

Historians of Japan’s most popular sport, baseball, fail to acknowledge the role of Yokohama in the game’s earliest history in this country. The Wikipedia entry on baseball in Japan for example describes the introduction of the sport as follows:

It was introduced in 1872 by American Horace Wilson who was an English language professor at the Kaisei School in Tokyo. The first baseball team was called the Shimbashi Athletic Club and was established in 1878. Baseball has been a popular sport ever since.

The Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum describes the first two milestones in the timeline of the history of baseball in Japan in similar terms, and calls the Shimbashi Athletic Club “the first formal baseball club in Japan.”

YC&AC does get a mention in the fourth milestone of the Hall of Fame’s timeline, for the year 1896: “The Ichiko team wins an international game in Yokohama against a foreign team from the Yokohama Country and Athletic Club, spurring great enthusiasm for baseball in Japan.”

In this way YC&AC is credited for helping — by losing — to popularize baseball in Japan. However, I have recently found evidence to show that the present-day YC&AC baseball section played a much more influential role than that, and was indeed Japan’s first formal “open” baseball club, predating the Shimbashi Athletic Club by a good two years.

What Really Happened

The earliest known record of a baseball game in Japan is the report about a game played on 30 October 1871 on the Swamp Ground in Yokohama, the first cricket ground developed by Yokohama Cricket Club co-founder J. P. Mollison near lot No. 264 in Yamashita-cho. The report (see below) appears in the *Japan Weekly Mail* on November 5 of that year. It is notable that the reporter does not write anything to the effect that the game was

the “first ever game played in Yokohama and/or Japan,” suggesting that baseball was already being played at least on an occasional basis. Yokohama was, of course, the main port of call in Japan for American warships after the opening up of the country in the mid 1850s.

The earliest known game in the Far East is an 1869 game probably played in Singapore between players from the U.S. Navy and their counterparts in the British Navy. When U.S. naval ships visited Japan therefore it is reasonable to suppose that some of their officers practiced or played baseball on land while in the treaty ports.

By 1873 the Yokohama Cricket Club (YCC) had acquired the lease to the land in the center of the newly constructed park — now called Yokohama Koen — which was planned by Richard Brunton. The players of baseball would have sought the YCC’s permission to use the great new ground there instead of the Swamp Ground.

The fact that baseball was being played at this time on the new ground in Yokohama Koen is confirmed in the annual report on Yokohama for the year 1874 by the British Consul Russell Robertson, when considering whether the small settlement can really afford to have two parks — the Bluff Gardens as well as Brunton’s new gardens — in the town. He points out that one of the merits of the new gardens on the “Swamp” (i.e. Yokohama Koen) is that “they are our only possible cricket and base-ball ground.”

However, it seems to have been in 1875 that a group of baseball players in Tokyo and Yokohama really brought the sport to life in Japan with their competitive spirit.

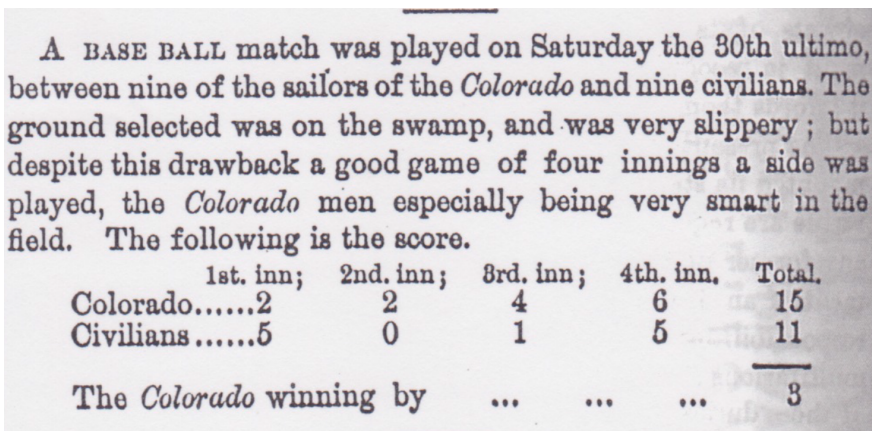
The initial focus of this activity was Tokyo and the Kaisei Gakko (one of the precursors of the present-day University of Tokyo) where the American Horace Wilson is credited with starting to teach his students how to play baseball in either 1872 or 1873. While the Imperial Naval College and the Imperial College of Engineering were mainly staffed by British teachers, Kaisei Gakko’s teachers included baseball-playing American teachers. Most of these were actually employed by the Eigo Gakko Tokyo but worked in the Kaisei Gakko compound or nearby. Edward H. Mudgett, Frank M. Lacey, O. M. Lacey and Henry R. Elliot were in this group, and they were joined by the great all-round English athlete Frederick William Strange, who quickly became an active and talented baseball player. He had studied at University College London when Dairoku Kikuchi, later head of the Imperial

