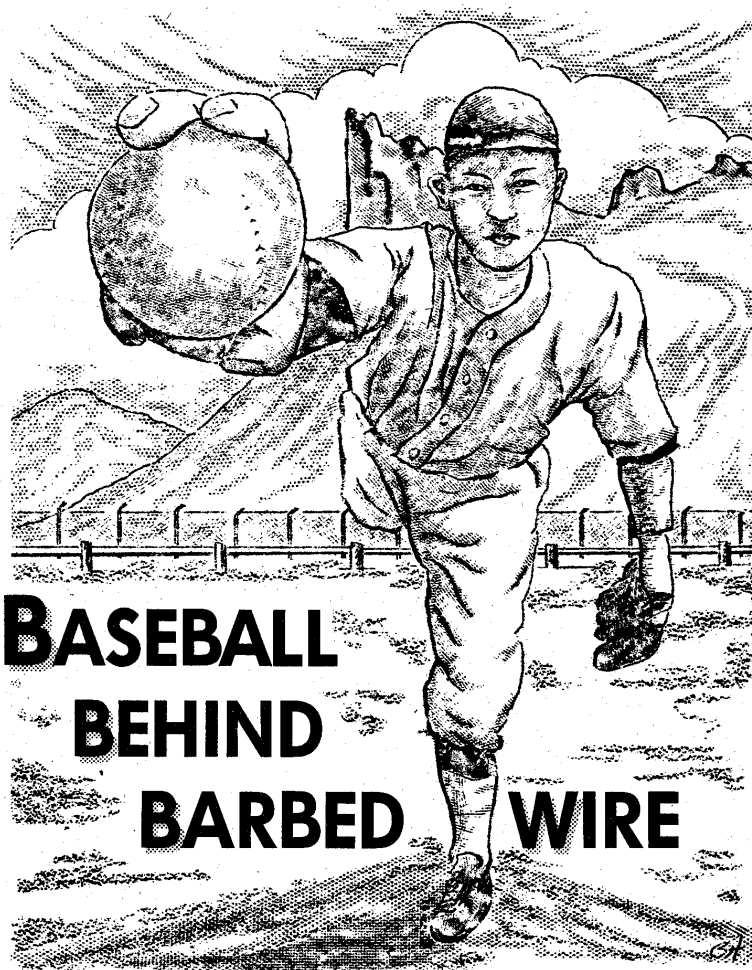


"What did you do in the war, daddy?" For many Japanese-Americans who were wrenched from their normal lives and interned during World War II, the answer was, "We played baseball."

The drawings illustrating this story are from a tattered pamphlet titled *BASEBALL: Tule Lake Center 1944*, the season's records from an internment camp in California.

Jay Feldman, 47, grew up in Brooklyn with the Dodgers. He lives in Davis, California, where he writes for *Sports Illustrated* and is a manager/player for a team in an over-thirty hardball league. He's working on a hitting instruction book for teenagers, due from Simon & Schuster next spring. His last article in *Whole Earth Review* was "Baseball in Nicaragua" (Fall 1987).

—Richard Nilsen



BASEBALL BEHIND BARBED WIRE

BY JAY FELDMAN

IN MAY 1942, Kenichi Zenimura looked out over the barren landscape of the Fresno Assembly Center, and he knew exactly what needed to be done. "Every time my dad went someplace, if there was no baseball park, he'd make one," says Howard Zenimura, 63.

From the second decade of this century, baseball was the most popular recreation in the Japanese-American community, and at five feet tall and 105 pounds, Kenichi Zenimura, "the dean of Nisei baseball," was the most influential figure in the sport. Born in Hiroshima in 1900,

"Zeni," as he was affectionately called, was introduced to baseball as a boy when his family moved to Hawaii. In 1920, he settled in Fresno and played shortstop for the town team; in '24, he organized the first tour of a California team to Japan.

