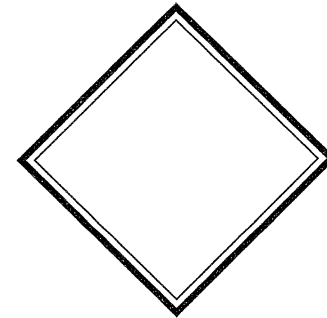


Remembering Japanese Baseball

AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE GAME



Robert K. Fitts
With a Foreword by Robert Whiting

Southern Illinois University Press ♦ Carbondale

players like Yonamine, Kawakami, and Chiba and did what had to be done to become good players. I think if they had joined another team, they would never have become such big stars.

What was my most memorable moment as a player? All of it. Every moment.

3 Wally Yonamine

Born: June 24, 1925, in Maui, Hawaii
1951–60: Yomiuri Giants outfielder
1961–62: Chunichi Dragons outfielder
1963–66: Chunichi Dragons coach
1967–69: Lotte Orions coach
1970–71: Chunichi Dragons coach
1972–77: Chunichi Dragons manager
1978–80: Yomiuri Giants coach
1981–82: Nankai Hawks coach
1983–84: Seibu Lions coach
1985–88: Nippon Ham Fighters coach



Known as the Jackie Robinson of Japan, Wally Yonamine was the first American player to go to Japan after World War II. Prior to that, Yonamine played professional football for the San Francisco 49ers. Wally, as he is universally known, initially shocked the Japanese with his aggressive play, but soon his style helped transform how baseball was played in Japan. His hustling style led to three batting titles, seven straight selections to the Best Nine team, a .311 lifetime batting average, and the 1957 MVP Award. After retiring in 1962, Yonamine coached six different clubs and managed the Chunichi Dragons—winning the Central League pennant in 1974. In 1994, he was elected to the Japan Baseball Hall of Fame. Wally Yonamine now splits his time among Hawaii, Los Angeles, and Tokyo as he helps with the family business, Wally Yonamine Pearls.

WHEN I CAME TO JAPAN, I wanted to do three things: to manage a championship team, get into the Hall of Fame, and to shake hands with the emperor. I won the Central League championship in 1974, and I made the Japan Hall of Fame in 1994. I thought that meeting the emperor would be impossible, but when I was a scout with the Giants, my wife and I met the emperor and empress in Los Angeles. The audience was in a small room

with eight others. When we were introduced, I automatically stuck my hand out because we were in Los Angeles. And he shook my hand! The empress talked to my wife for over five minutes. As they were walking out of the room, the empress looked at me and took a practice swing! There she was, the *empress* of Japan in a nice kimono and all that, giving me this batting stance! Those are the three things that I'll always remember.

I was born in Maui. When I was a little boy, I used to listen to the Honolulu high school football games and the Hawaii League baseball games on the radio. My dream was to play at Honolulu Stadium. So in my junior year of high school, I left my family in Maui and went to Honolulu. I played football my senior year for Farrington High School. I was so happy to be finally playing at the Honolulu Stadium. We used to draw twenty-five thousand every game—a packed house every game—and we won every game. I did so well that I was named the MVP and an All Star. I graduated high school on a Sunday night in 1945, and Monday morning I was drafted.

In two months, the War was over, but I was stationed at Schofield Barracks for a year and a half. During that time, I played football, baseball, and basketball. When I was playing football for the army team, we barnstormed to Portland, Oregon, and played against the University of Oregon. We beat Oregon 64 to 13, and I practically scored all of the points. I didn't know it but a scout from the San Francisco 49ers came to watch the quarterback for Oregon, but when he gave his report, it only talked about me. After I got discharged from the army, I had a scholarship to go to Ohio State for football. But the 49ers offered me a two-year contract for fourteen thousand dollars. In 1947, fourteen thousand dollars was a lot of money, so instead of going to college, I signed right away.

I played one year with the 49ers. After that first year, I went back to Hawaii in the off-season and played baseball. Unfortunately, I broke my wrist sliding into second base. When I reported to camp, I still had a cast on. As my contract said that I had to be physically fit, the 49ers kicked me out after ten days, and I didn't receive the other seven thousand dollars. I was really disappointed, because football is a sport that I really love. In the off-season, I used to just fool around with baseball. After I was let go by the 49ers, I came back to Honolulu and played for a team called the Hawaiian Warriors.

