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Having a Ball in Japan: Larry Rocca helps stoke the rising interest in Japanese baseball

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野球

(TRANSLATION: BASEBALL)

LARRY ROCCA HELPS STOKER THE RISING INTEREST IN JAPANESE BASEBALL

The World Series—it's perhaps the biggest misnomer in major-league sports. Sure, hot dogs and home runs are quintessentially American. But there is a whole world of baseball beyond the borders of the United States, and nobody knows that better than Larry Rocca '90.

A former sportswriter, Rocca has long called for a true "World Series" that would pit the Major League Baseball champion against the top team in Japan. Now he's in a position to help accomplish that—and much more.

Rocca joined former New York Mets manager Bobby Valentine in Tokyo as director of promotions for the Chiba Lotte Marines professional baseball team in 2005. "I remember my father saying, and I'm quoting him now, 'If you could help do that [orchestrate a global World Series], that would be a real feather in your cap,'" Rocca said, clearly still affected by the memory. "I still believe in a true World Series. That's one reason



Larry Rocca '90 (right), chief operating officer for the Chiba Lotte Marines baseball team in Japan, confers with Marines' manager Bobby Valentine.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHIBA LOTTE MARINES

STORY BY PAUL KARR

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY ROBERT P. HERNANDEZ

“
**LARRY HAS DONE A GREAT JOB OF
 TEACHING AND A GREAT JOB OF
 LEARNING.**
 ”

Bobby Valentine

Manager of the Chiba Lotte Marines and former New York Mets manager

why this was the only job I went out and tried to get.”

In just three years, Rocca already has begun to change Japanese baseball: helping turn the Marines into a moneymaker through fan programs and advertising deals, introducing a wacky mascot to liven up the crowd, networking with Colby alumni to establish a relationship tying the Marines to the Boston Red Sox.

His approach is measured and tactical; his progress is steady and significant.

“Larry has done wonders bringing in revenue and in persevering,” said Valentine, the Marines’ manager. “He’s learning the culture rather than trying to change it—learning to work from within, which can be the hardest thing.”

From his unique box seat in Tokyo, Rocca has watched and participated in the rise of Japanese baseball (known as *yakyu*, pronounced *yack-you*) and has helped promote a shift in the way Japanese baseball is managed and marketed.

“I was hired at just the right time to land in the middle of a revolution in Japanese baseball,” said Rocca, watching a rigorous Marines’ practice after (yes *after*) the end of the 2007 season. “Bobby [Valentine] loves it here. And so do I.”

The love affair with Japanese baseball began even before Rocca came to Tokyo, but the move was the latest chapter in a well-traveled baseball career in which he has done everything from covering the New York Yankees and Mets for *Newsday* and other big-city newspapers to dressing up as Henry the Puffy Taco (in the heat of Texas, no less) to washing and painting the exteriors of minor-league ballparks. In Japan, Rocca has boosted the Marines’ revenues, is arranging a scouting program (with fellow Colby alums) linking the Sox to the Marines, and is working for that global World Series.

“Larry has done a great job of teaching and a great job of learning,” said Valentine, also the former manager of the Texas Rangers, who is wildly popular in his adopted home. “He’s been able to teach some of our American ideas to some of the front-office personnel, and he’s also been able to learn a lot about how things work here.”

Rocca has always been a quick study.

At Colby the American studies major had brief flirtations with classics and baseball tryouts (he was cut

twice) before switching his interest to media, developing a call-in sports radio program for WMHB and becoming sports editor (later news editor) of the *Colby Echo*.

“I have nothing but great memories of my time at Colby,” said Rocca. “If I had gone to a larger school, I would not have had the same number of opportunities.” After graduating he worked in sports television production and minor league baseball before spending 11 years with *Newsday* covering Major League Baseball.

While covering the Dodgers in 1995, Rocca—whose father spoke fluent Japanese—also was writing for *Tokyo Chunichi Sports*, *Sports Yearb*, and the Japanese version of *Newsweek*. That led him to a book deal, co-writing a Japanese-language biography of Hideo Nomo, the first Japanese pitcher to succeed in the American major leagues. Covering the Mets in 1997, Rocca struck up an acquaintance with Valentine, whom he pestered regularly as a beat reporter digging for scoops.

