

## Asians in American sports • Asian Americans in world sports

## Japan continues legacy of Little League dominance

By Mike Street

Special to The Asian Reporter

For the fourth straight year, and the fifth time in the last six years, an Asian team won the Little League World Series (LLWS). This year the team from Tokyo overcame an early deficit to win the highest-scoring final game in LLWS history.

Japan flexed its offensive muscle early in the tournament's International Bracket, knocking two solo home runs in the first inning of its opening game against Chinese Taipei. Japan batted around in the bottom of the second, adding four more runs to build a lead its opponent could not overcome.

In the next game, against Mexico, Japan took another early lead. With two outs in the first, Kabu Kikuchi drove home two runs; Fukutaro Kiyomiya added a solo shot in the fifth to make the score 3-0. On the mound, Nobuyuki Kawashima held Mexico scoreless on just three hits, and reliever Daiki Fukuyama gave up only one run to seal Japan's second win, 3-1.

The next opponent, Venezuela, came the closest to defeating Japan, galvanizing them for the challenge of the finals. Venezuela and Japan traded runs in the third, and Venezuela took a one-run lead in the top of the fourth, a lead they held until the bottom of the sixth.

With one out remaining before a potential defeat, Shingo Tomita drove home the tying run on a single to center, sending the game into extra innings. Venezuela took the lead again in the eighth inning with back-to-back solo homers, but Japan refused to give up.

Nobuyuki Kawashima led off with a double, Masafuji Nishijima followed with a single, and two batters later, Shoho Yanagishima doubled home Japan's first run of the inning. With one out, Venezuela intentionally walked Shingo Tomita to set up a game-ending double play.

But right fielder Yuma Watanabe was hit by a pitch, tying the score and bringing shortstop Yugo Aoki to bat with the bases still loaded. Aoki played the hero, rapping an RBI single to give Japan the win.

In the International Bracket championship, Japan faced Mexico a second time, and again needed extra innings to take home the victory. Kabu Kikuchi whiffed 10 batters in seven innings, holding Mexico scoreless on just four hits and no walks. His counterpart from Mexico, Armando Verdujo, also pitched the entire game and also struck out 10 batters, surrendering just two hits and a walk.

Verdujo didn't give up any of those hits until the seventh, when the scoreless game reached extra innings. If his teammates had pushed past just one run before then, Verdujo would have had a no-hitter and a win. Instead, Verdujo gave up a leadoff single to Aoki and a double to Kengo Tomita. He struck out Kikuchi, but the Japanese pitcher reached first base on a dropped third strike to load the bases.

Verdujo fanned the next hitter, Kawashima, bringing Koki Jo to the plate with one out. Jo hit a ground ball to the shortstop, Jorge Armenta, who could get only one out. Aoki scored and Japan advanced to the Little League World Series final game.

In the final, Japan faced Red Land Little League from Pennsylvania, who had trounced their opening-round opponent, Webb City Little League from Missouri, 18-0, but then faced more formidable opponents in successive games. They squeaked past Northwood in the second round, 9-8, and beat Pearland West twice, 3-0 and 3-2, to reach the final game.

Japan got on top quickly in the final, taking a 2-0 lead in the top of the first on a two-run double by Kabu Kikuchi, but Pennsylvania roared back in their half of the frame. Their leadoff hitter reached on an error, and Daiki Fukuyama walked the next two batters to load the bases. The following two hitters singled to tie the game, so manager Junji Hidaka brought in Nishijima to pitch.

This move didn't pay immediate dividends, but it proved essential to Japan's comeback. With the bases loaded, Nishijima struck out the first batter he faced, but he walked the next, giving Red Land the lead, 3-2. Nishijima got the ball over the plate to the third batter, who launched it over the fence for a grand slam. A double, single, and another home run stretched Red Land's lead to 10-2 before Nishijima finally retired the side.

In between innings, manager Hidaka reminded his players that "it doesn't end until it ends," and Japan began to fight back. With one out in the second, shortstop Aoki slammed a three-run homer, and Kengo Tomita followed with a solo shot. Red Land recorded another out before Shingo Tomita hammered Japan's third home run of the inning to cut Pennsylvania's lead down to three runs,



**REMARKABLE RUN.** Japan's Masafuji Nishijima, left, rounds third after hitting a three-run home run off Lewisberry, Pennsylvania's Jaden Henline in the third inning of the Little League World Series championship baseball game in South Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Japan's string of excellence — four titles in six years — is the best run by any international team in almost 25 years. (AP Photo/Gene J. Puskar)

10-7.

But Japan wasn't finished. Kikuchi reached on an error, Watanabe rapped a single, and Fukuyama plated them both with a ringing double. The lead was now just a single run. Tom Peifer, Pennsylvania's manager, later commented, "They just put the bat on the ball ... They hit pitches I've never seen kids, especially 12-year-olds, hit."

Those hits kept coming. In the top of the third, Shingo Tomita smacked a game-tying home run, and Nishijima gave Japan the lead again on a three-run bomb. Red Land plated a run in their half of the third, but they still trailed

by two runs, 11-13. It would be their final tally of the game.

Japan padded its lead with a five-run sixth inning that saw Nishijima drive in his team-leading sixth RBI, validating his manager's decision to bring him into the game and sealing the victory for Japan. The two teams combined for 29 runs and 30 hits, both records for a Little League World Series final. The eight-run deficit that Japan overcame was also a record.

Japan's string of excellence — four titles in six years —

*Continued on page 16*

# Education Matters

Just ask Christina. She's the 2015 recipient of the Asian Reporter Foundation's \$2000 Scholarship Award, funded by the Oregon Lottery. Christina is at the top of her class at Franklin High School in Portland and is involved in so many clubs and activities, it'll make your head spin. Christina plans to attend the University of Oregon to study business and economics.

Christina Kuang  
2015 Asian Reporter Foundation  
Scholarship Award Recipient

## Congratulations Christina!



30 Years of Doing Good Things