By the 1930s every community had a Nisei (second-generation) team, ardently supported by the Issei (first-generation) immigrants. "The Issei were crazy about baseball," says Pete Mitsui, 76, who played for the San Fernando Aces in the thirties and forties. "It was all community-oriented. The communities didn't intermingle like they do now, you see,

and the ballclub was an important part of the community identity, so they really wanted us to do well."

"There were tremendous rivalries between towns," adds Hugo Nishimoto, 73, who played for and then managed the Newcastle team. "The Issei used to bet a lot of money on those games. If we won, they would take us out to a big dinner."

The outbreak of war changed everything. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which would lead to the evacuation and internment of virtually the entire Japanese-American populations of California, Oregon and Washington, of which approximately two-thirds (77,000) were American citizens.

Most families were given little more than a week to get ready. People sold cars, furniture, refrigerators, and other large articles for a fraction of their worth, taking only money and whatever possessions they could carry with them. The majority of the evacuees were sent to temporary "assembly centers" like that in Fresno — mostly converted county fairgrounds — while the government hastily prepared ten permanent camps.

The transition was abrupt and shattering. For a people whose culture stressed personal decorum and hygiene, and placed a premium on privacy, the indignities of camp life represented an acute aberration. Living quarters — barracks arranged in blocks — were severely cramped. Meals were served in large mess halls; toilets and bathhouses were communal.

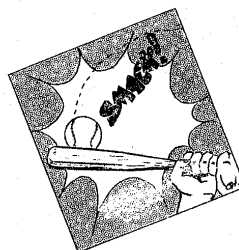
One of the first problems facing the internees was to establish some sense of normalcy in the face of totally disrupted patterns of life. Cultural, recreational and work activities took on tremendous importance. There were schools for the children, and many adults were employed within camp by the government at standard G.I. wages.

Baseball played a major role in the effort to create a degree of continuity. "At the Fresno Assembly Center, there was

nothing there but the fairgrounds, but Zeni had everything for a baseball diamond planned in his mind," recalls Herb "Moon" Kurima, 77, who managed and pitched for the Florin Athletic Club. "He lined up tractors, lumber, carpenters, and we started work on the grounds. Within a week, everything was ready."

Two leagues were formed — a six-team "A" division, and an eight-club "B" circuit. Many of the better draft-age players were already in the Armed Forces, so Kurima and the other managers had to patch together teams from the available talent — aging veterans and inexperienced high-school kids. Through a friend in Sacramento, Kurima sent for his team's uniforms and equipment, which he'd had the foresight to collect and put in storage before evacuation.

