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July 10, 2010

Dear Friend in Baseball:

I'm writing to ask you a favor regarding our beloved national pastime. My good friend Kerry Yo Nakagawa has nominated Kenichi Zenimura (1900-1968) for the Buck O'Neil Lifetime Achievement Award of the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Attached to this letter is a petition that must be delivered via hard-copy original—no emails, faxes or PDFs—in order to be counted. Also, would you print a few extras and pass them along to professional peers and personal friends?

As with so many aspects of our melting-pot history, American baseball has been shaped by immigrants and their immediate descendants. A glance at the roster of the upcoming All-Star Futures Game is but one proof of this influence.

Zenimura's tireless efforts on both sides of the Pacific cleared the way for MLB athletes named Sasaki, Matsui, Nomo, Hasegawa, Okajima, Saito, Fukudome, Taguchi, Iguchi, Matsuzaka, Okajima, Shinjo and Iwamura. Not to mention the unique combination of an MLB manager named Wakamatsu and NPB manager named Valentine.

When Ted Williams was inaugurated into the Hall of Fame, he was gracious enough to endorse African-American ballplayers for Hall of Fame recognition:

"I've been a very lucky guy to have worn a baseball uniform, and I hope some day the names of Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson in some way can be added as a symbol of the great Negro players who are not here only because they weren't given a chance." (1966)

More recently, Buck O'Neill offered the same opinion regarding our Nisei ballplayers:

"(Nisei baseball) is what America is all about. All men and women were created free and equal and (it) shows that when you make up your mind, you can be the best that you can be. Japanese Americans proved that they were the best that they could be." (2001)

Help give Zenimura his proper place in baseball history by making sure the HOF Committee gets your endorsement **no later than July 31, 2010.**

My heartfelt thanks for your support.

Anita Y. Tsuchiya
Writer, blogger, thinker



Buck O'Neil & Kerry Yo Nakagawa

Nomination of Kenichi Zenimura for the Buck O'Neil Lifetime Achievement Award

DATE: _____

Buck O'Neil Lifetime Achievement Award
National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum
25 Main Street
Cooperstown, NY 13326

Dear National Baseball Hall of Fame Board of Directors:

Please accept this letter as my nomination of Kenichi Zenimura (1900-1968), the Father of Japanese American Baseball, for the Buck O'Neil Lifetime Achievement Award.

Below are the top 10 highlights from Zenimura's career that demonstrate how his "extraordinary efforts enhanced baseball's positive impact on society, broadened the game's appeal," and how his "character, integrity and dignity are comparable to the qualities exhibited by O'Neil."

Top 10 Kenichi Zenimura Career Highlights for the Buck O'Neil Lifetime Achievement Award

1 A True Baseball Ambassador

Before, during and after WWII, Zenimura leveraged the game of baseball to break down barriers and build bridges between people of different racial, cultural and geographic backgrounds. In 2007, MLB.com called Zenimura "a true baseball ambassador," showcasing his quote: "It is much easier to make efforts of starting a better understanding between us in the field of sports than trying to talk your way through rough spots."

2 Bridge to the Pacific

Zenimura was a tireless exporter of the American style of baseball to Asia, including goodwill tours to Japan, Korea and China in 1924, 1927 and 1937. In fact, between 1923 and late-1931, no MLB team toured Japan. One reason was because of the thrown-game incident of 1922 when the MLB-stars lost 9-3 to a Japanese ballclub on purpose.² "We welcomed the American team because we thought they were gentlemanly and sportsmanlike," said the Japanese players. "They have now shown themselves to be full of the mean professional spirit ...they disappointed our hopes and left an unpleasant impression upon us." Zenimura, his Nisei peers, and Negro League counterparts stepped in and served as the U.S. baseball ambassadors during this eight-year MLB-team void.

3 Royal Giants' 1927 Japan Tour

After the all-black Los Angeles White Sox were guests of Zenimura's in Fresno during Fourth of July weekend 1926, he convinced manager Lon Goodwin to take his club on a tour of Japan. Goodwin changed his ballclub's team name to the Philadelphia Royal Giants and departed for Japan in April 1927. Japanese author and historian Kazuo Sayama credits the 1927 tour, especially Biz Mackey and his gentlemanly teammates, for inspiring the start of professional baseball in Japan in 1936.

