



Meiji Restoration

The Meiji Restoration was a radical struggle to industrialize Japanese production, politics, culture, and society. But did you know that part of the reform strategy included baseball? After American warships arrived in Japan, Japanese leaders and thinkers began importing American technologies and cultures. For some, baseball was the ideal game for the industrializing nation, blending themes of traditional Japanese culture with strategies that would make Japan competitive on the global stage.

**0:00**

Illustration of an opening scroll with year '1868'; stylized map of Japan on a blue ocean wrapped with a chain; map of Japan with the X symbol over the central part of it and surrounded by radiating sun beams ships with US flags sail towards it; ships surround a wrapped present which opens and displays a steam train.

Picture this: it's 1868, Japan just hit the "reset" button on history. For over 200 years, the country was basically in a self-imposed timeout, cut off from the rest of the world. Flashback to 1853. Four American warships sailed into Edo Harbor. Their purpose: convince Japan to trade with the US. Not willing to take no for an answer, six American warships returned six months later with gifts for the Shogun, including a working quarter-scale model train.

The Americans laid down 330 feet of circular track, unloaded the train, and filled it with coal. The train's black smoke and steam whistle thrilled the crowd of invited samurai.

0:47

Two figures in samurai attire seated on the floor; open books filled with Japanese script overlaid is the text 'Treaty of Kanagawa'; big blue wave; graphic scene of two Japanese figures talking as changing shapes fill two Japanese flags; illustration of Japanese military persons with text 'Meiji Restoration'.

Some of these samurai understood how far Japan had fallen behind technologically. Others weren't so sure letting foreigners in was a good idea. The Japanese reluctantly signed the Treaty of Kanagawa. More treaties soon followed, granting foreign nations trade concessions and extraterritorial rights.

New ideas flooded in. Japanese elites debated about the pace of change. Some believed Japanese culture would be overwhelmed by the "blue-eyed barbarians." Another group believed that the only way to avoid being overwhelmed and colonized was to embrace change. Fighting ensued. The side looking to catch up, won, beginning the Meiji Restoration.

1:31

Stylized image of Emperor Mutsuhito in samurai attire; a man wearing a kimono is replaced by a man wearing a suit, a horse replaced by a train, a sword replaced by a bat; woodblock prints of figures dressed in military-style attire; photo of a stern Japanese man and text 'Wakon yōsai'; video clip of Japanese teams playing baseball.

Emperor Mutsuhito, just 17 years old, took control from the Shogun. Trains replaced horses, business suits replaced kimonos, and, wait for it... baseball bats replaced swords. Yes, that baseball. America's pastime became a big part of Japan's story of modernization. Japan's new government had a mission: make Japan rich and strong. To do it, they invited experts from the West to teach them about everything, from science to democracy. But Japan did not want to become the West. They wanted to adopt Western techniques while preserving traditional Japanese culture and values, a term they called "Wakon yōsai."

Enter baseball. A game all about teamwork, discipline, sacrifice, and constant practice. Not only are these virtues hallmarks of democracy and factory work, they are also samurai values in sports form.

2:31

Photo of Horace Wilson with a thought bubble; a baseball pitcher and batter; photo of Hiroshi Hiraoka with heart symbols; illustration of Hiraoka wearing a baseball cap surrounded by baseball equipment; photo of the Shimbashi Athletic Club; portrait of Masaoka Shiki; a piece of paper titled 'Baseball Rules' with the word 'Attackers' and 'Defenders'.

Horace Wilson, an American teacher in Tokyo, thought his students needed more exercise. By playing baseball, his students built character, learned to work as a team, and developed their pitching arms and batter's eyes. Japan also started sending their own students abroad to study industrial technology, political systems, and team sports.

One of them, Hiroshi Hiraoka, studied engineering in the US and became obsessed with baseball. When he returned home, he didn't just bring back railroad engineering know-how, he brought back merch: baseball bats, gloves, and balls. He was the country's first baseball fanatic, and he founded Shimbashi Athletic Club, Japan's first independent team.

And then there was Masaoka Shiki, a poet who looked at baseball and thought "This is just modern bushido." His essays used combat terminology to explain



baseball's rules to Japanese audiences. The batting team became attackers and the fielding team defenders.