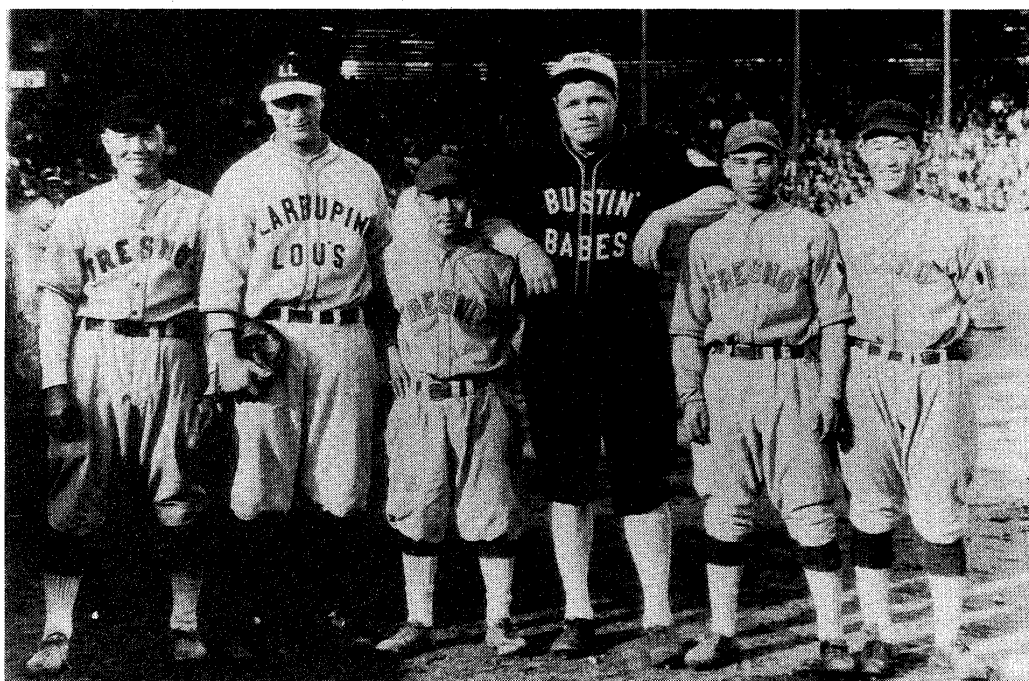
Behind Kurima, whose blazing fastball



Courtesy of Howard Zenimura



Internment-camp teams were made up of old players and high-school kids, since many draft-age men were in the Armed Forces. Kenichi Zenimura was 44 when he caught for the Gila, Arizona team in an All-Star game against Heart Mountain, Wyoming.



Kenichi Zenimura, Nisei baseball hero and master ballpark builder, with Lou Gehrig, Babe Ruth, and his Fresno, California teammates. In the 1930s, professional baseball stars traveled around the U.S., "barnstorming" — playing local teams — in the off-season.

and pinpoint control had made him one of the dominant pitchers in pre-war Nisei baseball, the Florin club quickly established itself as the team to beat, and Kurima, who was still recovering from injuries incurred in a near-fatal auto accident in April 1941, found himself the target of the other managers' dirty tricks.

"Every time Florin had a game against some strong team like Hanford or Bowles, these guys would call a meeting in the afternoon," says Kurima. "It was 100 degrees, and on a game day, I needed to take a rest, but they would hold a meeting to try and tire me out."

Meetings notwithstanding, Kurima won 10 games, as Florin thoroughly dominated the A league, going undefeated in 13 games and, in a contest played before 3,000 spectators (more than half the center's total population), whipped a highly favored, Zenimura-managed all-star team, 7-2, behind Kurima's six-hit pitching.

The lower division title was captured by the Fresno B club, which included the 15-year-old Howard Zenimura and his 13-year-old brother Harvey — both of

whom would later play Japanese big-league ball for the Hiroshima Carp in the fifties — and George "Hats" Omachi, now a scout for the Milwaukee Brewers.

■ IN OCTOBER 1942, the inhabitants of the assembly centers were again uprooted and assigned to one of the ten permanent camps geographically scattered through seven states (California, Arizona, Utah, South Dakota, Wyoming, Colorado, and Arkansas). At every camp, despite characteristically remote locations and inhospitable terrain, one of the first tasks undertaken after resettlement was the building of baseball diamonds.

Most of the group from the Fresno Assembly Center went to Jerome, located on Arkansas swampland. "I was on the clean-up committee, so I was one of the last to leave the Fresno Assembly Center," relates Omachi, 68. "I stayed behind about a month or six weeks. By the time I got to Jerome, they already had a diamond."

At Tule Lake, located on dry lake bottom in northeastern California, volunteers cleared the rocks and seashells from one

area, while Bill Matsumoto, head of the warehouse division, used the food-delivery trucks to haul in dirt from the camp farm.

At Manzanar, in the desert near Death Valley, the teams took turns going up to the hills in a dump truck for decomposed granite, and San Fernando Aces catcher Berry Tamura, who worked for the camp fire department, saw to it that the field was well watered down by conducting frequent fire drills on the diamond.

Nothing compared, however, with the field that Zenimura built in the Arizona desert at Gila River. "As soon as we got to camp my father started looking for a place to build the diamond," recalls Howard Zenimura. "Right near our block was an open space, so we started digging out the sagebrush with shovels, and pretty soon people came by to ask us what we were doing. We told them we were building a ballpark, and then everybody was out there with their shovels clearing that place. When it was all cleared we got a bulldozer and leveled it.

