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Mike Downey

IN THE WAKE OF THE NEWS

Baseball not just America's game anymore

July 15, 2003

I look around. I see Suzuki and Matsui. I see Soriano and Delgado. I see Lo Duca and Giambi. I see Glaus and Schmidt. I see MacDougal and Donnelly. I see Garciaparra and Renteria. I see Gagne, Halladay, Sexson, Mulder, Vidro, Varitek, Hasegawa and Smoltz.

And I see the time has come for America to call this game by its rightful name:

The International Pastime.

Welcome to the 74th All-Star Game, a rainbow coalition of personalities and nationalities that has just about everything but a southpaw from the North Pole.

I stand listening to Ichiro Suzuki, quite possibly the most popular baseball player on Earth.

"When I was a boy in school," he says, "and there was an All-Star Game, to me it was just something happening way, way out there somewhere."

American League vs. National League? What this boy knew about baseball was that the Hiroshima Carp and Chunichi Dragons were in one league and the Kintetsu Buffaloes and Nippon Ham Fighters were in the other.

Now he is the top vote-getter in our All-Star Game for the third year in a row.

He is not the Babe, not the Mick. He is not a Hammerin' Hank or a Joltin' Joe. He is just plain Ichiro, a hero—a modern-day baseball star, a man from a far-off land.

As is the outfielder Hideki "Godzilla" Matsui, who spends the morning talking about how proud he is to play by Ichiro's side in the American League's outfield.

As is the relief pitcher Shigetoshi Hasegawa, who says that he doesn't need to pitch Tuesday night to make this experience special because "Alex Rodriguez came up and shook my hand. Alex Rodriguez knows who I am. That is all the memory from being here I will need."

Welcome to Chicago, Shig.

It is heartening to see how far America's game has come since men of certain races or from certain places weren't welcome here to play it. When the racists and xenophobes had their way. When the likes of Ty Cobb and Cap Anson could spew their views and go directly to the Hall of Fame, just because we didn't know any better.

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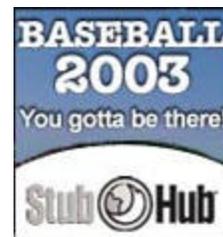
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Today we do, and racial sensitivity rules the day.*

(*With recent exceptions.)

Now, if we could just get the good people of Cleveland to see that a grinning, red-faced Indian on a baseball cap is no different from a grinning Japanese, a grinning Latino or a grinning African-American would be, it would be another leap for mankind.

Or do we need a genuine Indian to come along and become an All-Star and remind everybody that it's not 1903 anymore?

Times change, and we need baseball to keep changing with them. We need somebody in authority to do something to clear White Sox third baseman Buck Weaver's name from the 1919 World Series scandal, not just think about it. To do something about a Hall of Fame reprieve for Shoeless Joe Jackson, who was acquitted, not convicted, in that case's trial.

Night games, expansion to Canada, designated hitters, wild cards ... baseball is ever evolving. It is not afraid to try new things, seek out new civilizations, boldly go where it has not gone before.

This year's winner-take-fall All-Star Game—home-field advantage in October going to whichever league wins Tuesday's game—is baseball's big change for 2003.

Personally, I don't care who wins, American or National.

I will say this much: I wouldn't mind seeing Roger Clemens pitch to Barry Bonds with two outs in the ninth inning and the bases loaded.

But just the sight of men of different cultures, different colors, being here in this game, here in this city, that is all the memory I will need.

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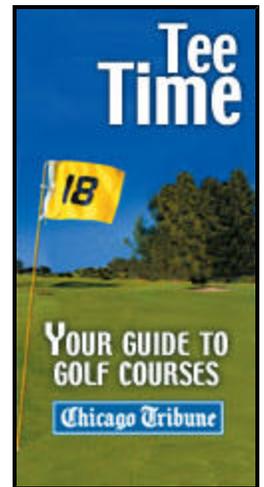
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