In the meantime, I met Lefty O'Doul. I signed with the San Francisco Seals, and they shipped me out to Salt Lake City in 1950. I had a good year,

hit .335. Lefty was going to bring me up to the Seals, but instead he told me, "Wally, I think that you should go to Japan. The Japanese are going to love your style." I decided to go because I had hurt my shoulder playing football. If I stayed in the States, the best I could do was AAA ball because of my shoulder. So if I stayed, I just would have been wasting my time.

The Tokyo Giants offered me a two-year, guaranteed contract, so I came to Japan in 1951. My first game was at Korakuen Stadium. In the eighth inning, runners were on first and second, and the pitcher was Shigeru Sugishita. Our manager, Shigeru Mizuhara, looked at the dugout and asked if anybody had enough guts to bunt. So all the guys said, "Why don't you let Yonamine bunt?" Now, I hadn't seen a ball for a month, but I figured that I could bunt. So I said, "Well, I'll try." I started to swing the bat, and I didn't feel anything. But when I got into the batter's box, my knees started shaking! Shaking like a leaf because it was the first time that I ever played in front of twenty thousand people. In football, I played at Yankee Stadium in front of seventy thousand; Los Angeles Coliseum in front of ninety thousand; but in baseball, the most I had played in front of was maybe six thousand. The first pitch I bunted the ball down the first-base line but foul, and when I started to run, I was shaking so much that I fell down. Mizuhara came to me and told me to bunt down the third-base line. The next pitch I bunted down the third-base line, and I beat the throw. The next day, I started in left field.

When I first came to Japan, it was a really slow game. They didn't know about aggressive baseball. When they hit a ground ball to the infield, they just jogged and sometimes even walked to first base. They didn't break up double plays. Everything was so slow. So, I was debating whether to be aggressive or not, but Mr. Mizuhara said, "What you did in the States, what you learned there, you do that in Japan." When he told me that, I thought, "OK! He's backed me up now," and I started to break up double plays and things like that. In those days, when they were turning a double play, the second basemen would stand right on the base and throw to first. So I'd knock them down. Naturally, they were very surprised. The fans for other teams thought that I was a dirty player and would yell, "Go back to Hawaii!" But that was my style of baseball. Even in Hawaii, I used to break double plays like that. After I started to do that, the opposing fans would throw rocks at me when I was in the outfield. I remember one time in Osaka, I

was playing left field, and the lights went out. Since I was close to the fans, I thought that I had better start walking in. When the lights came on, I went back to my position, and there was a big rock. Somebody must have thrown the rock, trying to hit me.

I've been called the Jackie Robinson of Japan, but although I had it rough, he had it much rougher than I did. You see, my skin is yellow just like the Japanese. They hated me because I was with the Tokyo Giants. We were so strong in those years that the fans everywhere would pick on the Giants. Sometimes, in Hiroshima, we couldn't go home. The fans would lie down in front of the bus. They would shower the bus with rocks. Oh, I'm telling you! You couldn't believe what we went through. We had to get down and hold our faces just like shrapnel was coming at us. Some of the fans with knives even punched the tires!

One time in Nagoya, we went to the hotel, and there were about one thousand angry Dragons fans waiting for us. We were supposed to catch the train to Osaka, but we couldn't leave, because the fans wanted to beat us up! They had to call the cops. You know the police wagons? They brought a wagon right in front of the hotel, and we climbed in it and went to the train station. The fans were terrible in Hiroshima and Nagoya. They were terrible!

When I played, I was always aggressive. Something that I learned is that when you are in a slump, a lot of players get into the batter's box and think, "Oh, I can't do it." They don't have a positive attitude. That's also how I felt when I was in a slump, but I told myself that I can't do that. So when I started to slump, I told myself, "Anybody who's in my way, I'm going to knock down." Because I played football and I was 180 pounds, I never gave anybody a chance. I told myself to be aggressive, so that when I got into the batter's box, I would be aggressive when I hit. People would say to my wife, "Your husband, he looks so calm." And she would answer, "Yeah, he looks so calm but when his uniform is on, I don't know what happens to him. He goes crazy!"

I used to be really aggressive on the base paths. I remember one time, there was a ground ball to the second baseman, he caught it and threw it to the Chunichi shortstop, Shigeru Makino [who later became a Giants coach]. I was coming into second base, and Makino saw me and knew that I was going to hit him. Before he could catch the ball, he shied away, and the ball ended up in left field.