4 Babe Ruth's 1934 Japan Tour

In October 1927 Zenimura was teammates with Lou Gehrig in an exhibition contest against Babe Ruth and a team of local all-stars. Several months after the game Zeni sent a copy his photo with the Yankee sluggers to his contacts in Japan. "I got a call from Japan to see if I could get Ruth to go to the Island and play for \$40,000 guarantee," said Zeni. "I contacted Ruth and he said he would go for \$60,000. It was too much but a few years later (1934) he went (to Japan) and made a big hit." Ruth's visit is widely believed to have inspired the start of pro baseball in Japan in 1936 as well.

5 Breaking Down Barriers

"No Japs Wanted!" These were the words displayed on billboards in 1923 Livingston, CA. Zenimura and his team courageously "put together enough guts and made the trip – trying especially hard to play clean ball." Zeni scheduled return games in Livingston and soon the signs disappeared.⁷ This event was one of the earliest known cases of Zeni using the game of baseball to transcend the ignorance and intolerance of his era.

6 Turning a Negative into a Positive

In 1924 Zenimura's all-Japanese Fresno Athletic Club applied to join the newly formed San Joaquin Valley Baseball League. Before the season could start, the team from Porterville protested: "We don't want the Japanese to play in

Porterville ... We have kept them out in other lines and if we let them come in baseball, they will bring a following and this we don't want ... This is a white man's town and we intend to keep it as such."9 Turning the negative into a positive, Zeni instead scheduled a three-game series against the Salt Lake City Bees of the Pacific Coast League. The FAC surprised everyone by taking one game 6-4. The series also marked the first time for Lefty O'Doul – future goodwill ambassador to Japan – to compete against players of Japanese ancestry.

7 Twilight League Leadership

Zenimura transcended the racial tensions of depression-era California by serving as player/manager of the predominately white Twilight Leagues in the 1930s. Twilight League teammate Don Jorgensen said of Zeni: "He was a little small, but real smart in baseball, real smart. He knew all the trick of the trade in baseball ... He had my respect and he had the respect of all the ballplayers on his team."

8 The Nisei-Negro Leagues Brotherhood

Japanese Americans and African-Americans shared a bond through their common struggle for equality. Throughout the 1920s and 30s Zeni scheduled numerous contests against west coast Negro League teams. In fact, Zenimura won 7 of 12 games against Negro League teams. And when the all-black squads were not competing against Zeni's ballclub, they were welcomed guests at his Fresno Japanese Baseball Park. In fact, O'Neal Pullen, former Philadelphia Royal Giants catcher, leveraged his relationship with Zenimura to use the field as late as 1935 as player-manager of the Bakersfield Cubs.

9 From Internment to Hope

During WWII, Zenimura was one of 120,000 people of Japanese Ancestry sent to internment camps by the U.S. government. Behind barbed wire in Gila River, Arizona, Zeni constructed a ballfield and organized leagues that gave internees a sense of hope and normalcy. The late Pat Morita, actor and former Gila River internee, said of Zeni: "(He) showed that with effort and persistence, you can overcome the harshness of adversity ... Zenimura and others created a fraternal community in the desert—and baseball was the glue."

10 Little Man, Big Impact

During his four decades in baseball, Zenimura made a positive impact on the lives of thousands of players. Tets Furukawa, pitcher with the 1945 Butte High Eagles, captured the essence of Zenimura's legacy best: "Coach Zeni ... indeed possessed a tremendous knowledge of baseball savvy, but above all, he wanted every player to become a better human being by realizing his responsibility and compassion for his fellow man."

The final testimonial for Nisei baseball and the man recognized as "The Father of Japanese American Baseball" comes from Buck O'Neil himself: "(Nisei baseball) is what America is all about. All men and women were created free and equal and (it) shows that when you make up your mind, you can be the best that you can be. Japanese Americans proved that they were the best that they could be."

Thank you for your time and thank you for your consideration of Kenichi Zenimura for the next Buck O'Neil Lifetime Achievement Award.

Sincerely,

PRINT NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

EMAIL: _____

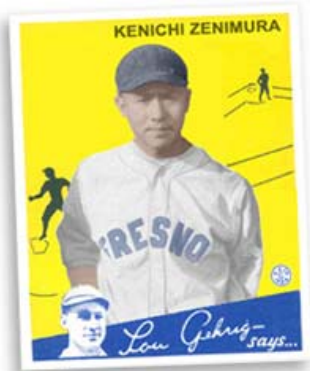
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05/10/07 10:00 AM ET

Zenimura a true baseball ambassador

Pioneer helped pave relationship between Japan and Majors

By Stephen Ellsesser / Special to MLB.com



Kenichi Zenimura's baseball legacy can be seen in many forms, but not yet in the Hall of Fame.

