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Tokyo Kitasuna sweeps to Little League World Series victory again

By Mike Street
Special to The Asian Reporter

Asian teams have done very well at the Little League World Series (LLWS): South Korea, Chinese Taipei, and Japan have 31 championships combined. That's almost as many as the 34 won by teams from the United States, and Asian teams are closing the gap quickly. Going into this year's tournament, Asian teams had won five of the past seven LLWS title games, and Tokyo teams represent four of those victories. This year, another Tokyo team swept to victory virtually unchallenged.

Of the four Tokyo LLWS championships since 2012, two were from Tokyo Kitasuna Little League. Each time, they not only won the title, but also went undefeated. In 2012, their 12-2 finals victory against Goodlettsville, Tennessee capped a tournament in which they outscored their opponents 35-5.

In 2015, Tokyo Kitasuna had a tougher time of it, outscoring the opposition by just 34-21. Their international final was a thrilling 1-0 victory over Mexico, while the final was an 18-11 slugfest against Lewisberry, Pennsylvania.

This year, Tokyo Kitasuna eclipsed even the club's dominant 2012 performance, beginning with the opening game against Australia. Japan's team captain, Keitaro Miyahara, smacked a leadoff double, later scoring when Seiya Arai lashed a sharp grounder into right field.

That's the only run Japan pushed across that inning, but they scored a run in each of the next three innings and four more in the fifth inning. Every run after the first proved unnecessary, however, since Japan's four pitchers held Australia to just two hits and three walks while fanning 10 batters. Tokyo Kitasuna cruised to an easy 8-0 victory.

Their next game, against the South Korean team, proved to be Japan's only challenge, partly because it was the only game in their first four in which they allowed a run. That run came in the top of the first, when pitcher Riku Goto surrendered back-to-back singles, then walked the bases loaded. The runner on third, Jin-won Shin, scored on a pass ball, but Goto didn't allow any more damage.

Tokyo Kitasuna struck back in their half of the first inning, when left fielder Ryota Ono and right fielder Yuya Nakajima hit back-to-back singles in a two-out rally that gave Japan the lead. Goto settled down,



never allowing more than one hit in an inning and pitching a complete game. Japan added two more runs in the third, but it was icing on the cake, as they won their closest game of the tournament with a 4-1 score.

By contrast, the game against Canada was Japan's easiest. The team from British Columbia won its first two games, but they were no match for the team from Tokyo Kitasuna.

After putting down Canada in order in the top of the first, Japan pushed across two runs in its half of the frame on a double from first baseman Natsuki Yajima and a single from Ono. Tokyo cracked the game open with a four-run third and added three more in the fourth. The game ended in the bottom of the fifth when a Ryusei Fujiwara double made the score 10-0, activating Little League's 10-run rule.

Canada lost to Mexico the next day, allowing the team from Reynosa to face Japan in the international final. Mexico had dropped its opening game against Venezuela, but it followed the loss up with four straight wins and a 28-2 scoring margin.

But Mexico had not faced a team like Japan.

Tokyo Kitasuna crushed Mexico's momentum with its very first batter, as Miyahara knocked a leadoff homer. Tokyo then loaded the bases on a walk, a dropped third strike, and an error. Nakajima drove in two with a single, and Arai later scored on a wild pitch. Japan had scored four runs with only two hits.

Mexico settled down after that, but it was already too late. Japan's starting pitcher, Goto, held Mexico to four hits, walking one and striking out 13. Japan

TOKYO TRIUMPHS. Of the four Tokyo Little League World Series (LLWS) championships since 2012, two were from Tokyo Kitasuna Little League. Each time, they not only won the title, but also went undefeated. Pictured are Tokyo Kitasuna players Tsubasa Tomii (top photo) and Rei Ichisawa (bottom photo), who played in the 2017 LLWS championship game held last month in South Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Japan won the game with a score of 12-2. (AP Photos/Matt Slocum)

scored again in the fifth for a 5-0 win and a berth in the final game.

Japan's easy path to the LLWS finals contrasted sharply with its championship opponent from Lufkin, Texas. The Southwest U.S. team won its first two games before dropping a 2-1 squeaker to Greenville, North Carolina. Texas got another chance against Greenville after winning the consolation bracket, coming out on top, 6-5, in the rematch.

The Southwest team, with a 4-1 record and a 32-15 scoring differential, looked like it would have no chance against undefeated Japan and its 27-1 scoring advantage. But Texas struck first, scoring twice in the first inning and putting Japan two runs behind for the first time in the tournament. Chandler Spencer led the game off with a home run on Tsubasa Tomii's very first pitch, and Hunter Ditsworth added his own solo shot two hitters later.

Another team manager might have pulled his starting pitcher, but Tokyo manager Junnji Hidaka stuck with Tomii, and for good reason. Tomii allowed only one more hit, and those two runs were all he surrendered. And by the time Texas got that third hit, Japan had scored three times in the second inning and four times in the fourth.

Then Tokyo Kitasuna put the game away. Leading 7-2 in the fifth, they scored five more runs to invoke the 10-run rule and win the game with a 12-2 score. Since 1996, when Taiwan defeated Rhode Island 13-3, only two other teams have won the LLWS final via the 10-run rule. Both teams were from Tokyo Kitasuna — in 2012 and now in 2017.

When next year's LLWS rolls around, there will be the usual excitement of qualifying tournaments around the world. But when those teams convene once again in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, the odds will favor an Asian team coming out on top. And among Asian teams, all eyes will be on the team from Tokyo Kitasuna to see if they can continue their club's incredible legacy.

Ai Weiwei puts human face on migrant crisis in *Human Flow*

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Sometimes you have to use drones to capture this kind of mass of meaningless humans, like ants."

Ai said he wanted to avoid traditional movie structures such as following one character along their journey.

"I wanted the film to be chaotic, in a way," he said.

The film's high-profile

slot at Venice, where it's the only documentary in the main competition, should help it reach a broad audience, as should a release by Amazon in the U.S. this fall.

Ai said he hoped politicians would see the film, and resolve "not to just avoid the situation, not just to build borders, not just to say 'them' and 'us,' but rather to see we are all

as one."

"History tells us we have to sit down and come up with the best solution," Ai said. "And I believe this is a possibility, because all policies are designed by human beings, and deep in our hearts we have this compassion and we have the ability to make something nicer for each other."

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