

Asians in American sports • Asian Americans in world sports

# Asian baseball victories on both sides of the Pacific

By Mike Street  
Special to The Asian Reporter

The world of Asian baseball saw two recent victories, one in America, another in Japan, demonstrating the growth of Asian baseball talent on both sides of the Pacific. The first win came in the World Series, where both teams featured Asian players, while the other was the first Japanese victory against an American team in more than 20 years.

This year's World Series saw the upstart Kansas City Royals trade blows with the San Francisco Giants for seven dramatic games. It was just the second World Series to go the distance in the past dozen years, but no matter which team won, Asian-American sports fans would be happy, since both teams featured players or managers with eastern roots.

The Giants continued their alternate-year pattern of reaching the championship game of Major League Baseball (MLB); they won in 2010 and 2012 before this year's appearance. The Royals, on the other hand, were in their first World Series since 1985 and just the third in the team's 45-year history.

Instrumental to the Giants reaching the World Series was Travis Ishikawa, a fourth-generation Japanese American and Seattle native. Traded from Pittsburgh to San Francisco earlier this season, Ishikawa rejoined the team with whom he had both made his major-league debut and won his first World Series in 2010.

Mostly used as a defensive first baseman, Ishikawa stepped in to the outfield when teammates Angel Pagan and Michael Morse went down to injuries. Playing left field for the first time in the majors, Ishikawa started three of the team's four final regular-season games, and then became the starter for the postseason.

In 16 playoff games, Ishikawa hit .256, with a home run and 7 RBI, nearly all coming in a dramatic National League Championship Series. Ishikawa drove in three of San Francisco's five runs in Game 3, and he hit the game-winning home run in the series-clinching Game 5.

In the World Series, Ishikawa and the Giants faced the Royals, who featured some Asian talent of their own, including a recent import from Japan's Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB), Norichika Aoki. A .329 hitter in Japan, Aoki has been less productive, but remarkably consistent, while playing in the U.S., hitting .288, .286, and .285 in his three seasons. His excellent .353 on-base percentage placed him atop the team's batting order this year, following his trade from the Milwaukee Brewers.

Also contributing to Kansas City's success were two Pacific Northwest Asian Americans: pitcher Jeremy Guthrie, a third-generation Japanese American, and bench coach Don Wakamatsu, who became baseball's first Asian-American manager when Seattle hired him as their skipper in 2009.

A journeyman pitcher who has been with four different teams in his 10-year career, Guthrie has found his



**ASIAN BASEBALL VICTORIES.** Former Hanshin Tigers leadoff man Norihiro Akahoshi (top photo, right), laughs as Kansas City Royals pitcher Jeremy Guthrie uses a smartphone to take a picture of photographers during his visit to the Japanese Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Tokyo. In the middle photo, Team Japan outfielders Sho Nakata, center, and Yuki Yanagida, right, celebrate with teammates after beating the MLB All-Stars in Game 3 of their exhibition baseball series at the Tokyo Dome in Tokyo. Japan defeated the U.S. squad 4-0 with four pitchers in a no-hitter. Pictured in the bottom photo is Guthrie, the starting pitcher for Game 3 of the exhibition series, delivering a pitch in the first inning.

stride with Kansas City, where he has a 33-26 record and a 3.92 ERA in three seasons. Guthrie started Game 3 of the American League Championship Series before being called upon for a crucial Game 7 World Series start.

Before reaching the World Series, Kansas City had won all eight of their playoff games, four of them in extra innings. The Giants proved a more formidable opponent, however, and the series momentum shifted back and forth.

San Francisco blew out Kansas City, 7-1, in Game 1, but the Royals struck back with an almost-identical 7-2 blowout in Game 2. After the Royals won a squeaker, 3-2, in Game 3, the Giants demoralized them with back-to-back wins of 11-4 and 5-0. But Kansas City returned home to win 10-0 in Game 6 and set up a climactic Game 7.

In that clinching game, Guthrie gave up three runs before getting pulled in the fourth inning, but the Royals had scored two of their own, keeping victory within sight. San Francisco's Madison Bumgarner, however, came on to pitch just three days after a complete-game masterpiece in Game 5, and he shut down the Royals for the final five innings, giving the victory to the Giants.

Despite the disappointing loss in the World Series, Jeremy Guthrie continued his season with a team of MLB All-Stars who travelled to Japan to revive a transpacific tradi-

tion. From 1986 to 2006, a team of MLB All-Stars and NPB All-Stars had faced off in a biannual series that was discontinued when the World Baseball Classic began.

The NPB squad had won just one of those 10 series, way back in 1990, but they were ready for this revival with a twist on their usual lineup. Rather than fielding an NPB All-Star squad, Japan featured its national team, the Samurai Blue. Although many of its players would have also appeared on an NPB All-Star squad, the Samurai Blue had the advantage of team harmony, having played together many times in preparation for the World Baseball Classic.

The U.S. team, on the other hand, had only practiced together a few times, and the lack of chemistry showed. High-powered hitters like Robinson Cano, Evan Longoria, Yasiel Puig, and José Altuve could only muster four runs in the first three games, while their Japanese counterparts scored 14 runs, winning all three games.

Even more surprisingly, the Samurai Blue pitchers held the MLB All-Stars hitless in the third game, only the second no-hitter ever in the history of the series and the first by a Japanese team. Although the MLB squad rebounded to win the final two games, Japan won the series, 3-2, once again proving the increasingly competitive level of baseball talent in the east.

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Difficulty level: Medium #34157

**Solution to last week's puzzle**  
Puzzle #23457 (Easy)  
All solutions available at <www.sudoku.com>.

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