Whether it is Zenimura Field, a relic of the World War II internment camps, the baseball relationship between Zenimura's native Japan and the United States that now thrives with the presence of Ichiro Suzuki and Daisuke Matsuzaka in the Major Leagues or even the discovery of a star in current Chicago Cubs outfielder Alfonso Soriano, Zenimura's reach covered a lot of ground in his 55 years around baseball.

A group of baseball researchers hopes that Zenimura will be among the Asian-American baseball pioneers one day enshrined in Cooperstown, but first, and more realistically, Zenimura may get a look from the Japanese Hall of Fame.

"After they inducted the whole class of Negro Leaguers in 2006, [the Nisei League players' time] has been a silent question in the research community," said Bill Staples of the Nisei Baseball Research Project. "What is next and what do we do now? What's next in the

whole baseball international connection?"

Small man, big plans

Zenimura was born in Hiroshima, Japan, in 1900, and began playing baseball in 1915, after his family had relocated to Hawaii.

Small in stature at 5-feet and weighing just 105 pounds, Zenimura had begun a baseball journey that would lead to California before traversing the Pacific Ocean on multiple occasions, while also playing with Lou Gehrig and Babe Ruth in the 1920s.

Zenimura left Hawaii for his longtime home of Fresno, Calif., in 1920. It was there he took his first steps as a baseball ambassador, sowing the seeds of what became the California Nisei League.

Zenimura's work on that front was easier said than done in many ways. A mechanic and restaurant worker in Fresno, Zenimura was selling baseball to Japanese immigrants who viewed the sport as a game of the privileged. College baseball was king in Japan at the time, and many of those immigrants didn't attend Waseda, Keio or any of the other big Japanese baseball schools.

There were other problems in fielding a team of Japanese-American baseball players.

"Being in a farm community and being full of tight-knit families, it was impossible for these guys to leave and travel the United States playing baseball," Staples said. "These guys were system farmers who played baseball on the weekends. That's kind of why the Nisei League was not considered one of the pro leagues."

Zenimura had a knack for getting people excited about baseball, however, and soon his Fresno Athletic Club team was joined by enough counterparts to compose a 10-strong league.

The constant gardener

Success at creating his league in California was only the beginning for Zenimura. Arguably his biggest accomplishment helped ease the hurt caused by the transgressions of another.

In 1922, Herbert Hunter's MLB All-Stars ensured their series in Japan would be remembered in a most dubious way, throwing a game against the Mita local nine, one of the country's finest teams for sure, but no match for a squad with players like Casey Stengel, Waite Hoyt and Bob Meusel on the roster.

"We welcomed the American team because we thought they were gentlemanly and sportsmanlike," Tokyo's Asahi Shimbun wrote after the game. "The have now shown themselves to be full of mean professional spirit. Japanese baseball followers are not foolish enough to believe they tried to beat Mita. ... They disappointed our hopes and left an unfortunate impression on us."

Zenimura's response was to lead goodwill baseball tours, bringing players from his adoptive country to his native country. In 1924, Zenimura took his first tour to Japan. His tours also traveled to Korea and Manchuria.

The 1927 goodwill tour included the Philadelphia Royal Giants, a Negro team that included stars such as Biz Mackey, and it has been credited as influential in paving the way for professional baseball in Japan.

That same year, Zenimura got his own taste of big-league talent, playing with Gehrig and Ruth when their barnstorming tour rolled into Fresno. A famous photo showing Zenimura with the legendary New York Yankees was a memorable scene of the tour.

After Hunter's tour, an MLB team didn't appear in Japan again until 1931, and in six of the eight years between, Zenimura either toured Japan or hosted touring teams from the Land of the Rising Sun.

Zenimura's final tour of Japan came in 1937, and by then, Ruth and his team of Major Leaguers had torn through Tokyo and set fans ablaze, igniting the flames Zenimura had stoked throughout the '20s.

Off to the desert

In 1942, the same goodwill Zenimura had spent years developing was negated. Along with many other Japanese-Americans, he was interned at Gila River.

Forced to live in the camp, Zenimura continued doing what he had always done best -- play, teach and coach baseball.

The first problem was finding somewhere to play. Zenimura's ingenuity served him well in that capacity.

Planting grass for an outfield and castor bean shrubs for an outfield wall, Zenimura made sure growth survived by running a water line from one of the camp's laundry rooms some 300 feet. The bean shrubs grew to eight feet tall, not exactly like Wrigley Field's ivy, thanks to an irrigation ditch diverted from the main canal.

The baselines were chalked with flour, and were it not for the barbed wire, it might have seemed a bizarre Cactus League departure of sorts to a wayward Wrigley wanderer.