“I think the fact that I shared Bobby’s great enthusiasm for Japanese baseball was something that set me apart and helped us sort of hit it off,” Rocca said.

When it finally came to teaming up, it fell together quickly. During a hectic week in the fall of 2004, Rocca attended his father’s funeral, broke off a wedding engagement, and e-mailed Valentine about a rumored job offer. Ten days later he was flying to Tokyo for an interview, and he was soon appointed the Marines’ director of promotions.

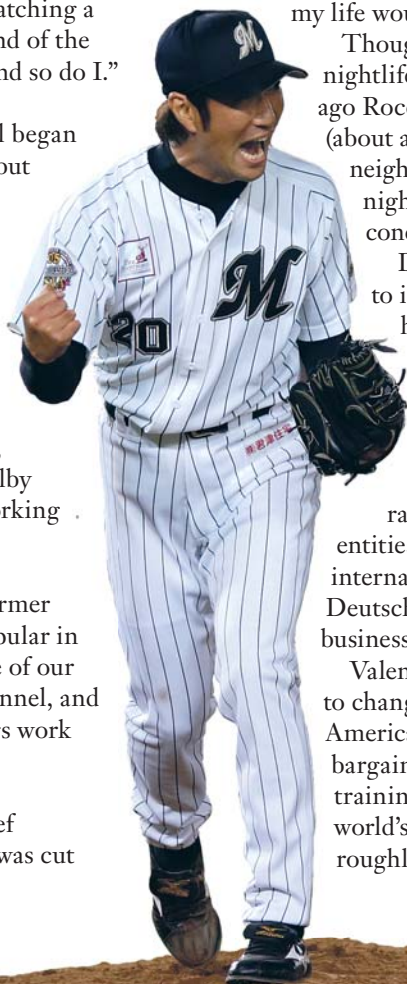
His life hasn’t been quite the same since.

Rocca has spent nearly three years pitching luxury seats, Bobby Burgers, and blogs. He orchestrated deals that landed MasterCard logos on the club’s batting helmets and The Hartford life insurance insignias on the pin-striped uniforms. “I couldn’t have imagined my life would take this path,” he said.

Though his work obligations leave little time for Tokyo nightlife beyond business dinners and meetings, two years ago Rocca moved from an apartment near the ballpark (about an hour outside the city) to the Azabudai-Roppongi neighborhood, the city center. It’s a hopping district of nightclubs, towering shopping malls, and the greatest concentration of foreigners in Tokyo.

During the off-season, Rocca takes language lessons to improve his fit into Japanese culture, and he also has helped introduce American-style business practice into the management and promotion of the club. Japan’s baseball profile may be a rising star on the world sporting scene, but the bulk of Japanese teams lose money hand-over-fist, operated chiefly as brand extensions of their parent corporations rather than fan-friendly or for-profit business entities. (Rocca also notes that his Japanese boss is a savvy international businessman who held top jobs at IBM and Deutsche Telekom and “knows a hundred times more about business than I do.”)

Valentine—and, in his service, Rocca—have set out to change that way of thinking, nudging forward such American-bred ideas as interleague play, collective bargaining, additional rounds of playoffs, and weight training for players. They have helped create one of the world’s best-integrated sports fan clubs, which works roughly along the lines of an airline frequent-flyer club.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHIBA LOTTE MARINES



Larry Rocca '90 with the cheerleaders for the Chiba Lotte Marines of Japanese baseball's Pacific League. Facing page, former Chiba Lotte Marines relief pitcher Yasubiko Yabuta, who was sought by several MLB clubs and signed a three-year free-agent contract this past winter with the Kansas City Royals. Yabuta was never a star in Japan, so his contract bolsters the argument that the talent level in Japan is closer to that of MLB than generally acknowledged.

Thanks partly to these efforts, revenues have quadrupled since Rocca joined the club, and he's been rewarded with a recent promotion to the position of deputy to the team's chief operating officer.

While he may be immersed in another culture, Rocca says it was his Colby connection that kick-started a recently forged alliance between Chiba Lotte's operations and the 2007 "world" champion Boston Red Sox.

