a difficult period of adjustment. After one month, Matsui was hitting .255, with only two home runs, and was in the midst of a 9-for-47 slump. The only bright spots were his fielding and his 22 RBIs.

“It’s quite different here,” he confessed to the everpresent writers.
“The MLB is much harder than I thought. It took me a while to realize it, but American pitchers will throw a strike on 2–2. In Japan, they try to get you to hit something off the plate.” He kept trying to pull those two-seam fastballs, resulting, unfortunately, in a succession of infield grounders.

Particularly embarrassing was the greatly anticipated first matchup between Seattle’s Ichiro and New York’s Matsui, a three-game set scheduled for April 29 through May 1 at Yankee Stadium. The series did not live up to its fanfare. That included, for the first time, simultaneous big spreads on the back page of the tabloids in both New York and Tokyo. The headline in the New York Daily News was “Ichiro vs. Godzilla” and featured cartoon caricatures of the two icons with the caption, “Japan’s big shots battle in the Bronx.”

The confrontation was viewed by tens of millions of people and analyzed by an NHK guest commentator, Matsui’s ex-mentor and manager Shigeo Nagashima (who took the opportunity of his visit to Yankee Stadium to inform New Yorkers about the “great nationalistic pride as a Japanese that Matsui had inside”). It also featured one of the briefest pregame handshakes in MLB history—so fast that most in the mob of photographers on the scene were unable to record it—as a distinctly uninterested Ichiro appeared out of the dugout, offered a limp wrist without even removing his batting glove and then quickly escaped to the outfield. Adding injury to insult, the Yankees were swept and Matsui managed only three miserable, insignificant singles.

Going into the last week of May, Matsui was on the verge of oblivion. His average stood at .249, with but five home runs (one less than Ichiro, to add to his shame), contributing to a serious Yankees swoon. He had also taken a commanding MLB lead in infield groundouts, earning the uncomplimentary nickname “4–3” for his one-binders to second base, and was becoming an embarrassment to executives at NHK, who had filled their sports programming schedule with wall-to-wall Matsui coverage.

The typical telecast of Yankees games featured numerous reruns of Matsui at bat—in slow motion, wide screen, split screen comparison with other at bats, and all from as many different angles as the on-the-spot producers could think up. Being thrown out at first time after time and vying for the league lead in double play balls (he would finish second with 25) was not an automatic crowd pleaser in Japan. Nor was the title of “Groundball King,” as he was also known.

The absolute low point for Matsui came during that period when George Steinbrenner, tired of watching Matsui flail away helplessly, declared, “This isn’t the man we signed on for.” That public insult was featured prominently in the tabloids back in Japan.

The normally unflappable Matsui fell into what was for him a depression, albeit one that was indiscernible to anyone else. In reply to a question from a Tokyo Suppōsu reporter as to how “enjoyable” his experience had been thus far, he said, “My heart’s in a slump. . . . I thought I was going to have a good time playing. But I would not call this fun. It’s kisshō [desperation] every day. I’m just trying to keep up.”

“It’s not just one or two pitchers here who have great velocity,” he told another inquirer ruefully, “Everyone does.”

Matsui lived alone in a Manhattan high rise. He did his own laundry and socialized mostly with his assistant Isao Hironaka, a few Japanese writers, visitors from Japan, and occasionally his teammates, if the services of an interpreter were available (Matsui’s English having not yet arrived at a conversational level). Like most ballplayers, he eschewed the museums and art galleries and other such NYC attractions, preferring to spend his free time eating at Japanese restaurants and going for long reflective drives along the Hudson River in his new Chevy. At night, he patronized the sedate, refined Manhattan hostess clubs for Japanese ex-pats—such establishments a noted feature of the exclusive Japanese community in New York. One Tokyo tabloid, worried about Matsui’s sex life, interviewed a top porno actress in Japan who volunteered to fly to the States and service Matsui whenever required, just in case blonde Western women were not to his liking.

Despite Matsui’s struggles at the plate, Yankees manager Joe Torre defended his new left-fielder from the Far East, praising his defense and his ability to drive in runs even while having to adjust to a new league. Torre and Matsui, in fact, exchanged numerous missives during the season, translated by Matsui’s assistant Hironaka, about how
to cope with MLB pitching, and the Yankees pilot was certain that it was just a matter of time before Hideki would show what he was really made of. “Stand closer to the plate” was Torre’s advice.

Team batting coach Rich Down (destined to be ex-batting coach by the end of the year) added his analysis. “In Japan Hideki only had to face two major-league-level pitchers per team. Here, it’s a different story, but sooner or later he’ll catch fire and I predict he’ll single-handedly carry this team for long stretches at a time.”

Both predictions proved to be accurate. At the end of May, Matsui suddenly righted himself. The reversal in his fortunes was triggered by a discussion with ryanes catcher Jorge Posada about Matsui’s stance, which had grown increasingly timid and defensive. “You’re not swinging aggressively enough,” he said. “And you’re not hitting the ball where it’s pitched. Cook the bat and get your body into the swing.” The advice worked.