3:33

Samurai wearing baseball equipment; photos of baseball stadiums; group photo of a baseball team with the text 'Daiichi Kōtō Gakkō'; short Japanese batter and tall American pitcher playing baseball; blue map with a yellow pin on Yokohama overlaid is a photo of a clubhouse and text '1896'; illustration of Japanese baseball players dressed in white and red traveling on a train.

This blending of samurai ethics with baseball fundamentals became known as Yakyū. It emphasized honor and loyalty to the team over individual performance. Shiki's ideas, and the game, caught on.

Japan's higher-level schools, modeled on western preparatory schools, fiercely contested the annual tournament to determine a national champion. One Tokyo school, Ichikō, dominated.

Hoping to improve their game and disprove the stereotype that the "little Japanese" were culturally and physically unable to compete with "six-footed Americans", Ichikō's players challenged an expat American team based in Yokohama.

For five years, the Americans ignored their challenge. Finally, in spring 1896, the foreigners agreed to a game, on their home field. On May 23rd, the Ichikō team, impeccably dressed in white collars and polished shoes, boarded the morning Yokohama bound train, their baseball gear at their side.

4:34

Graphic of a baseball game and crowd cheering with text 'Round 1'; scoreboard with game stats; Japanese baseball players being celebrated as they hold a trophy; baseball game between Japan and the US with the text 'Round 2' followed by text 'Round 3'; illustrations of newspaper articles reporting on baseball games; scoreboard with game stats.

Western spectators jeered and howled when these student athletes dropped pop-ups or slipped on the wet field during warm-ups. But after the first pitch was thrown, the Japanese players regained their focus and humiliated the team, winning 29 to 4. The students returned home to "banzai" cheers. They were national heroes.

A rematch happened a week later. This time, the Yokohama team included sailors from two American ships. Ichikō won again, 32 to 9. One Japanese newspaper applauded the victory, while another delighted in reporting that Ichikō made the Americans look clumsy. English language newspapers downplayed the Japanese victory, claiming that Yokohama's loss was caused by their players inability to practice, as they had daily business to attend to.

A third game was hosted by Ichikō. A team of sailors from the *USS Detroit* hoped to defend the USA's honor. Perhaps the noise of 10,000 rowdy Japanese fans, and the presence of Japanese government officials and American diplomats unnerved them, as they lost 22 to 6.

5:43

Baseball game between Japan and the US; illustration of a face-off with 'V.S.'; nervous Japanese player at bat; scoreboard with game stats; a handshake between American and Japanese baseball players; maps of Japan and the US; print of the Russo-Japanese War; woodblock prints of Japanese officials assembling and modern brick buildings.

A final game occurred on July 4th with the Ichikō nine facing off against an all-star team, consisting of players from the Yokohama Athletic Club and the US Navy, including a shortstop with professional experience. Having just finished their academic exams, the Japanese students were mentally and physically spent. The American team salvaged their reputation, winning 14 to 12, and demonstrating good sportsmanship by shaking the Japanese players hands and giving them a "hip, hip, hooray" before leaving the field.

Finally, Ichikō's players felt as if they were on equal footing with the Americans. And it seems as if Americans agreed. Japanese college teams toured the USA and American college teams toured Japan. The two nations developed mutual respect for each other especially after Japan surprised the world by defeating Russia in 1905 during the Russo-Japanese War, proving that it had modernized its military, government, and society, and established Japan as a great power on the world stage.

**6:48**

Video clips of stadiums and baseball games; graphic of a baseball game and crowd cheering; black and white photos of students in a classroom, workers in a factory, and soldiers in battle; woodblock print of a calvary battle; images of Japanese baseball players and teams; photo of a crowd holding the Rising Sun flag; graphics of baseball equipment and cherry blossom trees.

In less than 50 years, what started out as foreign curiosity with no relevance to Japan, became a national obsession. The Japanese saw something in baseball that they could use to transform their nation, using the sport as a tool of foreign and domestic policy, and a metaphor for the Meiji Restoration. The Japanese took America's game and remixed it with their own traditional Japanese customs and values. The sports rules and emphasis on practice and teamwork helped develop great baseball players. Baseball's principles were equally useful on the factory floor, classroom, and battlefield.

A 1905 song linked Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War to what Ichikō's players had accomplished on the baseball field. *"Ah, for the glory of our baseball club! Ah, for the glitter it has cast! Pray that our martial valor never turns submissive and that our honor will always shine far across the Pacific."*