



BILL LOVEJOY/SENTINEL

Tom Mine with a photo of his 1932 Watsonville American Legion baseball team in his Watsonville home. Mine is second from right. BELOW: New York Yankee immortals Lou Gehrig and Babe Ruth are surrounded by Japanese American stars Johnny Nakagawa, Kenichi Zenimura, Fred Yoshikawa and Harvey Iwata.

Baseball

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# Baseball

## WAS MY FIRST LOVE

Japanese American baseball leagues  
once flourished around the Monterey Bay

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As the 2010 Major League Baseball season gets under way, a long forgotten chapter of local sports history waits quietly to be reopened.

While players from Japan are now commonplace in the big leagues—Ichiro Suzuki of the Seattle Mariners and Daisuke Matsuzaka of the Boston Red Sox have become American sports icons—few contemporary fans of the national pastime are aware that Japanese American baseball teams flourished throughout the Monterey Bay Region during the era leading up to World War II.

"Baseball was my first love in those days," recalled 91-year-old Tom Mine, a

left-hander who played outfielder on the Watsonville Kasei team in the late 1930s.

"We played some pretty good ball. But, mostly, we had a lot of fun."

Baseball was first introduced to Japan in the early 1870s by American educator Horace Wilson, who taught the game to his students at Tokyo University. By the 1890s, the game had taken hold.

"We loved the game," said 91-year-old Roy Hattori, who played for the Monterey Minato club during the 1930s. "Our fathers loved baseball, too. The Issei [first generation immigrants] loved baseball before coming to the United States."

During the 1920s and '30s, most communities in the Monterey Bay area — Santa Cruz, Watsonville, Salinas, Mon-



GEOFFREY DUNN COLLECTION/CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

**A grassy ground**

**In the spring**

**How I long to play ball**

— SHIKI MASAOKA (1867-1902),  
collected haiku

terey, Hollister and Gilroy — hosted talented Japanese American baseball teams. They played in highly competitive leagues against each other, with games

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on Sundays.

The Japanese American teams also played nonleague games against a host of white and African American semi-pro teams that barnstormed throughout the region. The better teams also played in an "A" league that included teams from Sacramento, Stockton, Oakland, Fresno, San Jose and Los Angeles.

"We traveled all through Northern and Southern California," said Maya Miyamoto, 88, one of the five legendary Miyamoto brothers who formed the hub of the Monterey roster for the better part of two decades. "We'd ride to games in the back of old Model T trucks with sideboards and canvas tops. On the way home, we'd sleep in the back. They packed us in like sardines."

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In Santa Cruz, where the Japanese American community was significantly smaller than others throughout the region, the Santa Cruz YMA squad included a pair of brother acts — Art, Burt and Franklin Kithara; and Nobuyuki, Suama, Tom and Tugio Iwanaga. Also on the team were Jim Masamori and Kuichi Takei, a crafty left-handed pitcher whom Miyamoto remembers as having "a good fastball and good drop."

Takei led the team to a championship season in the Japanese Central Coast League in the late 1930s.

The YMA squad played its games on the old Santa Cruz High diamond [now Dodge Field] and the players wore the high school team's uniforms. Miyamoto remembers the Santa Cruz Japanese American families hosting large picnics after the games.

"We always liked playing in Santa Cruz because of the weather," Miyamoto said. "And there was always lots of good food afterwards."

Watsonville boasted a substantially larger Japanese American community centrally involved in the burgeoning agricultural economy of the Pajaro Valley. The Watsonville Apple Giants formed in 1920 and were followed up by the Watsonville Kasei in 1935.

In addition to Mine, a perennial .300 hitter, some of the stars on the Watsonville teams included "Lanky" Nagase, "Tar" Shirachi, Ben Matsuda, Herbert Takata, "Sig" Wada, Walter Hashimoto, Larry Tsuyuki, George Matsumoto and "Socks" Hayashi. In 1935, at the National Baseball Congress Championship tournament, the Apple Giants fell one game short of facing the immortal Negro League star Satchel Paige.

One of the most celebrated encounters in regional Japanese American baseball history took place during the fall of 1927. New York Yankee immortals Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig teamed up in Fresno with a group of California all-stars that included four Japanese American players: Johnny

Nakagawa, who had been dubbed the "Nisei Babe Ruth"; hard hitting Harvey Iwata; catcher Fred Yoshikawa; and the player who is widely regarded as the "Dean of Nisei Baseball" in California, Kenichi Zenimura.

The 100-pound Zenimura [who was a well-known baseball star to Japanese Americans throughout the state] put on a base-running display that apparently irritated Ruth, who was playing first base. At one point, the diminutive Zenimura, who went 1-for-2 in the game with a stolen base, slid between Ruth's legs to avoid a tag on a pick-off play.

"If you do that again," Ruth told him, "I'll pick you up and use you as a baseball bat."

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Immigrants from China, Japan and the Philippines played a significant role in the Monterey Bay region's cultural and economic development. At nearly every turn, however, these immigrant groups were subjected to both restrictive legislation and even vigilante violence.

Anti-Japanese American activity in the Monterey Bay area reared its ugly head as early as the 1890s. In the 1920s, it ramped up. Japanese fishing boats were sunk in Monterey and local business associations tried to squeeze Japanese farmers out of the region's agricultural economy.

As it often has in the United States, baseball furnished the social lubricant for breaking down these racial barriers and providing opportunities for ethnic groups to claim their share of the American Dream. Just as often, however, the sport reflected the harsh realities of American society.

As Adrian Burgos Jr. notes in his baseball history, "Playing America's Game," the historic racial segregation in baseball was more complex than simply a black-and-white dynamic. The national pastime, Burgos notes, "depended on a racial system that featured five major 'colored' racial groupings—white, brown, red, yellow and black."

These leagues were something of a parallel to the better-known Negro Leagues that flourished in the U.S. before Jackie Robinson broke the so-called "color line" in 1946. Just as African Americans were barred from the game for the first half of the 20th Century, so too were dark-skinned Latinos and Asians.

"We must acknowledge the discrimination and segregation from the larger society that forced the Japanese American community to build leagues of their own," noted Japanese American historian Gary Otake.

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For Japanese American communities around the Monterey Bay, the legacy of America's racial

divide took an even uglier turn when all residents of Japanese ancestry were forced into internment camps in the early days of World War II.

Not surprisingly, baseball followed them into the camps.

"Baseball was big—it was huge in the camps," remembered Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, author [with her late husband James D. Houston] of the classic account of internment life, "Farewell to Manzanar." "It didn't require expensive equipment, and you could play it anywhere. It was a big part of our lives."

Many of the Japanese American teams re-formed in the internment camps.

"We played on Sundays to big crowds there," Watsonville's Mine remembered. "Just like we did at home."

But it wasn't always fun in the sun. In 1944, a bad call in a game between the Manzanar and Poston teams resulted in a huge brawl involving players and fans.

Several of the ball players from Japanese American teams aided

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ABOVE: The Japanese Central Coast League Championship series held in Watsonville, 1923, with teams from Monterey, Watsonville and Salinas. The championship won by Monterey.

LEFT: The Santa Cruz YMA team won the Japanese Central Coast League in the late 1930s behind the pitching of Kuichi Takei (seated, second from right). Burt Kitahara is standing, second from right.