"The fence that surrounded the camp was built of 4x4s strung with barbed wire, so we just took out every other 4x4 till we had enough to build a frame for the backstop. Then we took these long pads that they used to wet down and spread over cement to keep it from drying too fast, and we hung those over the frame to provide a cushion for passed balls, which was very nice. The only catch was, first thing when we went out, we'd have to pick up all the pads and check — you didn't want to go in after a passed ball and find a rattlesnake."

Next they worked on the mound and the infield, scraping the top layer and hand-straining out the rocks and pebbles. They diverted water from a nearby irrigation ditch and flooded the infield to harden and pack it down.

A grandstand was the next project. "We needed lumber," says Harvey Zenimura, now 61. "We were in Block 28 and the lumber yard was way across the other side of the camp. We'd go out there in the middle of the night and get the lumber, lug it all the way out in the sagebrush, bury it in the desert, and go

pick it up later as we needed it. They probably knew what was going on, but nobody said anything."

The graded bleachers had four or five rows, and Zenimura went so far as to delineate individual seats on the planks. "My dad marked the benches with paint," laughs Harvey, who was all-Japan with the Carp in 1955-56. "He drew lines and put numbers. Anybody that donated a lot of money would get a good seat."

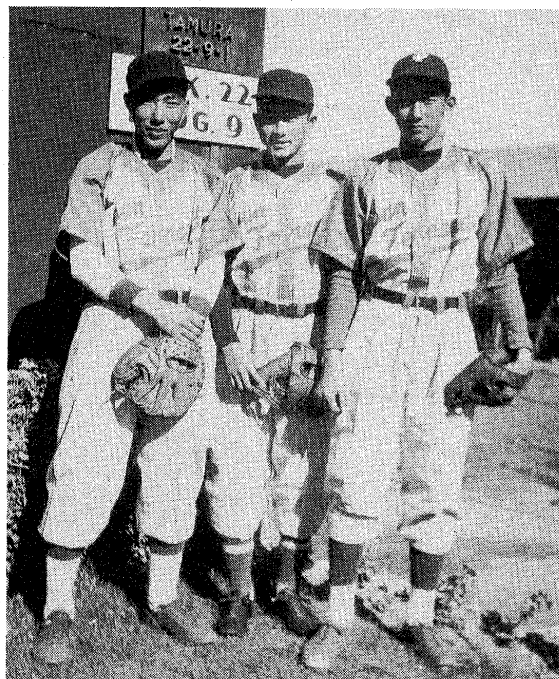
Beyond first and third base, dugouts were excavated so the fans could enjoy good sight lines. More of the cement-curing pads covered the dugouts and bleachers, to provide some shade against the desert sun. The pebbles strained from the infield were spread below the bleachers and on the dugout floors to keep down the dust. For an outfield fence, they planted castor beans at ten-foot intervals and dug a ditch behind them to deliver water. Finally, clumps of Bermuda grass were planted in the outfield, and some plumber friends ran a line all the way from the end of Block 28 to the ballpark for a portable sprinkler system.

Thirty-two teams competed in Gila, where the climate allowed for year-round play. At every game, a collection was taken up, and Zenimura used the proceeds to have baseball equipment shipped from a Fresno sporting-goods dealer. In a 1962 interview, he claimed to have ordered about \$2,000 worth of equipment from Fresno every month!

EVEN THE popularity of baseball in the pre-war Japanese-American community, its prominence in the camps is hardly surprising; while there was organized competition in many sports, including basketball, football, boxing, and softball, none were pursued with the passion and ardor devoted to baseball.

