

Chinese baseball team takes over Texas minor league club

By Stephen Hawkins
AP Sports Writer

GRAND PRAIRIE, Texas — The starting lineups are announced in English and Spanish at home games for the independent Texas AirHogs.

And then the Chinese national anthem is played.

For about 30 members of the Chinese national baseball team, the suburban ballpark a few miles west of downtown Dallas has become their summer home and training ground in an unprecedented setup.

They are a revolving part of the roster for a professional team in the United States, playing more games and against tougher competition while working to improve for future international events such as the upcoming Asian Games and 2020 Olympics in Tokyo.

“The system that they’ve created here, where we work out in the morning, we’ve got weight training, the pitchers have a system where we throw on, the coaches have kind of set up a system that’s really helped them to be able to make the adjustment to play more games,” Sun Jianzeng, a 26-year-old right-hander, said through a translator.

Chinese players who professionally back home would play only about 20 to 30 games a season make up about two-thirds of the expanded roster for the American Association team now formally known as the AirHogs powered by Beijing Shougang Eagles. The players, ranging in age from 18 to 29, rotate on and off the active roster to play 6 or 7 games per week in one of the low-minor leagues not affiliated with Major League Baseball.

“It makes it workable, because we don’t want to wear these guys down,” said AirHogs manager John McLaren, a big-league coach for three decades who has worked with Chinese teams since 2011.

Players not on the active roster for games go through early workouts at AirHogs Stadium, 10 minutes from the



home ballpark of the Texas Rangers. There are conditioning and weight training drills that are new to the Chinese players.

“They’re trying to do something they’ve never done before, which is play this many games on a daily basis, and you throw in the fact that with the exception of maybe three or four pitchers, they’re physically and experience-wise overmatched,” said Larry Hardy, a former Rangers pitching coach filling the same role for the AirHogs. “But they’re getting better.”

McLaren had a short stint managing the Seattle Mariners in 2007-2008 and was interim manager for three games for the Washington Nationals in 2011. He was on the Philadelphia Phillies staff the past two seasons.

He also managed China at the World Baseball Classic (WBC) in 2013 and 2017. Over that time, there would be gaps of six or seven months when he wouldn’t even see the team — and players would barely play baseball. China has a 2-10 record in its four WBC appearances, getting outscored 18-102 in those games.

“These guys, I don’t think they’d ever played twice in a week,” McLaren said.

That changed when the Chinese Baseball Association made an arrangement with the AirHogs, allowing them to focus on daily development.

They are now together all the time in a 12-team league that stretches more than 1,300 miles from Texas into Canada. The closest stop is Cleburne, Texas, where 53-year-old former big-league slugger Rafael Palmeiro is starring for the Railroaders.

China’s only Olympic berth was in 2008, going 1-6 in group play after an automatic berth as the host nation. That was the last time baseball was part of the Summer Games until its return two years from now in Japan.

The AirHogs are a league-worst 17-44 this season, but player-coach Na Chuang said the team has progressed faster than expected, increasing the confidence of the Chinese players who will leave with McLaren and some of their national coaches for the Asian Games in Indonesia before the end of the 100-game AirHogs season.

Kevin Joseph, who pitched in the majors briefly with the St. Louis Cardinals in 2002, is part of McLaren’s staff as an

UNPRECEDENTED SETUP. Chu Fujia of China, who plays for the Texas AirHogs, makes contact for a sacrifice bunt during an American Association of Independent Professional Baseball game against the Chicago Dogs in Grand Prairie, Texas. The small ballpark in Texas just a few miles from downtown Dallas is home this summer to the Chinese national baseball team. (AP Photo/Brandon Wade)

assistant coach and invaluable translator. He learned Mandarin while spending more than eight years teaching baseball to young people after a friend with connections to baseball officials in China invited him there.

“The big need, I think, for China is they don’t play a lot of games. So for them to be able to come, and to learn the rhythm of a baseball lifestyle, play against better competition, has been a great experience,” Joseph said. “The players have really meshed well with the Chinese guys, they love them.”

Joseph said hitters have changed the way they swing the bat, being more aggressive and ready to hit pitches coming faster than they’ve seen before.

For the pitchers, the emphasis has been on throwing more fastballs and fewer breaking balls. Hardy said the catchers have started to understand what the coaches are looking for from pitchers.

“The level of play is a lot higher,” Jianzeng said. “You can make smallest mistakes, can be hurt here as a pitcher. ... Because you’re playing so many games, you’re learning about yourself as a pitcher, and you’re getting a lot more experience.”

There are the inevitable hiccups because of communication issues and culture differences, including the style of play the Chinese players were used to, but Joseph said things have gone well overall.

“It’s fun just to watch them interact with everybody, and themselves, and show up every day, kidding and joking,” said McLaren, sitting in the coaches’ office next to a narrow room cramped with lockers. “It’s a clubhouse. They’re a different culture, speak a different language, but the laugh in the clubhouse is the same.”

Once sidelined, romantic comedies rise again

By Lindsey Bahr
The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Summer is always full of action and superhero pics, but this year a once dormant yet utterly adored genre is back in a big way: the romantic comedy. After a 2017 without any from a major studio, this summer is proving to be a re-birth for this lost Hollywood staple with five notable releases, including *Crazy Rich Asians* and a *Mamma Mia!* sequel.

