

## Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 20: Baseball: American Game, Japanese Rules

**Viewing:** Film, *Mr. Baseball*, 1992, Schepisi, as centerpiece for a humanities unit,

**Film (optional):** *MacArthur's Children*, 1985, Shinoda.

**Suggested grades:** 10-12 and college.

(Note, *Mr. Baseball* (PG-13) and some of the materials in this unit contain language and sexual situations which may be considered inappropriate for some young students.)

### **Suggested Reading:**

*Tokyo Sketches*, Pete Hamill 1992

*You Gotta Have Wa*, Robert Whiting

### **Themes**

Although baseball is played in both the United States and Japan, the way it is played, the philosophies and styles of play, are very different. These differences in the game reflect basic cultural differences between the two societies and peoples. Nevertheless, the sport of baseball continues to be a strong cultural connection between the two countries and cultures.

### **The story of *Mr. Baseball*:**

Jack Elliott (Tom Sellick) is an over-the-hill American star whose contract options are picked up only by a Japanese team, the Chunichi Dragons. His story is that of other American professionals who have sought big money and fame playing in Japan, knowing little of the culture and nature of the game in Japan. Elliot is arrogant and his superior attitude makes him unwilling to compromise his ego and American baseball style to the Japanese game. Only gradually, through his love relationship with a Japanese woman and the patient, wisdom of his manager does he learn the Japanese way and regain some of his former skills. In the end he is able to both learn from the Japanese and, in return, teach them about winning the game of baseball.

### **The story of *MacArthur's Children*:**

This film tells the story of the defeat of Japan in the Pacific War and the early occupation of American troops from the eyes of two fifth graders who have lost their fathers. Takaya and Yoshiyuki, the two boys, and Mume, a young girl whose father is an admiral charged with war crimes, along with their teacher Komako represent the generation of young people who will adjust and begin to build a new Japan. In the end these kids and their teacher will challenge and tie a rag-tag team of American soldiers in a game of baseball. Although film includes some crude language and a discreetly handled rape scene, it is generally true to the children's experience and appropriate for most audiences. If the teaching focus is entirely on baseball, the last 40 minutes of the two hour film can be shown.

### **Teaching:**

The title of this unit is borrowed from an excellent PBS documentary dealing with the cultural conflicts both baseball players and businessmen encounter working in Japan. But here the title is used ironically. The goal is to bring students to the understanding that baseball is not exclusively an American game but rather a mirror of the society and culture in which it is played; further, students can see that the view "the American way is the right and only way" is often the cause of cultural misunderstanding and conflicts.

A possible introduction to the extended unit is to show either or both *MacArthur's Children* and, from the *Faces of Japan* series, "Young Baseball Heroes." Although the Japanese have been playing baseball for over one hundred years and professionally since 1935, these film/videos show the importance of baseball to the Japanese in the postwar generations. *MacArthur's Children* suggests that for the surviving children of war-torn and defeated Japan baseball was a step toward Westernization and recovery. "Young Baseball Heroes" (available in 15 or 30 minute versions) deals with a 1980s high school teams' determined drive to make Koshien, the high school national championship competition. When they lose in the semi-finals, the players' samurai-like discipline collapses into tears. However, their incredible effort and commitment to the goal, win or lose, reflects their heritage and remains a stunning example of the work ethic of the Japanese people.

The film *Mr. Baseball* is both entertaining and educational as to the different baseball philosophies and styles in the United States and Japan. Although the cultural ignorance and arrogance of the main American character in Japan is exaggerated for comic and dramatic effect, *You Gotta Have Wa*, 1989, Whiting, particularly chapters 1 and 4, provides many similar examples of actual clashes between American players and their Japanese managers and teams. The "Introduction/Ground Rules," pages 1-3, offers a helpful short primer to Japanese baseball. One problem I find with *Mr. Baseball* is the ending in which the American player, now a good Japanese team player, in turn teaches his Japanese team mates to respond emotionally to an umpire's decision and violently (a bench clearing brawl) to a pitch thrown at a batter. The climax further strains credibility when the hero, one home run from beating his manager's record and with the bases loaded in a crucial win-or-lose pennant game, bunts on a two strike count. But, of course, he wins the game. Aside from these and an obligatory love story between the hero and the manager's independent daughter, the film is good and should provoke considerable cross-cultural discussion.

The video documentary from Frontline, PBS, *American Game, Japanese Rules* (1988, Bikel), uses interviews with Americans playing for Japanese teams to reveal their frustrations in trying to understand and cope with the ways of Japanese baseball and society. Although half of the 55-minute program is devoted to the conflicts between American businessmen and the Japanese business system, both the baseball and business parts provide vivid examples of cross-cultural conflicts.

A different view of the American player in Japan is Hamill's "Running for Home" in *Tokyo Sketches* (1992). Like *Mr. Baseball's* Elliot, Scanlon has made cultural mistakes and is playing poorly. But here the confrontation with his manager leads Scanlon to the realization that he has been playing baseball for his father and not for himself and a love of the game. Here is an example of an American learning from the Japanese. The language of this story may restrict its use with young students.

Once the students have some understanding of Japanese baseball, they should view the experience of *Mr. Baseball* in Japan from both the American and Japanese points of view. Although for the first hour of the film Elliot tends to be the "ugly American," students can be divided into two groups, one to defend him, the other to criticize him when he is out of line. The American group can list the aspects of Japanese society and baseball which seem strange, while the Japanese group can list the incidents where Elliot is insensitive and disrespectful to people and their ways.

His transformation represents the pattern of the learning experience for the American students in this unit. The same division is possible when studying selected scenes from the documentary *American Game, Japanese Rules*. We can understand and feel the frustration of the young Steve Hammond and his wife, but we can also appreciate the cultural perspective presented by Leon Lee who survived eleven seasons in Japanese baseball. The well-spoken African American is the model for Matt "Hammer" Dubois in *Mr. Baseball*. Together, they represent the new generation of Americans; baseball players, businessmen and women who are culturally sensitive and knowledgeable, fitting into the Japanese society and working effectively with its people.

Whiting's *You Gotta Have Wa* provides an excellent resource for information and print materials. Chapters can be assigned for presentations or papers. However, the book deals with the American encounter with Japanese baseball in the 1980s during the strength of Japan's economic growth. Both the book and the documentary *American Game* tend to be critical of the Japanese. In the "Epilogue," Whiting suggests examples in which Americans have learned from the Japanese. But both the book and video seem to hold to the view that Americans and Japanese are two different cultures trying to play the same "game" with different sets of rules. Can we finally play together, they ask? The answer seems to be, "not until the Japanese are willing to change and to play the game the American way."

Note, the unit can be updated by considering the performances of Japanese pitchers now playing with the New York Yankees and New York Mets. Also, Professor William Kelley of Yale University is continuing anthropological studies of Japanese baseball.

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