Speaking of which, one of Zenimura's players from 1942-45 at Gila River was Fibber Hirayama, who went on to a career with the Hiroshima Carp, along with Zenimura's sons, Kenshi and Kenso.

Hirayama made his mark as a longtime Carp scout. His biggest catch? How about reeling in Soriano for his brief stay in Japan, before the dollars and stardom awaiting him in the Majors called his name.

A character in the recently released film "An American Pastime" is inspired by Zenimura. The film, about baseball in the internment camps, features a character based on Zenimura, even to the point of having a doctored version of the Ruth-Gehrig photo.

Zenimura, who died in 1968, also built two fields in Fresno, but the Arizona park is his most enduring memorial.

And all that remains

In 2012, it will be 70 years since Zenimura and more than 13,000 other Japanese-Americans were interned at Gila River. Wrongly imprisoned in oppressive desert heat through the end of the war, Zenimura had these words for his players upon his release.

"Try to speed up the mutual feeling between the Americans and Japanese," he told the Gila News-Courier. "It is much easier to make efforts of starting a better understanding between us in the field of sports than trying to talk your way through the rough spots."

Spoken like a true diplomat and ambassador of baseball.

Stephen Ellsesser is a contributor to MLB.com This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.

03/07/08 10:00 AM ET

Baseball cast light in shadow of war

Zenimura kept game alive in Japanese internment camps

By Tom Singer / MLB.com



Today, the valley of the Arizona desert buzzes with big league baseball activity in chic enclaves such as Scottsdale, Tempe and Peoria.

Then, the best ball was played in the shadow of barbed wire in the desolation of Butte.

Today, it's lush green outfields, manicured infields and high-tech irrigation systems. Then, it was castor bean shrubs for outfield walls, infields hand-picked clean of pebbles and water siphoned from laundry pipes for irrigation.

Today, there are Spring Training camps. Then, it was the Gila River Internment Camp.

During World War II, when big league training camps were shuttered by government decrees ordering teams to train near their home bases, the most exciting brand of baseball in Arizona was played by Japanese Americans held captive in barracks in the middle of the desert.

It is a regrettable, inspiring little secret.

The regret is from the herding of Japanese Americans into internment camps while the war raged. According to some polls 60-plus years later, only 30 percent of contemporary Americans are even aware that practice occurred.

The inspiration is in the way some interned Japanese Americans reacted to the loss of their freedom, by holding on to hope they persistently expressed through baseball.

Japanese Americans such as Kenichi Zenimura, who had dedicated his prior life in Fresno, Calif., to baseball, saw no reason to surrender his devotion behind the barbed-wire fences of Gila River.

So Zenimura built a ball field in the middle of nothing. He marshaled fellow captives to create a genuine diamond in the rough, one blade of grass, one concrete slab, one appropriated four-by-six at a time.

That field showcased not only all-star teams of interned Japanese Americans, but also the area's best high school and semipro teams, all tirelessly arranged by Zenimura.

It was an authentic field of dreams, inaugurated 65 years ago on March 7, 1943.

Traces of Zenimura Field are long gone; an olive orchard now marks the spot. However, a park being developed in Chandler, about 10 miles from the original, will honor the legacy of all Japanese Americans. Scheduled to be dedicated next year, it will be called Nozomi Park, Japanese for "hope."

A wee (5-foot, 105-pound) and energetic infielder and catcher born in Hiroshima, Zenimura grew up in Hawaii, and as he entered his 20s, moved to Fresno. There, for two decades, he was a car salesman who actually spent most of his time helping Japanese Americans cross the culture gap on the bridge of baseball.

For that, he was popularly known as "The Father of Japanese Baseball."

He was also the father of Kenso Zenimura.

"Oh, my ... that was a long time ago," Kenso Zenimura, who goes by the Americanized name of Howard, said, chortling. "But, oh yes, I remember when we were building that park.

"The biggest problem was just trying to get all the rocks out of there. The big ones, we could just walk through and pick up. The little ones ... we kept crossing the grounds with these screens, trying to trap them ... it was like looking for gold."

Kenso Zenimura, at 80, lives in retirement back in Fresno. He was 15 when President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 -- ordering the displacement of 120,000 Japanese Americans into detention camps across the country.

The Zenimuras, all their property confiscated, were originally sent to live in abandoned horse stalls at the Fresno fairgrounds. Six months later, they were relocated into the Butte-area Gila River Internment Camp.

