



Wally Yonamine: The Man Who Changed Japanese Baseball

Robert K. Fitts

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Wally Yonamine was both the first Japanese American to play for an NFL franchise and the first American to play professional baseball in Japan after World War II. This is the unlikely story of how a shy young man from the sugar plantations of Maui overcame prejudice to integrate two professional sports in two countries.

In 1951 the Tokyo Yomiuri Giants chose Yonamine as the first American to play in Japan during the Allied occupation. He entered Japanese baseball when mistrust of Americans was high—and higher still for Japanese Americans whose parents had left the country a generation earlier. Without speaking the language, he helped introduce a hustling style of base running, shaking up the game for both Japanese players and fans. Along the way, Yonamine endured insults, dodged rocks thrown by fans, initiated riots, and was threatened by *yakuza* (the Japanese mafia). He also won batting titles, was named the 1957 MVP, coached and managed for twenty-five years, and was honored by the emperor of Japan. Overcoming bigotry and hardship on and off the field, Yonamine became a true national hero and a member of Japan's Baseball Hall of Fame.

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