In the old days, the *sempai-kohai* [senior-junior] relationship was worse than today. The *kohai* could not eat with the *sempai*, and could not bathe with the *sempai*. I think I helped change that. By my second game, I was already a regular. For one week, I stayed with the younger players while the veterans got the first bath. The regulars would get all the soap in the water, and the water would get cold so the younger guys wouldn't get a clean bath. After one week, I said to myself, "I'm going to go in with the old-timers." So one day in Osaka, all the old-timers were in there, and I walked in. I put my head down and walked in. I could see the guys poking each other, and I knew they were thinking, "What is this rookie doing in here?" So I just got in, and they didn't say anything to me. After all, I played every day, and I was a foreigner, so the rules sometimes didn't apply to me. From then on, the Giants team slowly started to change. Like when we used to go eat, the old-timers would eat first, and the rookies would eat after them. But I changed all that by starting to go with the regulars.

I came to Japan in 1951 only six years after the War, and some of my teammates had fought against the United States. So I was really worried about how they were going to accept me as an American and a *nisei*. But I didn't have any problems whatsoever. The players didn't talk about the War, just baseball.

The hard thing about playing in Japan was the traveling, the hotels, and the food. The trains had wooden seats. Twenty-five hours on the train and boy, your back hurt! A lot of times you had to sleep on the floor of the trains—and they were dirty! I would even go up onto the luggage rack to sleep sometimes. In the hotels, we didn't have air conditioning, didn't have heat. The rooms were often much colder than outside, so I would wear my overcoat in the room. The food was really bad in those days, too. It was often so bad that I couldn't eat it. But I didn't want to leave the food on the table, because I didn't want my teammates to think that I thought I was too good for them. So I would sit close to the window, and when nobody was watching, I'd take the food and throw it out the window! These were things that I had to do. That first year I lost a lot of weight.

The first year I came, we won the championship, and Shigeru Chiba took the young guys to a nightclub. Chiba-san called me to the side and said, "As a rule, we don't like *nisei*. But you're one good *nisei*. You did everything we did. You slept with us, you ate the food, and you didn't grumble. You go

back to Hawaii, get married, bring your wife, and I'll back you up one hundred percent." I was so happy because my first year with the Giants was the toughest year of being in Japan, but I didn't grumble because I wanted the players to like me. I felt that if I did my job, other American players would have a chance to come to Japan.

When I first came to Japan, I wasn't good at hitting curve balls, so I would go to Tamagawa, where the farm team practices, and just hit for one hour—curve ball, curve ball, curve ball. I used to do everything like that. I used to practice so much. My wife used to take care of the home front, and the only thing that I would do is practice, practice. I had to feed my family, and I wanted my three kids to go to college because I didn't. So, I had to do well at baseball. During some years, I wouldn't take a day off from February to October. I would practice every day. Sometimes, if I played at night and went 0 for 4, I would get up early the next morning and practice. Then I would go home, take an hour nap, and go to the stadium. Some nights, I would swing the bat four hundred times and even ask my wife to be the pitcher.

I have so many good memories from Japanese baseball. One time, I went forty at bats with no hits. I was going crazy—forty times at bat with no hits! But once Mizuhara had confidence in you, he wasn't going to use anybody else. Finally, we had a doubleheader in Sendai. Before the first game, I went to see the head coach, Daisuke Miyake, and asked him, "Mr. Miyake, I was at bat forty times, and I didn't get a hit. Can I rest one game?"

"Well, let's go see Mr. Mizuhara," he responded.

So we went to see Mizuhara, but he just gave me a good scolding, "What you talking about? You're getting paid by the Giants, you play!"

I got so mad. I didn't say anything to him because I respected him, but inside I was thinking, "Mizuhara, you *yaroo* [rascal]! I'm going to show you now! I'll show you!" I was just so mad. Well, in that doubleheader, I went eight for eight. Then after the game, Miyake came to me. He was so mad at me. "Yonamine, you think that I'm a damn fool or what!" And he gave me a good scolding. "Eight for eight and you wanted to sit down!" But that's what I needed, somebody to kick me in my pants.

The Giants of the early 1950s were the best teams that I played on. We had good pitching; the team batting average was about .285; and we were a good defensive team, too. Shigeru Mizuhara, our manager, was very disci-

plined and the reason I did so well in Japan. He was a good man, so I really respected him. But, Mizuhara was the type of manager who never praised you. I gave so much for the team, like breaking up double plays and doing sliding catches, but he never praised me. But there was one time. We went from Tokyo to Shimonoseki, and it took seventeen to twenty hours and those days you couldn't sleep well on the train. We got to Shimonoseki, and he called a meeting. I was really tired. I sat down on the tatami mat and was leaning my head against my bat, when Mizuhara told the other players, "Look at Yonamine. He loves his bat so much that he sleeps with it. That's why he is a good hitter."