On May 29, Matsui hit a huge home run to help Roger Clemens win his 300th career game and delivered several more key hits after that, including a three-run homer in Cincinnati and a dramatic grand slam versus the Mets in a widely watched crosstown matchup on June 30. The blast was his 10th homer of the year. He had also raised his average to .300 and moved into the top 10 in the American League in RBIs.

Back home, a greatly relieved Japanese public participated vigorously in the All-Star balloting, overwhelmingly voting for Hideki and putting him into the starting lineup for the 2003 midsummer classic, to the dissatisfaction of some in the American media who thought there were more qualified players.

As ESPN.com’s Sean McAdam pointed out, for example, Matsui’s 64 RBIs at the midpoint tied him for sixth place in the A.L., but he was not among the league leaders in batting average, total bases, run scores, slugging percentage, OBP or extra-base hits. Nor was he even close to the top 10 in batting average with runners in scoring position.

Said McAdam, criticizing the ballot box stuffing by fans back in Japan, “Matsui’s RBI total shows him the beneficiary of the many base runners in front of him in the powerful Yankees batting order.”

He added “There are more regulars in the Yankees lineup who have more homers than Matsui than those who have fewer. . . . This is an All-Star?”

Nonetheless, it was a historic game for Japan because there were an unprecedented three native sons selected to play: Matsui, Ichiro Suzuki and Shigetoshi Hasegawa. In fact, ratings for the telecast of that game in Japan were higher than they were in the United States. (Shown on NHK General, the network’s terrestrial channel beamed to nearly every household in Japan, the game drew a viewer rating of 11.6 percent, meaning nearly 12 million people watched the morning telecast. The rating was higher than for the Fox telecast of the contest in the United States, and higher even than certain Tokyo Giants games that year.) Fans missed the last two innings of that game, one of the most exciting All-Star games in years, with the A.L. rallying in the bottom of the eighth inning for three runs to take a come-from-behind victory, because of a previously scheduled half-hour news break. It hardly mattered to most of them, though, because the last Japanese player had already been removed from the game. Indeed, a subsequent survey conducted by the Mainichi Shimbun asked the question, “After you see the day’s news on Matsui, do you remember who won the day’s game?” Seventy-eight percent of respondents said no.

Matsui continued to impress as play resumed in the second half of the season, with a number of crowd-pleasing hits, foremost among them a towering walk-off home run to right field to best the Cleveland Indians on July 18; it was the first japonara home run ever hit by a Japanese in MLB history. On September 17, he became only the third Yankee rookie in history—after Joe DiMaggio and Tony Lazzeri—to drive in 100 runs in a season.

Although Matsui did not ultimately prove to be the franchise player (or even the home run threat) that many Japanese had anticipated, he did finish with a set of statistics you could send home to Mama. They included a batting average of .287, 16 home runs and his 106 RBIs, which was second on the team and was the highest total for a Yankees rookie since DiMaggio in 1936. Showing “gap power,” he also led New York in doubles, batted .335 with runners
in scoring position and earned kudos from fans and sportswriters alike for his other talents—the fielding skills, the quickness with which he got the ball back to the infield ("He’s like a second baseman in that regard" said YES broadcaster Michael Kay), his heads-up baserunning ability and mastery of the other fundamentals. Thomas Boswell called him "a left-handed version of the elegant Hall of Famer Al Kaline."

New Yorkers especially took to his unfailingly polite demeanor, which fit in nicely with the clean-cut, almost bland Yankee persona. Had Matsui been less of a nice guy during his down periods, the New York press would most certainly have been harder on him, but, as it was, there were no howling back-page headlines of the "iraboo" sort about his performance.

No one was more satisfied than Yankee manager Joe Torre, who said, summing up, "He does everything well. Sure, he's a different player than I thought we were getting, but I think he's better. It's tough for a slugger to switch leagues and switch countries because most of them take advantage of pitchers’ mistakes, pitchers they've faced over and over again. But Hideki is much more than a home run hitter. He’s a line drive hitter who covers the whole plate. He hits to all fields. He has good at bats. And he knows how to play the game. I can't think of anyone else I'd rather have at bat with men on base than Hideki." High praise indeed.

And there was more to come as shares in Matsui’s stock enjoyed a major postseason rally. He whacked a powerful home run in Minnesota to give the Yankees a 3–1 lead in the American League Division Series. He slammed a scalding double down the right-field line off Pedro Martínez in Game 7 of the American League Championship Series, while his alert baserunning allowed him to score the tying run in the eighth inning of Game 7, which New York won in extra innings. He was so excited after touching home plate on that play that he jumped three feet into the air, pumping his fists in jubilation. Said one Japanese writer watching wide-eyed back in Japan, "That’s more emotion than he ever showed in his life."