It happened like this: Leafing through an issue of *Colby* magazine back in his New York newspaper days, Rocca noticed an item in the class notes about Galen Carr '97, a Major League scout for the Red Sox. Rocca got in touch, and the two stayed in contact. Then, in June 2006, Rocca broached the idea of a partnership. Red Sox management (which includes Director of Baseball Operations Brian O'Halloran '93) was enthusiastic, as was Valentine, and the two clubs now share scouting and marketing resources.

"Larry was the catalyst for this partnership," Carr said. "Both sides look at it as something positive. Obviously the market for Japanese players coming over to the U.S. has never been better, so it's useful for us. But we can also provide valuable information to them, about both major- and minor-league players that might have an interest in playing in Japan.

"If this alliance is going to be really successful on their side, it's going to be mostly because of Larry. He's outgoing, with a good sense of humor. He's a hard guy not to like."

That sense of humor has helped Rocca ease into a culture where bowing rather than bravado, and ballpark sushi rather than hotdogs and Cokes, are the norms. When a still-green Rocca suggested to a table of straight-faced Japanese executives (he is still the only foreigner among 60 front-office staffers) that the Chiba club create a clownish character to race fans around the base path during seventh-inning stretches, they had a quick response.

You do it.

So Rocca donned a shimmering gold lamé suit, rainbow wig, and Elton John glasses and nervously performed live karaoke before 30,000 enthusiastic—if slightly stunned—fans. His bewigged "M-crash" character became a hugely popular staple of late-inning Chiba home games for the next two years. Sadly, business responsibilities now take up too much of Rocca's time, he said, and the wig has been retired (though not forgotten).

"I've done a lot of different things in my life," he said. Japanese baseball "has to be one of the very best." ❀

MAINE ROOTS

The origins of Japanese baseball, believe it or not, are in Maine. Horace Wilson, an English professor from Gorham, taught the game to a group of university students in Tokyo in the 1870s. It didn't really catch on until after World War I, when increasing university populations (and Japanese spectators with new leisure time on their hands) created a boom of interest in a sport that requires little expense, land, or materials to practice and play.

Universities began to play, then high schools, and finally pro teams. When a team of All-Stars (including Babe Ruth) toured Japan in the 1930s to huge crowds, a light bulb went on in the head of newspaper executive Matsutarō Shoriki. Shoriki and his newspaper firm formed the first club, the Dai Nippon Tokyo Yakyu Kurabu, now known as the Yomiuri Giants. A four-team league soon followed.

"He knew people would buy his papers just to read about the baseball," Rocca said. "He saw the power of baseball."

Today, just as in the United States, there are two leagues. In Japan, the Central and Pacific leagues have slightly different rules. The champion of each meets in a best-of-seven fall Japan Series that closely mirrors Major League Baseball's World Series in format. (The national high school tournament, known as Koshien and played twice a year, also creates a national fever and a television ratings spike similar to 'March Madness' in U.S. college basketball.)

The game itself is a bit different from the American version. The baseballs are smaller, and they're wrapped in aluminum foil until just prior to game time to protect their surfaces. No grass grows in the stadium infields; they're completely dirt. Teams play each other far more often. Pitchers start one game per week.

In-game strategy is different, as well. There's far more bunting, base stealing, and situational hitting, far less power hitting and power pitching. Pitchers train themselves to throw any pitch to any location in any situation, relying on guile rather than speed to trick the hitters. The result is something roughly approximate to National League-style play in the United States. (Only a handful of Japanese league hitters have batting averages above .300 each season.) On the other hand, Japanese players' endurance, hand-eye coordination, and conditioning are considered among the best in the world.

In fact, weeks after the 2007 season had ended, the ball club was still hard at work. At a practice in a field house near the club's seaside stadium, players were stretching and chanting intensely, firing baseballs around, cracking whistling line drives off batting-practice pitchers, and listening to spirited pep talks from manager Bobby Valentine.

These rigorous workouts are among many intriguing facets of Japan's version of the American pastime, and they're often cited as one of the chief reasons Japanese players like Ichiro Suzuki (an seven-time All-Star in his seven seasons in the major leagues so far) and Boston Red Sox pitcher Daisuke Matsuzaka are enjoying such success in the United States.