Little/Big Ball: 
The Vancouver Asahi Baseball Story

Shannon Jette
University of British Columbia

On May 15, 2002, the Vancouver Asahi, a Japanese-Canadian baseball team that dominated the amateur senior men’s league during the 1930s, was recognized in a ceremony held before a Toronto Blue Jay’s game. It had been sixty-one years since the Asahi’s last league championship, and only four of the original players were present at the ceremony. Most of the others were deceased or unable to make the trip. Of the 17,000 fans gathered in the stands at the SkyDome, it is likely that many had never heard of the Vancouver Asahi. Indeed, until the recent ceremony held in their honor, and their subsequent induction into the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame in 2003 and the British Columbia Sports Hall of Fame in 2005, the story of the Asahi baseball team had largely slipped beneath the collective Canadian consciousness instead.

In this article, I share the Asahi story, describing how the team won numerous championships and brought a sense of pride to the Japanese-Canadian community at a time when this group faced a great deal of discrimination in their everyday lives. I begin with a broad discussion of the social conditions and obstacles faced by Japanese-Canadians living in Vancouver during the first several decades of the 1900s, illustrating the manner in which the Japanese-Canadian community was constructed as “Other” in a predominantly Caucasian British Columbia. In this context, I describe the Asahi’s ascension through the ranks of the amateur senior men’s league in Vancouver during the years between World War I and II. Woven throughout the story is an examination of the physical culture of baseball (and more specifically the Asahi’s distinct style of “brainball”), as well as a discussion of the ways in which Asahi baseball appears to have mediated relationships both within the Japanese-Canadian community and between the Japanese-Canadian and white community. I conclude with a discussion of the fate of the Asahi team with the onset of World War II.

In addition to paying tribute to the team, a central aim in my discussion is to illustrate that for the Vancouver Asahi, what occurred on the field was inextricably linked to issues around assimilation, resistance, ethnicity, and identity formation for members of the Japanese-Canadian community as a whole. Indeed, to view “sport” as simply a game or merely a “physical activity engaged in for pleasure” (per Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary) is to ignore its multilayered and complex nature. Colin Howell explains in the following excerpt.

Jette is affiliated with the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada.
Over the years, Canadian sport has been a collective exercise...it has involved struggle, conflict, and resistance, as well as attempts to exercise social control and maintain hegemonic authority. At times sport has involved struggles for liberation, and contributed to self-determination and self-awareness, and provided a way for disadvantaged constituencies and cultural groups to assert the values of their communities. At other times sport has reproduced the authority of dominant influences, provided opportunities for capitalists motivated mainly by concerns for profit, and underscored and reproduced masculine authority and power even while providing women new opportunities to compete.4

Sport has also been recognized as a site of identity negotiation. For Jewish immigrants living in the Ward (a ghetto of Toronto) during the first four decades of the twentieth century, for instance, sport confirmed a meaningful Jewish-Canadian identity, while also promoting a more widespread social acceptance into the dominant culture.5 A similar link between sport and assimilation is revealed in Vertinsky’s discussion of male Jews’ participation (or attempted participation) in German gymnastics clubs during the late nineteenth century, as these sporting organizations were perceived to embody the ideal German male.6 Joseph Reaves notes that baseball, in particular, is

an important tool of cultural hegemony and a powerful weapon to fight that hegemony. It can promote acculturation and assimilation, or it can encourage defiance and self-assertion. The ways the game spread; the ways it was, or wasn’t adapted; and the reception or rejection it received, all serve to highlight cultural differences or similarities.7

Thus, this article will contribute to a body of literature that examines the socially significant nature of sporting experiences in the lives of individuals and groups of individuals, and that also considers the role of sport within a larger societal context—on both the local and the global level.

It should be acknowledged that the themes I discuss and the conclusions that I draw are merely my interpretation of the Asahi story.9 The game of baseball likely meant different things to various members of the community, and, as such, the Japanese-Canadian experience with baseball was not a universal one. Furthermore, what is not discussed is of importance. The Asahi story is largely about the male members of the Japanese-Canadian community. The female population was relegated to the margins of the baseball diamond, their voices heard only from the sidelines as they cheered for the male members. Denied the opportunity to experience the physicality of the game, the female population is mostly silent in the Asahi story, and as Foucauldian scholar David Armstrong explains, “[s]ilence [is] not the opposite of discourse, but another facet of it.”9

The Social Construction of Race: Japanese-Canadians as “Other”

Although records of Japanese immigration to British Columbia were not kept until 1905, it is believed that the first immigrants arrived in the late 1870s or early 1880s.10 Likely drawn to British Columbia by urban overpopulation and rural