



Japan v. United States Friendship Series

The Friendship Series has been an annual event since 1974. It was founded by Shinsuke Ito, after observing that ‘our peoples don’t know one another,’ ‘our societies don’t understand one another,’ and ‘our governments don’t always like one another.’ Mr. Ito’s solution was to set about building bridges and understanding through a common thread, baseball. On alternate years, each country assembles one team that travels to the other for 10 Days of baseball. During competition players stay with host families. Mr. Ito was adamant that while they can compete on the field, there must be an exchange of customs off the field. Home housing of players is a key part of the experience. Travel Day, when it’s time to say goodbye, brings tears from both player and host.

Players typically range in age from 13 to 16 years of age, but most are 15 years old when it’s their turn to shine. This is the last year for Japanese players to play summer ball before they begin their high school baseball career and reach for the holy grail, Koshien. The national high school baseball tournament, known simply by the field where it is played, is where 64 teams play in a single elimination tournament to be crowned Champion. The Friendship Series is the last summer program before the quest for Koshien begins and players want to impress their new coaches. For many of the American players it’s their first taste of international competition and they want to make the most of it. Players have gone on to play professional baseball, in both Japan and the United States.

The Friendship Series has been played in the nicest of professional ball parks and in forgotten sandlots across Japan and the United States. Sometimes the teams are greeted by governors, mayors, and professional players. At other times the greeting comes only from those charged with getting the team to the field. Some of the games have been broadcast on television, radio and written about in national papers, others recalled only by those in attendance.

It may come as a surprise to some but “PONY baseball” doesn’t stand for one of a series of horses that have come to represent the different leagues within PONY baseball and softball. PONY is short for “Protect Our Nations Youth.” While Shinsuke Ito and his wife had no children they embodied that motto. The participants can decide if the cultural experience or the baseball is the most important. One thing is for certain, the relative few who get to enjoy both are the better for it.