THE ORIGINS

of

BASEBALL IN JAPAN

Strike! **Mike Galbraith** discovers key information on the founding of the Yokohama Base Ball Club — the roots of the present-day YC&AC baseball team.



Japan Weekly Mail coverage of Japan’s first recorded baseball game

University of Tokyo, was studying there. Meanwhile, Durham White Stevens, another keen player, was working in the U.S. Legation in Tokyo.

According to historians, in 1875 the Tokyo-based players combined with some Yokohama-based players such as S. D. Hepburn (son of the famous American physician and translator J. C. Hepburn), Henry Willard Denison, the consul, who had been paid to play for the Washington Olympics team in the late 1860s, and the students of Kaisei Gakko to play a series of games, and these encounters seem to have been the spark that led to the intensive series of games in 1876 and the founding of a club in Yokohama.

On Saturday 2 September 1876 a game was played on the Cricket Ground in Yokohama between the U.S. Fleet and "the Settlement." The former team included officers from the USS *Tennessee* and was accompanied by that ship's band while the latter team included several players from Tokyo. General Van Buren umpired, Hepburn pitched and Denison was catcher. After nine innings the game was tied 25-25, so the teams played another inning. You can see how this remarkable game finally unfolded in the stats for the game recorded by the *Japan Gazette* below.

Following the article on this game which I have abbreviated above, the *Japan Gazette* reporter makes the following comment which indicates that as early as 1876 Japanese students were very good at baseball and also apparently blows apart the claim made by historians such as Donald Roden that the Yokohama foreigners refused to play Japanese teams possibly for racial discrimination reasons:

We should be pleased to see a return game played before the Tennessee leaves Yokohama: or a match arranged between the settlement and the Japanese students of Kaisei-gakko, who have made such progress in this American game as would likely surprise their opponents.



"Birds of Freedom playing baseball," by Charles Wirgman, published in the 18 September 1876 edition of *Japan Punch* / JAPAN PUNCH REPRINTED EDITION PUBLISHED BY YUSHOUDOU SHOTEN

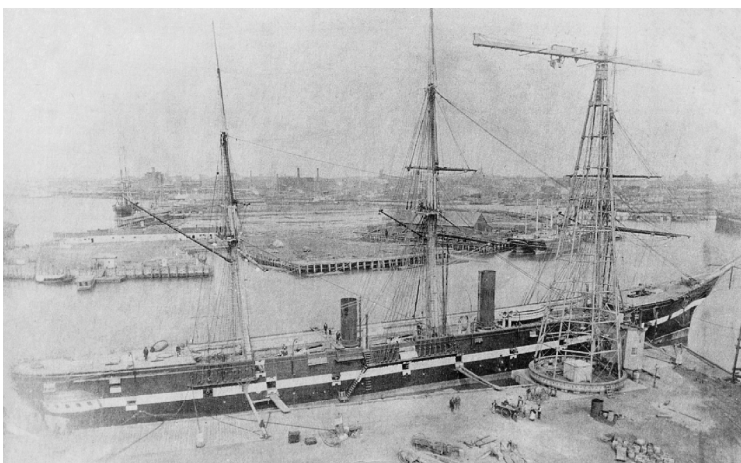
Charles Wirgman depicted a baseball game in a cartoon published in the 18 September 1876 issue of *Japan Punch*. This may very well have been the game described above.