The reasons for the genre’s decline are many. A post-recession focus on international audiences, franchises, and superheroes have helped to push rom-coms off the priority list for studios. Also, after a long and fruitful run in the late ’80s through the 2000s, enthusiasm started to wane. They had become stale. There were a few outliers, of course, like Amy Schumer’s *Trainwreck*, but the big studio rom-coms became derivative, lazy, and dull.

“They didn’t reflect the way that society was changing. They were all about white, straight couples. They fell back on the conventions that define the genre,” said Erin Carlson, author of the book *I’ll Have What She’s Having: How Nora Ephron’s Three Iconic Films Saved the Romantic Comedy*, and an upcoming book about the films of Meryl Streep. “People just got tired of them.”

A death, of sorts, was necessary for the genre to rise again with a new set of voices. It didn’t hurt that *The Big Sick* made a splash at the box office and went on to get a screenwriting Oscar nomination — the kind of prestigious recognition rarely

afforded to classic rom-coms that don’t have a *Silver Linings Playbook* edge.

“(*The Big Sick*) showed that people still want a good rom-com at the multiplex, but they want one that pushes the genre forward in new, interesting ways that reflect real life today, not tired tropes of yesterday,” Carlson said.

And indeed, the rom-coms of 2018 are continuing that forward movement. Earlier in the year there was Paramount’s *Book Club* and its focus on older women, 20th Century Fox’s *Love, Simon*’s gay, teen protagonist, and the bilingual *Overboard*, which has become the highest-grossing film for Pantelion Films.

Set It Up, a Netflix release, is perhaps the most throwback of all the films. It is about people with actual jobs that consume their lives instead of playing a glamorous backdrop to whatever romantic exploits the movie dictates. Zoey Deutch and Glen Powell star as assistants who decide to set up their miserable and difficult bosses, played by Lucy Liu and Taye Diggs.

It was dreamt up by Juliet Berman, the head of development for Treehouse Pictures, and screenwriter Katie Silberman, both ardent rom-com fans who met as assistants in Los Angeles.

“I grew up at a time when rom-coms didn’t have a negative connotation, they were just my favorite movies,” Silberman said. “I wanted for a long time to try to write something that would make audiences feel the way the movies I loved growing up made me feel. They’re fun and kind and warm and nice and smart.”

The script got the attention of Hollywood with a spot on the coveted Black List in

2015, a survey of the industry’s best unproduced screenplays. It was picked up by MGM and even had *Game of Thrones*’ Emilia Clarke to star, but it started to fall apart when the studio wavered and Clarke had to go back to shoot her television show. The team, including Powell, was undeterred.

“We met with a lot of people who really liked the script, but so many people would say, ‘oh it’s not right for our platform,’ or ‘it’s not right for our slate,’” said *Set It Up* director Claire Scanlon. “There were so many rules for people who were picking up films and if it didn’t fit perfectly with exactly what they had coming out, then they didn’t want to do it.”

That all changed in a meeting with Netflix, when executive Matt Brodlie agreed to make it in the room — he said yes in January and they were shooting by May. Netflix has also released a few other romantic comedies this year, including *Ibiza*, *When We First Met*, and *The Kissing Booth*. And, likewise, Amazon was the shop that took a gamble acquiring *The Big Sick*.

It’s not just streaming platforms re-embracing the genre — the big studios are too. Universal has *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again*, with many of the original cast as well as Cher and Andy Garcia. And Warner Bros. is releasing the adaptation of Kevin Kwan’s popular novel *Crazy Rich Asians* on August 15.

Nina Jacobson, who produced *Crazy Rich Asians*, saw an opportunity in the story about a Chinese-American woman who travels to Singapore to meet her boyfriend’s parents to take audiences to a world they haven’t seen in a mainstream

American movie, and also touch on universal themes.

“So many (romantic comedies) became so formulaic,” Jacobson said. “But it is a genre that has been historically beloved and successful and this felt like a great way to re-approach it.”

The independent realm, which has been keeping rom-coms alive for some time, also has a few boundary-pushing releases on the schedule, both about people in their early middle age finding love. The Sundance charmer *Juliet, Naked*, based on the Nick Hornby novel and starring Rose Byrne, Chris O’Dowd, and Ethan Hawke, comes out August 17, followed by *Destination Wedding*, which boasts a ’90s dream cast in Winona Ryder and Keanu Reeves who star as single wedding guests, on August 24.

“It’s a dark comedy,” said *Destination Wedding* producer Gail Lyon. “They’re playing the idea of two broken people who have had the (expletive) kicked out of them in the love department. Can they really find enough hope to find something or is cynicism going to rule the day? It’s really funny and really honest about finding love later in life.”

Lyon, who also produced *Win a Date with Tad Hamilton!*, knows that the movie business is cyclical, but thinks that rom-coms needed to get back to the basics — character and dialogue — while also “twisting the paradigm a little bit to keep it fresh,” which she says *Destination Wedding* does.

If 2018 is the start of a new era of the romantic comedy, Carlson thinks that one day we may trace it back to *The Big Sick*.

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