But he never babied you. When my wife was pregnant, I had to take her to the hospital. So I called Mizuhara's house and told him, "I have to go to the hospital. Can I catch the next train? I'll be to the game on time." But he said, "Yonamine, you get to the train with the players! You get on that train to Hiroshima!" I couldn't believe it! Mizuhara wouldn't let me take her to the hospital! She had to get a friend to take her. During that game, she gave birth to my son, Paul, and I hit a home run to straight center field.

At first base was Tetsuharu Kawakami. Kawakami and I were rivals, like Ruth and Gehrig or Oh and Nagashima. When I got here, I thought, "How can I become a good ballplayer in Japan? Well, if I beat Kawakami, who is the best hitter on the team, then I have a good chance of winning the batting title, and if I don't, I'll probably become number two or number three, just behind him." So my goal was to beat him every year, but I didn't tell this to anybody.

For the eight years we played together, he always used to needle me. If I didn't get a hit, he would come up to me and say, "Oh, Yonamine, you didn't get a hit" and "Oh, you looked terrible." That would really get me mad, but that's the mistake he made. I would think to myself, "Okay, I'm going to show you." So the next day, maybe I'd get two or three hits. He and I were always like this. He won the batting title two times, and I won it two times.

Shigeru Chiba played second. Chiba was a good defensive player and a very good hitter, too. The majority of his hits were toward center and right. He hardly pulled. Mizuhara was the type of manager that would always bunt to get one run. I guess if you have good pitchers, like he did, you just try to get ahead. If I got on base, instead of letting Chiba do a hit-and-run

or letting him hit to the opposite field, he would make Chiba bunt. Chiba used to get all mad at Mizuhara and complain to me, "Bunt! Bunt! Why? Why? I could hit behind you!"

After the first year, Chiba-san was one of my best friends. He used to call me all the time and take me out to dinner and stuff like that. I hit leadoff, and he was the number-two batter. When I was stealing, if he thought that I would get caught, Chiba-san would foul it off. Once he did it seven times in a row, and I yelled to him, "Hey, I'm tired, you know!" After the game, I asked him, "Chiba-san, are you doing that on purpose?" He said, "Yeah." So I asked him to teach me how to hit foul balls. The next year at camp, I started to practice hitting foul balls during intersquad and exhibition games. I would take two strikes purposely and then just practice hitting foul balls. Mizuhara was at Vero Beach with the Dodgers so Kawakami, the assistant manager, took over. In the first ten games, I didn't get a hit, so Kawakami was kind of worried. He called Mizuhara at Vero Beach and said, "Yonamine doesn't have a single hit." Mizuhara said, "Oh, don't worry it's just exhibition games." But I didn't tell anybody what I had in mind. I knew that in an exhibition game I could get a hit if I wanted, but I wanted to learn how to hit foul balls. I played in twenty games, and I didn't get a single hit.

On opening day, Masaichi Kaneda was the pitcher, and Mizuhara didn't use me since I didn't get a hit in the exhibition games. In the eighth inning with a runner on second base, he had no pinch hitters left so he told me to pinch hit. I got a hit to center field that scored the run, and we won the game. That year, I hit .361. Chiba-san and I became so good at hitting fouls that in some games we would make the pitcher throw about twenty-five pitches to us in just the first inning! The most that I fouled at one at bat was sixteen. I would just foul off the hard pitches and wait for one that I'd want.

We had some really good pitchers—Takehiko Bessho, Hideo Fujimoto, Hiroshi Nakao, and Takumi Otomo. Bessho was one hell of a pitcher. Just like an American pitcher—good fastball, good curve, threw for strikes, and challenged the hitters. He won thirty-three games in 1952, but if he were pitching today, now that they use closers, he would have won more. He used to do a lot of relief pitching, too. He could have made the Major Leagues.

Later [in 1958], Shigeo Nagashima joined the Giants. Nagashima was such a natural athlete. The thing that I respect about Nagashima was that he could field, could hit, and he always told people that I taught him how

to slide! He was a showman. He threw the ball on the ground and stuff like that. When you really needed one, he'd come through for you. Like when the emperor of Japan came to see the game. I remember that the stadium was jammed packed. When the emperor first entered the stadium, naturally, everybody stood up. They were amazed because it was the first time that he had ever gone to a ball park. We were really happy that he came, and it was really an honor for us to play in front of him. Every two minutes, the fans were going crazy. Instead of watching the ball game, I think that they were all looking at the emperor and empress.