Kenichi Zenimura died in 1968. His achievements are immortal, and beginning to be recognized. In 2005, Arizona governor Janet Napolitano decreed the observance of Zenimura Day.

"Every time my dad went someplace," Kenso Zenimura said, "if there was no baseball park, he'd make one."

And, so, he went to work on the barren canvas of Butte.

Future enterprising television hero MacGyver had nothing on Kenichi and his band of volunteer aides.

They planted Bermuda grass seeds in the parched ground. They nurtured them to life by tapping into a laundry-room water line and channeling its flow 300 feet outside of the barbed wire. They imbedded castor bean shrubs that would grow eight feet tall and form the outfield "wall."

They scavenged for every available piece of wayward lumber to erect a backstop and the stands. They gathered discarded cement pads to use as roofing for dugouts and grandstands, protection from the relentless sun.

"I remember this little old man out there every day watering the infield. One of the great sounds of joy for me was the sound of baseball."

-- Pat Morita on Kenichi Zenimura

They marked foul lines with flour -- and started playing their escapist games even as Zenimura Field continued to evolve.

"We could cross over the fence to find scrap lumber, and we pulled up every other four-by-six wooden pole that anchored the barbed wire fence to build the backstop and grandstand," Kenso Zenimura recalled.

"Instead of screens, for the backstop we used cement pads that were left laying all over the place after they were used in making the mess halls and showers.

"We always kept working in the mornings, before the big heat. And I remember, to water the field, we'd move the water through our trench after one in the morning, when everyone was asleep and we knew they wouldn't be using the laundry or flushing toilets."

The thousands of Japanese Americans interned at Gila River included the great character actor Pat Morita ("The Karate Kid"), who shortly before his death in 2005 vividly recalled Kenichi's omnipresence in camp.

"I remember this little old man out there every day watering the infield," Morita had said. "One of the great sounds of joy for me was the sound of baseball."

And the whole time, Zenimura's crew labored in fear of being told to halt, of their project being shut down on orders from by-the-letter camp administrators.

They needn't have feared. Their creation was admired by the community, covered by the press, and rejoiced by baseball fans.

And when the time came to formally inaugurate the field, first-pitch ceremonies were performed by the very man who oversaw their incarceration.

A poster crafted by Zenimura to promote the opening of his field captures the poignant irony. It details the schedule for a doubleheader -- Parlier Cards vs. Guadalupe YMBA, Kingsburg Vikings vs. Zenimura Jr. All-Stars -- then invites fans to "see project director Bennett pitch the first ball!"

The games, and Zenimura's enterprise, went on. He sold box seats to benefactors. He placed empty coffee cans by the gates to collect donations which went toward equipment and uniforms.

Soon, there were 32 teams in three divisions playing in front of huge crowds.

Some historians have likened the segregated impact of Japanese American baseball to another World War II phenomenon, the women's teams who played in a league of their own.

But Bill Staples, who has only recently been drawn into chronicling this history and does so with unrivaled passion, offers another comparison.

"It's more than just a wartime experience," Staples said. "I think it's more comparable to the Negro Leagues. Due to decades of discrimination even before World War II, Japanese Americans were forced to play in leagues of their own."

A 38-year-old marketing professional and baseball fan who moved to Chandler, Ariz., a few years ago, Staples was spurred to become part of the Nisei Baseball Research Project when he realized none of his new neighbors were even aware of the history in whose shadows they were living.

Staples is particularly fascinated by Kenichi Zenimura, and sees the bigger picture of his dedication.

"How do you find happiness in a world where we have less freedom? There is a great deal that can be taken from that and applied to the human condition," said Staples, who is currently working on an authorized biography of Zenimura.

Zenimura Field had a short life, happily. In a couple of years, the war was over and interned Japanese Americans regained their freedom. But not their lives.

Kenichi Zenimura returned to Fresno and "went to work on a farm," Kenso said, "trying to make ends meet."

"He didn't talk much about the camp experience," Zenimura added. "He was always just concerned about playing baseball. When he got back, he went right back to starting teams and leagues here.

"Baseball was his life."

Today, Cactus League fans see his afterlife everywhere. The Mariners' Ichiro Suzuki and Kenji Johjima are in Peoria, Kazuo Fukumori (Rangers) and Yasuhiko Yabuta (Royals) are in Surprise, while Kosuke Fukudome (Cubs) is in Mesa.

As the influx of Japanese players and their assimilation into the Major Leagues grows, we impulsively tend to credit them as pioneers.

In truth, they are not opening any doors. As historians know, they are publicly closing the circle.

Tom Singer is a reporter for MLB.com. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.
