

# MLB is trying to expand in Japan. Can Japan's NPB grow in America?



By **Evan Drellich**

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TOKYO — Twenty minutes from the Tokyo Dome sits another of Japan's most revered ballparks, the 99-year-old Meiji Jingu Stadium, one of the few fields still in use anywhere that can claim Babe Ruth as a batter. Jingu's home club, the Yakult Swallows, held a spring exhibition Tuesday afternoon against the Hanshin Tigers, creating a crosstown doubleheader opportunity for fans lucky enough to also have

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gorgeous scene on the right day. But what Jeff Shimizu of Los Angeles enjoyed most was the gameplay. When a batter pretended he would bunt and then pulled back to swing, something rarely seen in Major League Baseball anymore, the 70-year-old Shimizu called it out in the stands: “That’s a slash play!”

“I love how Japanese baseball is so much more fundamentally pure,” said Shimizu, who spent many years as a youth baseball coach. “It’s a big difference. I watch major-league games, you see them make really rookie mistakes frequently. You don’t see that out here.”

Shimizu arrived in Tokyo as part of a tour run by JapanBall, a business founded in 1999 that arranges travel for fans interested in seeing the country’s top league, Nippon Professional Baseball. Plenty of Japanese fans have been drawn to MLB in the last 30 years as stars like Shohei Ohtani, formerly of the Nippon Ham Fighters, make their mark stateside, but new interest has also grown in the other direction. Some fans in the U.S. have taken a liking to the Japanese baseball circuit, albeit on a smaller scale.

“The metrics of how many people want to come on our tours and how many people want to subscribe to our NPB newsletter, follow our social media accounts — it’s just been a steady, steady growth, and then it really feels like it’s just exploded last year,” said Shane Barclay, who owns JapanBall. “Ohtani is obviously the main force in everything.”

JapanBall email subscribers have grown 31 percent in the last 12 months, Barclay said, while its Instagram and X followers have grown 27 percent.

Yet, at a time when [MLB is aggressively trying to leverage Ohtani’s rise for its own gain](#) in Japan — and making no secret of those ambitions — the 12-team NPB is not moving with nearly the same verve to capture its own set of international fans. That’s because NPB rarely moves together as one, for reasons both cultural and institutional.

“Japanese baseball has not grown in, I would say, 50 years,” said player agent Don Nomura, who was a thorn in the league’s side when he orchestrated pitcher Hideo Nomo’s groundbreaking departure to MLB in 1995. “The uniforms, the players have changed, but their structure of baseball hasn’t changed. They’re owned by major, big corporations, and mostly what they care about is advertisement of their club, and they’re not really into baseball business.”

NPB jersey? There is no league-wide online store to do so. Resellers on eBay or Amazon might be your best bet.

NPB also does not offer a full-league TV package, leading some to seek creative solutions. The New York-based author Robert Fitts, who's written several books on Japanese baseball and trading cards, signed up for a Japanese cable company's streaming bundle for about \$200 a year.

"I have like 81 channels all in Japanese," Fitts said "Every morning it's like, OK, where's the game? It takes me 20 minutes."

For a long time, MLB was divided into two meaningfully different bodies, the American and National Leagues, but the distinction is irrelevant today outside of the standings. Not so in Japan, where the Central League and Pacific League run different programs.

"They function completely separately from each other," said Yuri Karasawa, who built a following writing about NPB on social media and runs the website Yakyu Cosmopolitan. "The league would have so much more recognition and so much more popularity overseas if they actually tried to get it. But they don't seem to be doing that."

Individual clubs hold virtually all the power in NPB, a contrast to baseball in the U.S.. Yomiuri is the most powerful team. While MLB commissioner Rob Manfred is ultimately at the mercy of his owners, his office is formally empowered to handle far more than the office of the NPB commissioner Sadayuki Sakakibara.





The century-old Jingu Stadium. (Evan Drellich / The Athletic)

One of the two leagues inside NPB is more progressive than the other, however. The six teams in the Pacific League operate a marketing venture that sells a streaming package for its half of NPB. The company, Pacific League Marketing, said it had approximately 490,000 digital viewers in North America last year.



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“We found that a very small percentage of visitors to Japan were taking advantage of the thriving live events scene,” Tickets in Japan said. “The data shows that only about 1 percent of annual spending by international visitors in Japan is on sports events, and 2 percent on theater and music performances. ... We know there is consumer demand and interest to capture, it’s a matter of accessibility.”

The U.S. isn’t the only country where NPB could see more business, if it chose to pursue it. Tickets in Japan said it’s getting traction among baseball fans in Taiwan, and that country might be the next frontier for merchandise sales, too.

Fanatics, the major U.S. sports apparel retailer, has partnered with five NPB teams, including the Giants. Nori Kawana, head of the company’s East Asia division, said that some club executives are interested in pushing further abroad, but bringing NPB marks to the States is tricky.

