

Baseball

# Japan Trip Enriches SC Little Leaguers

They were Americans visiting Japan, but there was no real "language" barrier. There turned out to be a common language after all — baseball.

Thirteen members of the Santa Cruz Little League and five chaperones traveled to Shingu, Japan, for a week as part of a Sister City exchange program. Before returning to Santa Cruz recently, the Santa Cruz contingent won three of six baseball contests against two Japanese teams. Moreover, the Santa Cruzans made a lot of friends on the one-week trip.

"It was a great thrill for the kids," said Colette Seiple, one of the chaperones and chairperson of the Sister City Committee of Santa Cruz. "We were happy they made good representatives for Santa Cruz."

While in Japan, the Santa Cruzans stayed with Japanese families, switching every two days in order to get exposure to different households.

"The kids, each of them, got a lot out of it," said Seiple, whose husband, Jack, was Santa Cruz' manager. "They each stayed with families. Every other day, the kids were shuffled around to different families."

Sponsoring the little leaguers, all of whom were either from the Santa Cruz National or American leagues, were 29 businesses in Santa Cruz County.

The trip officially started on Aug. 4 (a Tuesday) at midnight, when the group departed from the San Francisco International Airport. The Santa Cruzans arrived in Tokyo Thursday morning and spent the day there doing some sightseeing. The next day, there was a six-hour training ride to Shingu.

According to Seiple, the American visitors were greeted heartily by the native. Among those who greeted the Santa Cruzans were the city's mayor, the city council and the Sister City Committee. And, said Seiple, there was never any talk of politics or ideological differences of the two countries.

"We were greeted by flagwaving, dignitaries and citizens," said Seiple. "Never once was there anything over imports, exports or policies. We were all treated like royalty."

The players were even presented medals before the competition began at a reception hosted by Shingu's mayor. And, after the competition ended, the players were presented with watches.

On Aug. 9-11 (Sunday through Tuesday), the Santa Cruz team played all its games — doubleheaders each day, which was no easy task, said Seiple. "They're (the Japanese) used to it, but we're not," she said. "It was really concentrated on baseball."

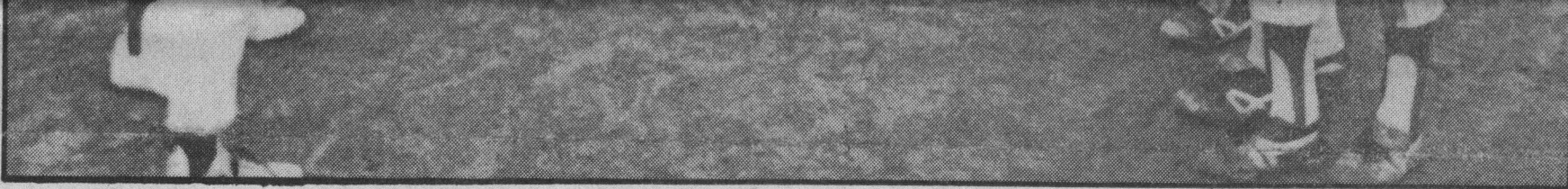


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There were other things the Santa Cruzans weren't used to — including the steamy weather and the field.

"The field was totally different," said Seiple. "It was an all-dirt field. It was totally different than what we're used to. Also, the weather was in the 90s."



The Santa Cruz Little Leaguers and Japanese exchange friendship before one of the six baseball contests in Shingu.



Jay Fite of the Santa Cruz Little League is mobbed by teammates after cracking a grand slam in the second game of series.

The Japanese players were also on the "different" side, said Seiple. "The Japanese kids are incredible," she said. "Weather permitting, they practice every day during the season. They really emphasize bunting. And, their fielding drills are unbelievable and they really stress fundamentals."

Shingu is a city of about 40,000 — identical in size to Santa Cruz. Also, it's on the coast, with trees and mountains dotting the landscape. However, Seiple says the city is more "rugged" in nature than Santa Cruz and has less of a laid-back attitude.

While in Shingu, the Americans spent some time at an Aikido school run by Michio Hikitsuchi, a 62-year-old, 10th-degree black belt in the martial art. Mikitsuchi, the world's foremost technician in Aikido, said Seiple, was at UCSC for a month in 1974 providing demonstrations.

Clint George, who left UCSC three years ago to study Aikido in Japan, served as the Santa Cruzans' guide and interpreter. "He was with us all the time," said Seiple. "He was really wonderful."

Seiple was impressed by how hooked the Japanese are on baseball. According to Seiple, baseball — professional, college and high school — is televised on almost every channel a lot of the time in Japan.

On the field, the Santa Cruz Little Leaguers won the second, fourth and sixth games against the Japanese teams (one from Shingu and one from Osaka).

Santa Cruz lost its first game to Shingu, 10-5. The lone Santa Cruz highlight of the game was a two-run home run by Jay Fite in the first inning.

Santa Cruz downed Osaka, 10-8, in the second game. The big blow was a fourth-inning grand slam by Fite. In the game, Kurt Hodges was 3-for-3 at the plate, while Sean Harrell was 3-for-4. David Albritton was the winning pitcher.

In the third game, Santa Cruz lost to Osaka, 9-8, in nine innings. Hodges was 4-for-5 and Harrell 3-for-5.

Santa Cruz won the fourth game, 4-3, against Shingu, as Albritton picked up another victory on the mound. Mitch Medina was 2-for-3 for Santa Cruz.

The fifth game was forgettable for Santa Cruz, as Osaka came away with a 12-1 decision. However, Santa Cruz came back and won the sixth game, 10-2, against Shingu. Albritton was 2-for-2, while Brendan Gill and Billy Mellis were 2-for-3. Fite was the winning pitcher.

Cited for special honors were Hodges and Harrell.

A baseball team from Shingu will come to Santa Cruz next summer, said Seiple, as part of the exchange program.