

Nervous? Not Japan's big bats chasing Little League repeat

By Tommy Butler
The Associated Press

SOUTH WILLIAMSPORT, Pa. — People in the Japanese city of Kawaguchi have long memories.

They still recall the last time a team from this town north of Tokyo made it to the Little League World Series, ultimately losing to Georgia in the 2006 final.

"A lot of people (in Kawaguchi) say '2006. Don't forget about it, get the title back to Japan,'" manager Hiroyuki Takahashi said through an interpreter.

Doesn't matter to these players as they chase a second straight world title for Japan — the oldest kids were infants back in 2006.

Today, representing Japan comes with expectations.

Japanese teams at the Little League World Series have returned home as victors five of the last eight years, and have the second-most championship victories all-time with 11, only behind the 17 won by Taiwan.

A team from Tokyo last year cruised through the international bracket, then beat a team from Lufkin, Texas, by mercy rule in the championship.

Takahashi was nonchalant when asked if his team felt any pressure to continue that dominance.

"Nothing," he said. "We just play our best."

Kawaguchi showed what that best meant during Japan's qualifying tournament. The team scored 45 runs in



four straight wins, including a 23-2 win over Nagasaki Minami Little League to clinch a trip to South Williamsport.

"It was just the boys' best effort," Takahashi said.

Kawaguchi will be tough to stop if it can stay hot at the plate. But even if the team cools off, Takahashi isn't worried.

"We have a very good defensive team," said Takahashi. "I'm not sure of the defensive stats, but our defense is also very decent."

Kawaguchi had a little time to work on any weaknesses ahead of its first game against Europe-Africa representative

Barcelona, which they won 11-1.

Third baseman Shinji Furusawa didn't think his team had anything more than minor tweaks to make ahead of competition in South Williamsport.

"We scored 45 runs while in the Japan Regional Tournament," Furusawa said, also through an interpreter. "We are capable of defeating these teams."

Takahashi said he's noticed one disadvantage for his team — there's only one player taller than 5'5". Japan's first baseman, Masato Igarashi, is the tallest at 5'9".

"I think Japan is very skilled and they

JAPANESE SLUGGERS. Second baseman Soya Ebihara of Japan fields a grounder during the Little League World Series (LLWS) tournament in South Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Japanese teams at the tournament have returned home as victors five of the last eight years, and have the second-most championship victories all-time with 11, only behind the 17 won by Taiwan. (AP Photo/Tom E. Puskar)

have good accuracy," Takahashi said. "But some other teams have bigger bodies so we don't know what kind of baseball they play."

Still, the first few days for the teams in Pennsylvania are more about fun than scouting.

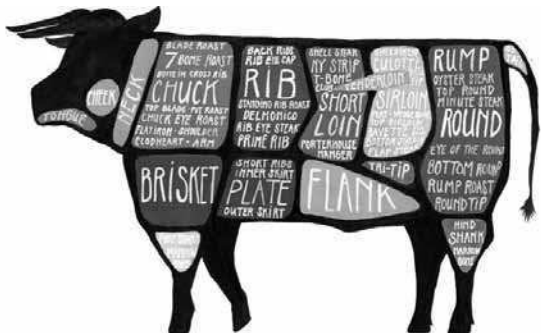
"There are really a lot of different teams, so we're just trying to make friends," he said. "Team Australia gave us t-shirts with all of the players' autographs on them, so we took a picture with them. It's really good that international teams are making friends."

Make no mistake, even while he's connecting with players coming from across the world and across language barriers, Japan's catcher Masaumi Ikeuchi still has his mind on the diamond.

"We want to show the performance we have (in us)," Ikeuchi said. "We want to have the first score."

Batter up: The tournament began August 16 with Puerto Rico taking on South Korea. Central Pennsylvania had an unusually rainy summer, which has organizers and volunteers hoping for a break in the weather through August 26, when the championship game is scheduled.

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Son Heung-min travels to Indonesia for the Asian Games

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — After making his first appearance of the Premier League season on August 11, Tottenham forward Son Heung-min landed in Indonesia two days later to play for South Korea at the Asian Games.

The 25-team soccer tournament is not officially recognized by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), but Tottenham allowed the 26-year-old Son to leave England after the 2-1 win at Newcastle.

Son is one of three overage players on the under-23 team. If South Korea wins the gold medal, Son will be exempt from 21 months of military service, an obligation he is otherwise expected to start within the next two years.

"Of course our target is gold, but it is a long way to get to the final," Son said on his arrival at Bandung International Airport. "How we approach the game mentally is important. I have thought about the Asian Games a lot."

Son missed the 2014 Asian Games because he was not released by former club, Bayer Leverkusen.

South Korea, which will have four members of its World Cup team on the roster, is favored to win the title in Indonesia. In Russia, the South Koreans were knocked out in the group stage, but defeated Germany



ANNUAL ASIAN GAMES. Son Heung-Min, right, of South Korea, shoots on goal during a men's soccer match between South Korea and Malaysia at the Asian Games at Si Jalak Harupat Stadium in Bandung, Indonesia. The Tottenham forward landed in Indonesia for the Asian Games two days after making his first appearance in the Premier League. (AP Photo/Achmad Ibrahim)

2-0, eliminating the defending champions in the process.

"We beat Germany at the World Cup when nobody expected it," said Son, who scored twice in Russia. "Like that, we could lose to other Asian teams here. We have to take each game as it comes, however, and if we don't give everything in every game then it will be tough."

The other 19 members of the team arrived August 11. One of the standouts at the World Cup was goalkeeper Cho Hyun-woo, another

overage player. Cho has already applied to start his military service in December, but could be exempt with a gold medal.

"The World Cup is in the past now and I want to focus on the Asian Games," Cho said. "We want to show what we are made of and Son told me he just wants to score lots of goals."

South Korea defeated Bahrain 6-0 in its opening group match, but was then stunned by Malaysia, who beat them 2-1. The final group match against Kyrgyzstan is scheduled for Monday, August 20.

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