Foundation Meeting of the Yokohama Base Ball Club

Creating a baseball club in Yokohama was by now under serious consideration, but before the players could go ahead they needed an agreement with the YCC regarding the use of its ground. A letter was sent to the club secretary which resulted in a meeting of the cricketers in the Grand Hotel on October 12. "The principal object of the meeting was to consider a letter which had been received by the Secretary from the Base Ball players in Yokohama, in which they desired to be informed whether, if a Base Ball Club was formed, the Cricket Club would grant the use of the Cricket Ground for play and practice, for which privilege the Base Ball Club would be prepared to pay \$50 a year," reported the *Japan Gazette*. Only nine members turned up to the meeting but there was a heated discussion as some of those present were strongly against letting the baseball players use the ground on a regular basis. According to the newspaper, "granting the request would establish a very bad precedent, and as the Tennis Club had the use of the ground for three days a week, and could not be interfered with, the Cricket Club could, at all events, only make arrangements to grant the use of the ground during the three days in which they had it for their own purposes. It was also thought that, if the number of Base Ball players increased, they would interfere materially with the operations of the Cricket Club." However, Mr. Hall, who appears to have played both cricket and baseball, "strongly advocated making arrangements with the proposed Base Ball Club" and "contended that there would be no interference with the cricketers." Things were resolved when Mr. Kirkwood proposed the motion (seconded by Mr. Dunlop) "that the Honorary Secretary

SCORE.										
SETTLEMENT.					FLEET.					
	O.	R.			O.	R.				
Mudgett 2b.	3.	3.	Remy	c.	3.	4.				
Stevens 1.f.	4.	4.	Hodgson	1b.	3.	5.				
Elliot s.s.	3.	4.	Spiccar	1.f.	4.	4.				
Denison c.	4.	3.	Jacoby	2b.	5.	2.				
F. Lacy r.f.	3.	5.	Augur	3b.	1.	4.				
Hall 3b.	2.	5.	Ballis	c.o.	3.	3.				
Hepburn p.	3.	1.	Marix	p.	3.	2.				
O. Lacy c.f.	2.	3.	Winslow	s.s.	3.	1.				
Churchill 1b.	6.	1.	Usher	1.f.	5.	1.				
	30.	29.			30.	26.				
	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
Settlement	3.	0.	11.	1.	0.	2.	1.	3.	4.	4.=29.
Fleet	4.	10.	1.	0.	1.	0.	0.	4.	5.	1.=26.

Stats for the 2 September 1876 U.S. Fleet vs Foreign Settlement game



The USS *Tennessee* pictured in 1875: The ship supplied players and its band for U.S. Fleet Vs Foreign Settlement games.

inform the Base Ball players that, when a Club of twenty members is formed, the Cricket Club will be prepared to treat with them for the use of the ground: and for the present season they be allowed the use of the ground, during the days it is under the control of the Club, in consideration of whatever donation they may be pleased to give."

The *Japan Gazette* gave a lot of coverage to baseball in the month of October 1876 and on Monday October 16 the newspaper ran with the following report:

A game of base ball between the nines of Tokio and Yokohama came off last Saturday at the Kaisei Gakko. Owing to the kindness of Mr. Hamao the grounds were in very good condition, and several ladies were present during a large portion of the game. As will be seen from the annexed score our brothers from Tokio were the victors, the game being called before the close of the seventh innings on account of darkness. We understand that the defeat of the Yokohama team was due to want of practice which seriously affected their play on the field: and we would advise them to make the best use of their time between now and next Saturday to get into playing order, and not let the Tokioites score another victory. If the cricket ground can be secured for next Saturday the return game will be played there. We also understand that the US Flag-ship Tennessee is expected about the first of the month: and in that case we may hope to see another game with the navy before the end of the season.

That return game was duly played on October 21 but was not completed before the *Japan Gazette* reporter filed his copy: "The return game of base-ball between the Tokio and the Yokohama nines came off this afternoon. A number of visitors were present. At half-past four o'clock the sixth innings had been played and the game stood, Tokio 14 and Yokohama 10."