In Game 2 of the 99th World Series (which the Yankees would lose in six games), he hit a 3–0 fastball off Florida starter Mark Redman over the center-field fence, 408 feet away. That blast made him the first Japanese ever to hit a World Series home run and earned him gushing headlines the next morning—"A Classic Yankee" blared the New York Post. "Matsui Earns Stripes!" went another—and a public prediction by Steinbrenner that Matsui would hit "35 homers" for sure the following year.

In the end, Matsui’s most important contribution may have been financial, as he single-handedly created new ways for tourists to blow their money in New York. Sales of Yankee tickets to Japanese tourist groups went through the roof, as did sales of Matsui goods. In midseason, an autographed Hidéki Matsui baseball sold for $379, compared to $269 for teammate Derek Jeter (and a Barry Bonds ball for $279), prompting one baffled Yankees official to remark, "The people from Japan don’t seem to give a damn about Yankee baseball. All they want is to see Matsui get a hit, to buy a Matsui souvenir and go home feeling good about their country. Watching the other Yankees play is incidental."

Be that as it may, according to one estimate, the intense Japanese interest in Matsui brought in roughly 500 million much-needed dollars for the city’s economy, about five times what Ichiro had done for Seattle in his debut campaign.

Godzilla himself didn’t do so badly either with lucrative endorsement contracts for Upper Deck sports cards, Lotte ice cream, a Mizuno sports drink and Japan Airlines, among others. In midsummer of 2003, JAL launched a new fleet of Boeing 747 jets, two of which flew to Matsui’s hometown airport in the city of Komatsu (of which Neagari is a suburb) bearing a 20-foot image of the star’s pug on the fuselage. One of the many advantages for Matsui of being a Yankee was that unlike the Yomiuri Giants, the Yankees did not demand control over his endorsements or a 20 percent cut off the top.

The city fathers of Neagari certainly welcomed the publicity generated by their native son’s emigration to New York. Plans were laid to ignite a tourist boom by merging their town with two nearby communities and bestowing upon the new mini-metropolis the name “Matsui
City.” A train station near the local ballpark was to be renamed “Godzilla Station.”

Not everybody in Japan was eager to share in the joy. One, of course, was Watanabe, who saw his TV ratings slip to under 15 percent, the team’s lowest since the Japanese Nielsen system began in 1965. Another malcontent was a fan named Kiyoko Morishita who wrote a letter of complaint to a newspaper in which she decried the fuss over American games. “Many players seem to think that success in the major leagues means more than success in Japan,” she sniffed. “The attitude is similar to some Japanese people’s adoration of Western culture. I want Japanese players to respect Japanese fans. The media and TV shows actually give more attention to the achievements of Japanese major leaguers. I’m bored with that. They should focus on Japanese baseball. . . . If the Professional Baseball Association doesn’t consider ways to change the situation, it will become unable to attract spectators. My hope is that more young talented players will come out and show us more exciting games.”

One who wasn’t about to fly back to the rescue of the NPB was Hideki Matsui, who, by season’s end, was standing as erect and as proud as anyone else in the park during the playing of the “Star Spangled Banner” and “God Bless America”—shoulders back, cap respectfully over his heart—as if he truly were an American citizen. Said Yankees vice president Jean Afterman, “Hideki absolutely reveled in being a New York Yankee.”

“I’m a American major leaguer, now,” Matsui said emphatically, after a year of enjoying American-style freedom. “And I’m here to stay. . . . This is only the beginning.”

EPILOGUE

The funny thing is not how different Japanese and American baseball is, but how, in some ways, each country longs to be a little more like the other.

JOE POSANASKI, KANSAS CITY STAR

Ichiro Again

For Ichiro Suzuki, 2001 proved hard to match. The shades-wearing teen idol followed his gilt-edged first season with successively declining marks of .321 and .312, starting off like an F-1 racer in both years but then developing engine trouble and running out of gas by September. It was a pattern that accompanied the Mariners’ frustrating dissipation of huge division leads in both of those campaigns, which ended with their failure to make the playoffs two years running. In 2002 Ichiro hit .357 in the first half of the season, but only .280 after. In 2003 his collapse was even more striking, as he nose-dived from .352 at the All-Star break all the way down to .243 over the final two months.

This prompted some observers, like sports columnist Jack Gallagher, to suggest that perhaps Ichiro’s famed work ethic was inappropriate to the long MLB grind, with its grueling travel schedule. Others believed that the problem was caused by opposing pitchers who had been pounding the Seattle Flash more than ever with inside fastballs, which Ichiro had taken to pulling for fly outs. This caused a significant drop-off in the number of hits he slashed to the opposite side of the field—such infield singles being a hallmark of his unforgettable first year.

Ichiro himself, who had once aspired to hitting .400 in MLB, was said to be so upset by his inability to perform well for the Mariners