“There are complications around what IPs are protected in U.S.,” Kawana said. “Let’s say Tokyo Giants. Can you sell Giants in the U.S. where the San Francisco Giants are?”

“There’s definitely interest (in expanding sales) more towards Asia, like Taiwan. There are Taiwanese players, there are Korean players playing in Japan. NPB definitely has a potential to go beyond Japan, which is somewhere I think we can play a big role.”

Topps, the Fanatics-owned trading card company, produces its own sets of NPB cards, competing with three other major manufacturers: BBM, Epoch and Calbee. The last sells its cards with potato chips.

NPB cards sell “very, very well” in Japan, Topps head of trading cards David Leiner said, but the U.S. allocation is “much more limited because the demand isn’t as strong.”

“They like that we’re exposing them further in the States, but I don’t know how big of a push it actually is for them,” Leiner said of NPB. “The Samurai, the national team, their global presence is definitely important.”

Asked if Topps was interested in acquiring any of the other card makers, Leiner said, “At Fanatics, everything’s on the table.”

Amy Moses, a 48-year-old Virginia resident, has attended several MLB special events in the past, including games in London, but had never been to Japan before joining JapanBall’s tour. She watched Hanshin play both at Meiji Jingu on Tuesday and on Saturday as well, in an exhibition against her Cubs at the Dome.

“I had no idea what it’d be like coming into this,” Moses said. “I was so excited because the Hanshin Tiger fans were electric, and I’ve never been in an atmosphere like that.”

On Sunday, Moses spoke with Japanese fans in the stands about their game’s idiosyncrasies: Where were the bullpens at the Tokyo Dome? The conversation later moved to cheering. In Japan, fans often hit souvenir sticks together, which is not as common in the U.S.

“He said, ‘How do you make noise in America? Is it just with your voice and your hands?’” Moses said. “And I thought that was such an unusual way to phrase it, right? What I love the most was talking to the two of them and then sharing back and forth.”

Moses on the trip read a well-known book about Japanese baseball, “You Gotta Have Wa,” by Robert Whiting. Whiting, who first came to Japan in the 1960s and has chronicled the sport and country for decades, feels NPB’s reliance on the status quo could eventually be perilous, if it isn’t already.



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Robert Fitts, Jeff Shimizu and Amy Moses at Jingu Stadium. (Evan Drellich / The Athletic)

“The days of NPB games on nightly nationwide TV are long declining as Japanese people prefer to watch Japanese players like Ohtani in MLB telecasts rather than NPB,” Whiting said. “Younger people find baseball too slow.”

Whiting thinks NPB needs to pay its players more and shell out big bucks to pry away some top MLB talent to come to NPB.

NPB's revenues were about \$2 billion in 2024, a person briefed on the league's finances who was not authorized to speak publicly said. That's about \$10 billion less than MLB. But growth and expansion aren't necessarily goals unto themselves for the league's owners. In part, that's because of a lack of competition. Unlike in the U.S., where MLB has to compete with the NFL and NBA, baseball and NPB are at the top of the chain.

"It's not all about making every dollar, maximizing our team's exposure and doing everything we can to win," Barclay of JapanBall said. "That's a reason behind a lot of appealing things about Japanese baseball, because I think any MLB fan can tell you how much they resent being treated as just a credit card to maximize spending at every game.

"But then in other ways, it's frustrating, because I'm like, 'I want to give you money.'"

The longtime Japanese baseball writer Jim Allen, of jballallen.com, said the goal for NPB teams is to maximize advertising value and take a tax deduction on the operating losses. New stadiums, which can boost attendance and profits, also aren't built very often. Only two have opened this century.

"It's not America. They can't just go to Tokyo (government) and say, 'Build me a stadium or I'm gonna leave,'" Allen said. "They'll say, 'Yeah, take a hike.'"

Change in NPB might always be gradual. A new generation of owners could produce different thinking, but nothing is likely to happen fast, save perhaps for a scenario where NPB starts to be threatened by MLB's competition for top players.

"I think you're going to have to see just a mass, mass exodus, and even then, I don't know if it'd be enough to spur change," said reporter Jason Coskrey of The Japan Times, who grew up in the States and went to Japan to cover baseball in 2007. "There's no impetus to make money. There's no impetus to grow the fan base. It's a very insular way of thinking. It's like, 'This works in Japan, so why should we do anything else?'"



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Shimizu had done a JapanBall tour once before, of the league's spring training. He liked it so much that he returned. But back home in the States, he doesn't detect a lot of interest in NPB around him.

"Not much, to be quite honest," Shimizu said. "It's not really on the radar unless you're a baseball guy like me."

*(Top photo of Jingu Stadium: Kiyoshi Ota / Getty Images)*

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