The same creativity that was tapped for the construction of ballfields was used to provide uniforms. "We ordered jerseys from Sears Roebuck, and one of the fellows stenciled in the name," relates the gravel-voiced Nishimoto, who managed the Placer Hillmen to a Tule Lake camp championship in 1943. "But the pants





Even in internment camps, teams managed to improvise authentic baseball uniforms and equipment. Here are the Tamura brothers, Berry, George and Jim, in their San Fernando Aces uniforms, in front of their family's barracks at Manzanar.

were potato sacks that came from the farm. They were heavy cotton, bleached white. Two or three of the ladies sewed them up for us, and they looked real professional, too." Another Tule Lake team, the Wakabas, removed the canvas covers from the government-issue mattresses, and had custom shirts and pants made.

The Issei continued to be a major force behind the scenes — financially and otherwise. "I went to learn sumo wrestling," says Florin's Yosh Tsukamoto, 70. "I got holy hell from the backers. They didn't want me to get hurt. So then I went to learn how to box. One of the guys wanted to put on an exhibition, and about half a dozen Florin guys were in it. When I came to the ring, I saw my dad standing over there. Boy, we all caught hell from the parents. That ended that. Stick to baseball."

As before the war, betting on ballgames was common among the Issei. Berry Tamura, 74, remembers three old men who attended every game at Manzanar and bet so much money that none trusted either of the others to keep the cash, so every inning, a different member of the

trio would hold the stakes.

At the time, the San Fernando Aces were enjoying a winning streak that would lead to the 1943 camp championship. "We were scheduled to play the weakest team in the league, the Sacramento Solons," says the angular Tamura, a retired gardener whose voice rises and falls emphatically when he tells a story. "Well, one of the old men who always bet on us was very happy, and he told everyone he would pay three to one. What he didn't know was that the Solons had recruited a pitcher from Japan named Horimoto, and he was hotter than a firecracker that day. We couldn't touch him, and we lost. And that old man had to pay three to one. He was white; he wouldn't eat anything. He looked like he'd been kicked by a horse."

IN MID-1943, thousands of camp residents were once again displaced as a result of a loyalty questionnaire administered to all internees. The two key questions involved willingness to swear allegiance to the United States, forswear allegiance to Japan, and serve in the U.S. Armed Forces. All who answered no to those questions were transferred to Tule Lake; any Tule Lake residents deemed loyal were relocated to other camps.

The loyalty test was designed to identify and isolate the pro-Japan elements, but it also caused substantial anguish for many others. "My father had been classified '4C-Enemy Alien'," says Isao Fujimoto, 56, who was nine years old when his family moved from Heart Mountain (Wyoming) to Tule Lake. "He was not allowed to become a U.S. citizen, so he couldn't renounce his allegiance to the Japanese government, because if he did, he would have had no citizenship at all. So he was sent to Tule Lake; my family chose to stick together, and we all went."

Many stayed at Tule Lake for similar reasons. Says Nishimoto, "My wife's father was there, and he was an old man, and my mother and stepfather were there, living in the next barrack, and I didn't want to leave them there alone, so we stayed. There were a lot of people there who were not disloyal, but because of family, they stayed in Tule Lake."

Many individuals wrestled with the loyalty test as a matter of conscience, and answered no on principle. "It was a difficult decision," explains Matsumoto, 72, who left Tule Lake and went to Amache, in Colorado. "Here your folks are sitting behind barbed wire, and they're asking if you'd go fight. It was hard."

For Berry Tamura, who had been drafted before evacuation, the loyalty questions were absurd. "I was all ready to go in the army," he says, recalling the irony. "I had my physical and everything, but before the time came, we had to go to Manzanar. As soon as we got there, they reclassified us as aliens. So when the question came up, I said the hell with it. I really shouldn't have felt that way about it, but you know how kids are."