	R.	O.
F. Lacy, S S	4	2
O. Lacy, 2 B	3	3
Maclay, R F	1	6
Mudgett, C	1	3
Wilson, C E	2	3
Elliot, P	3	2
David, 3 B	3	3
Lagden, 1 B	3	3
Strange, L F	3	2
	23	27
Van Buren, P	4	1
Hall, S S	2	3
Churchill, 2 B	2	1
Hepburn, 3 B	3	2
Stone, R E	0	5
Denison, C	2	1
Tripler, L F	0	4
Merriman, 1 B	0	5
Tileston, C F	0	5
	13	27
Tokio.....	1	3
Yokohama...	1	0
	1	0
	2	5
	0	0
	0	3
	6	8
	0	2
	0	1
	3	13

Stats for the 21 October 1876 Tokio vs Yokohama game in which Horace Wilson played

present: Gen. Van Buren, Messrs Morse, Tripler, Doyle, Lillbridge, Hepburn, Denison, Stone, Allen, Rice, Sargent, Merriman, Churchill, Farr, Haskell, and Van Buren. The meeting was called to order and Mr. N. J. Stone took the chair. A resolution was adopted forming a Base Ball Club to be called the "Yokohama Base Ball Club" to be governed by the rules of the National Amateur Association of the

United States. It was further resolved that all those who desired to become members could do so by applying to the Honorary Secretary: and by paying whatever dues might be decided on by the committee, in whose hands the business of the Club was placed. The following officers were then elected, N. J. Stone, President : H. W. Denison, Captain : J. S. Van Buren, Honorary Secretary and Treasurer : Executive Committee, Messrs Van Buren, Hall and Rice : with Messrs. Stone and Denison, members ex officio. We understand that the Club numbers already thirty-five members.

The very next day they played the return Yokohama vs. Tokio game described above. The aforementioned Horace Wilson and Frederick Strange were among the scorers in Tokio's 23-13 victory, while pitcher J. S. Van Buren top scored for Yokohama.

On October 28 the two teams played again with the Yokohama team including a few players from the U.S. Navy ships in port. This time Yokohama were able to win, 24-12, with Denison and Van Buren scoring 10 runs between them.

Japanese Baseball's Founding Fathers

So who were the people that founded Japan's first baseball club, the Yokohama Base Ball Club?

Gen. Van Buren is Thomas Brodhead Van Buren (1824–1889) who was a nephew of the eighth U.S. president Martin Van Buren. In 1874 he was sent to Japan to be the Consul General by president Ulysses Grant and stayed until 1885. He had three sons, among them J. S. Van Buren, who was elected the first honorary secretary and treasurer of the new club. Henry Willard Denison (1846–1914), who was the Vice Consul in Yokohama between 1869 and 1876 and was possibly the best player, was elected captain. The chairman of the meeting to found the club was Nathan Jonas Stone, who was born on a farm in New Hampshire in 1843. He arrived in Japan in Yokohama around 1872 and went into a partnership called Chipman, Stone & Co., merchants specializing in the import-export business which soon had a turnover of a million dollars making it one of the biggest American companies in Japan. Unfortunately for him, the company failed in early 1877 and he returned to the United States in 1878.

George Rice, who often acted as scorer, was at the time marshal of the U.S. Consulate. L. T. Farr was acting superintendent of the Yokohama branch of the Imperial Japanese Post Office. Samuel Dyer Hepburn (1844–1922) was the son of James Curtis Hepburn, the American medical missionary, dictionary creator, and founder of Meiji Gakuen. There were several Halls in Yokohama at this time and since the Hall in this case was also a member of the YCC, my guess is that it was John "Jock" Hall from Scotland, who represented both Yokohama and Kobe in several sports.

Unfortunately, after an exciting end to the season in 1876, things seem to have gone off the boil in 1877, perhaps due to the departure of Horace Wilson and others from the Tokyo team. Nonetheless, the history of the Yokohama Base Ball Club can be clearly traced until the club merged with the Yokohama cricket, football and athletics clubs to form the YC&AC in 1884.

The first baseball Interport was played in 1896 when the YC&AC lost in Kobe. 1896 was also the year when the game — actually three games — against Ichiko mentioned at the very top of this article were played. The dramatic events of that year require a separate story.

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