The game was tied in the bottom of the ninth inning, and Nagashima led off. He hit a fly to left field, but he didn't know if it was going to be foul or fair, so he just stood there by home plate and watched the ball. Once he figured that the ball would be fair, he started running around the bases. As far as I'm concerned, Nagashima was the best clutch hitter in Japanese history. It was a real treat for me to play in that game.

When Sadaharu Oh first came to the Giants, he was playing first base, and I was playing outfield. Oh used to strike out a lot, so when Mizuhara took him out, I'd play first base. When we took the train, the old-timers would take their time, and the young guys had to run and get all the bags. Oh was with my group, and sometimes he used to carry my bag. I never thought that one day, he was going to be such a superstar!

Oh was really disciplined and worked hard. He must have swung that bat over a thousand times a day. He'd just swing, swing, swing. Of course, he became a really good hitter. One time, when I was managing Chunichi, the bases were loaded with two outs in the ninth. We were three runs ahead, and Oh came up to bat. So I walked him purposely and gave them one run. Oh couldn't believe it. But I felt that Oh, in a situation like that, was going to hit a home run or something. So I walked him.

Under Mizuhara we won eight pennants, but the first year we didn't win [1960], he was fired. It was my tenth year, and I thought, "Oh man, Kawakami's going to be the next manager, and he's going to fire me." So I went to the front office, and sure enough I was let go. I came out of the meeting, and Kawakami said, "How was the meeting?" I didn't even talk to him. I just walked away. I knew that he was the guy who really wanted to let me go.

As soon as I got fired, Chunichi picked me up, and I got back at the Giants. The first game against the Giants was at Korakuen Stadium. It was in

the eighth inning, I think, and I came up to bat. It was either 0-0 or 1-0, and Minoru Nakamura was pitching. I hit a home run, and we won. But the thing that made me really happy was that the Giants fans, who saw me play for ten years, all stopped and clapped for me. That was one of the best feelings in my life.

In 1972, I was hired to manage the Dragons. We had a party, and the directors and president said, "*Kotoshi kosol!*" which means "This year is the year we will win the championship." And I said, "*No way!* I know because I'm the manager." I told them, "Give me three years. I'm going to teach these guys fundamentals, and I'll make a couple of trades."

My third year, we won the championship by beating the Giants. The Giants were going for their tenth championship, and Kawakami was still the manager. After that season, Kawakami resigned or got fired, and Nagashima retired. Once we clinched, we had two more games with the Giants at Korakuen Stadium, but I couldn't go because we were going to have a parade in Nagoya. So I called Nagashima, because that was his last game, to apologize. He said, "Oh no, don't worry about it. Don't worry about my game. Your parade is more important." The day he retired, he made that famous speech and was crying all over. Every time that they show Nagashima making that speech, I remember winning the championship and beating the Giants!

I was in Japanese baseball for thirty-eight years. After I retired, I became a scout, and five years later, my name went on the Hall of Fame ballot. I was worried that the young writers didn't know who I was. You have to get 75% of the votes from the media to get elected, and my first year I only had 68%. So I thought, "Oh boy, I'm going to have a hard time." The second year, Sadaharu Oh was eligible. I thought that, naturally, Oh was going to get in, no problem. And he did, and I also got in. So, Oh and I were inducted into the Hall of Fame at the same time.

A lot of the players today don't know what it is to be hungry. You know, I come from a poor family. When I was twelve and thirteen years old, during the summer I used to get up at 4 A.M. and help my father work in the cane fields. I would have to work for three months, trying to make a dollar here, a dollar there, but we used to get paid only twenty-five cents a day. I used to hate that—going to cut grass, but that was the only job that we could get.

So when I came to Japan and played for the Tokyo Giants, I never forgot that. You never forget things like that.

Every year when I went back to Hawaii, I'd land in Honolulu and take the next flight out to Maui to see that cane field and the old house where I used to live. I thought how fortunate I was to be in baseball and making a living. So when I went back to Japan, I would try harder. I did that for ten years. I told myself that I'd better not forget what I went through to get here. Even today, I feel how fortunate I am that I came to Japan, because I feel that Japanese baseball did so much for me and my family.

The old-timers here in Japan say that I changed Japanese baseball. If that's true, then I'm very happy, because it's really an honor for me to do something like that.