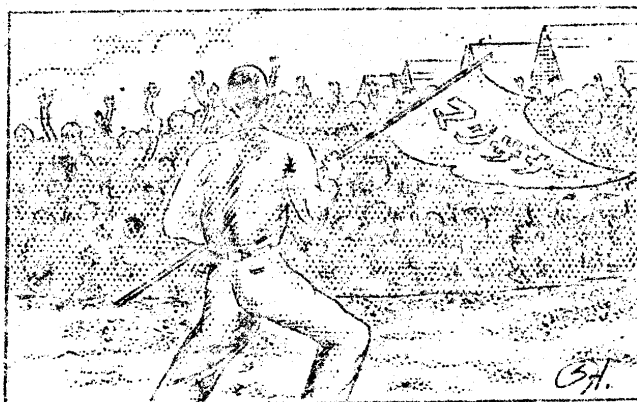
Berry was assigned to Tule Lake, and the whole Tamura family went with him, enduring the undeserved stigma of disloyalty — a stigma which, in a culture that venerates allegiance, carried a heavy personal weight and, to this day, still causes concern. "We went to Tule Lake as a family," says Berry's brother Jim, 67, a soft-spoken man, making the point with quiet emphasis.

With its original population mix, Tule Lake had been a tense environment from the beginning. One large segment of the camp — from in and around California's Sacramento Valley — was dark-complected from farming in the intense Valley sun; the other portion of the population consisted of people from Oregon and Washington.

"It was a strange mixture and we didn't hit it off too well socially," says Matsumoto. "They'd call us black Californians, or something, and a fight would start. So we weren't on very good terms. More than one time we got chased out of the ballpark because the fans got so carried away. The cardinal rule that we broke was that we would talk to the fans. There would be a close play, and one of them would say, 'He was out,' and one of us would say something like, 'No he

wasn't, you dumbbell,' which would start a fight. They would come after you with bats. There were times when we just had to go home — run like hell."

With segregation, the population of Tule Lake swelled. Now, in addition to the strained relations among the original inhabitants, there was also the enormous tension between the pro-Japan faction and the loyal American group, all of which made for a highly volatile milieu. Leading the pro-Japan bloc were the Kibei-Nisei who had been born in the U.S. but educated in Japan — who were not only strongly partisan to the Rising



Sun, but particularly rabid baseball fans.

The eyes of the outside world were now on the segregated camp. On May 2, 1944, under the headline "Tulelake [sic] Turns Out For Baseball Season," the following article appeared on page three of the *San Francisco Chronicle*:

Baseball season opened at the Tulelake internment camp on the heels of ceremonies celebrating the birthday of the Emperor of Japan over the weekend, the War Relocation Authority announced yesterday.

Ceremonies Saturday were brief and the day passed without incident, according to the WRA. The Tulelake baseball convention was opened by Project Director Ray Best, who threw out the first ball for the opening game. More than half the 17,000 resi-

It takes more than players to make a team. Competition and partisan team support increased after the transfer of "disloyal" individuals to California's Tule Lake camp. The Manzanar team had a large following, and its fans organized a rooting section with banners and cheerleaders.



Courtesy of George Omachi

What must it have felt like to be a Japanese-American ballplayer, from California, playing in Arkansas, at the height of World War II? The 1943 champs at the Jerome, Arkansas camp were from the Florin, California Athletic Club. At bat is George Omachi, today a scout for the Milwaukee Brewers. The catcher is Ko Kuwada, the umpire Dick Kunishima, and Moon Kurima is on deck.

dents of the center were present for the game, it was announced.

There were 15 "major-league" and 23 "minor-league" teams for the 1944 season. There were block teams (mostly B-level), home-town clubs, and squads from the other camps which formed after the move to Tule Lake. The newcomers from Jerome, Manzanar and Poston (Arizona) all fielded A-league clubs named for the camps they'd left behind.

Not surprisingly, baseball became more competitive after segregation, and the tensions which plagued the camp spilled over onto the diamond. In a crucial play-off game between Poston and Manzanar, the pressure came to a head and exploded.

As usual for any game involving the Manzanar team, there was a better-than-average turnout. "Our fans had an organized rooting section led by Kibeis," says Berry Tamura. "They had the flags, just like you see in Japanese stadiums today. We sure drew the crowds; they all wanted to see our cheerleading team."

The Manzanar fans also included a prominent group of burly fishermen from the harbor community of San Pedro who

had a well-deserved reputation as a hot-headed bunch, always ready to mix things up.

With Jim Tamura pitching for Manzanar, the score was knotted at 5-5 after nine innings. In the top of the fourteenth, Poston broke through for three runs. In the Manzanar half, with a runner on second and two out, shortstop George Tamura — younger brother of Jim and Berry — got a hit, advancing the runner to third. The next batter belted a fly ball into the gap in left field.

Nishimoto was umpiring at first base. "The leftfielder went up and jumped," he relates, "and the ball was deflected off his glove, but the centerfielder, who was backing him up, caught it. Red Tanaka, the third-base umpire, and I both raised our hands, 'Out!' Oh, boy! The Manzanar fans couldn't take it, and they started storming out on the field."

The Manzanar rooters claimed the ball was trapped. George Tamura, 64, describes the ensuing melee: "This fellow who was a real close friend of ours, he went after the whole Poston team himself, right into their dugout. He got hit over the head with a chair. I saw his dad

going in there, pulling him out with a bloody head. That really started it. All these big bruisers came out of the stands with fire in their eyes. We were in the infield, and we held everybody back."

In the pandemonium, the umpires and the Poston centerfielder had to be escorted back to their blocks. "After things settled down a bit, the player who claimed he caught the ball, he came to our block with his father and mother and apologized to my friend's family," continues George. "After that he quit baseball. Later on, we asked our friend why he went into the dugout like that, and he told us he felt sorry for Jim, that Jim was pitching such a good game, he hated to see him get robbed of a win."

The incident is briefly mentioned in *BASEBALL: Tule Lake Center 1944*, a 74-page, camp-published book about the '44 season: "True rabidness of the local diamond fandom was unveiled during this colorful brawl which saw differences of opinion voiced by the spectators and fists fly between a few of the more rabid baseball followers. This incident gained center-wide recognition as well as the attention of out-of-town newspapers."

On the less tempestuous side, it should be noted that the four Tomooka brothers led the Guadalupe team — which had transferred basically intact from Gila — to the Taiseiyo (Pacific) League Championship, and went on to take three straight from the Tule Lake Nippons, winners of the Taiheiyo (Atlantic) Division title, for the overall camp crown.

AFTER THE WAR, the Japanese-American community faced rebuilding from scratch. "Until about 1950, life was very hard," says Fujimoto, who teaches applied behavioral science at the University of California at Davis, "and baseball continued to play an important role — not only as a recreational outlet for the younger people, but in allowing a lot of the older people to come back together. They could take a Sunday afternoon and go to a ballgame.

"My experience playing and watching baseball in camp helped me get resettled because I knew so much about the game.



I was in seventh grade when I got out of camp. I met a lot of kids my own age who played, but they didn't know strategy. They didn't know how to warm up; they didn't know how to do infield practice. That was all stuff I knew very well. The school I went to had a team, and the principal saw right away that I knew quite a bit, and he put me on the team. I was a shrimp, a foot shorter than a lot of these kids, but I was able to make the team because of what I knew about baseball from camp."

In August 1988, President Reagan signed a Congressional bill granting a redress payment of \$20,000 to every living survivor of the internment camps. In October 1990, 48 years after FDR issued the internment order, the first payments were made.

More than forty years after the closing of the camps, many internees point to baseball as one of the few bright spots of a dark time. Matsumoto: "I think baseball was the main salvation against the loneliness of the camps. More than anything else, it got people together. If it hadn't been for baseball, it would have been unbearable." ■

In America, in Japan, and in the internment camps, baseball is a community-centered ritual. "Baseball was the main salvation against the loneliness of the camps. It got people together. If it hadn't been for baseball, it would have been unbearable."