

New Title of World Champion

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Japan 10-Cuba 6

Japan, and Its Fans, Embrace New Title of World Champion



By JACK CURRY

SAN DIEGO, March 20 -The white flags with the solitary red circles were scattered around Petco Park, growing more and more prominent with each inning. Every time Japan scored another run or made another slick play Monday night, the fans raised those cherished flags, shook them and waved them. Then they waited.

Could this drama really become a dream come true? Could Japan really be the class of the World Baseball Classic? The fluttering flags offered the answer. They almost never stopped flying, the Japanese almost never stopped repelling Cuba during a 10-6 victory, and they snatched the championship of this inaugural event.

So Japan, which qualified for the semifinals only after the United States was surprisingly eliminated with a loss to Mexico, ended Cuba's refreshing ride through the tournament. The Cubans were almost not allowed to compete, but they were given permission, and the mysterious men in red performed admirably against some teams loaded with major league players.

But the Cubans could not solve Daisuke Matsuzaka, who stifled them on one run over four innings, and they could not overcome Japan. Matsuzaka, who throws a

94-mile-an-hour fastball and has a slight hesitation in his delivery, surrendered a leadoff home run and then retired 12 of the next 15 batters. He had three of Japan's five victories and was named the tournament's most valuable player.

"Well, it was my first experience to pitch in the game with the world championship on the line," Matsuzaka said. "I was going to feel a lot of pressure, as this is something you wouldn't be able to buy. But I did not feel much of it once I go to the mound."

The Cubans trailed by 4-0 and by 6-1, but they scored two in the sixth and two more in the eighth on Frederick Cepeda's home run to crawl to one run down. As one fan held a "Cuba Campeon" sign, Akinori Otsuka of the Texas Rangers emerged to get two crucial outs in the eighth. Then Japan scored four times in the ninth, and Cuba's chances for a fantastic finish fizzled in front of 42,696 fans.



Otsuka struck out Yulieski Gourriel to end the game, causing the Japanese players to fling their gloves and hug each other between the mound and first base. The players formed a circle, lifted the legendary Sadaharu Oh, their 65-year old manager, off the ground and tossed him in the air --- a tradition the Japanese follow after winning a title.

"I thought I would never, never get a chance to manage a team like this," Oh said.

After Manager Higinio Velez decided Ormari Romero was dependable enough to start perhaps the most important game in Cuban baseball history, he inexplicably replaced Romero after only 23 pitches. Romero permitted two infield singles and a walk to the first four batters to fill the bases and, suddenly, he was gone.

The Cubans have had relievers warming up in the first inning in other games, but this seemed like a hasty decision. Romero was clearly irked about being replaced. He walked behind the mound and waved his hand at Jose Elosegui, the pitching coach. Vicryohandry Odelin, who looks and pitches like Tom Gordon's twin, followed Romero.

Odelin could have started, but the Cubans skipped him because he allowed three

home runs in a 6-3 loss to Japan in the 2004 Athens Olympics. Odelin did not give up any homers to Japan this time, but he did not come close to getting out of the delicate situation, either. Odelin plunked Hitoshi Tamura in the elbow with his fourth pitch to force in Japan's first run. After a strikeout, Odelin walked Michihiro Ogasawara on a close 3-2 pitch to push in the second run. Toshiaki Imae followed by slapping a slider for a two-run single that that gave Japan a 4-0 lead.

When Eduardo Paret smashed a leadoff home run for the Cubans, he pumped his fist rounding first. Maybe the Cubans could immediately erase the deficit. Well, maybe not. Matsuzaka allowed three more hits through the fourth.

Japan scored two runs in the fifth for a 6-1 cushion, but Cuba rebounded with two in the sixth. The Cubans had runners on first and third with one out, but Shunsuke Watanabe induced Yoandy Garlobo into a double play.

When organizers first applied for a license for Cuba to participate, the Treasury Department denied the request because the Cubans would have received American money. That would have violated the United States' trade embargo against Cuba.

The organizers applied for a second license that guaranteed Cuba would not receive money. Five weeks after the denial, President Bush ordered his staff to settle the issue, and a license was granted.

Under tournament regulations, every team except Cuba received at least 1 percent of the net profits. Those percentages rose as teams advanced, with Japan receiving 10 percent as the champion. The money that Cuba would have received will be donated to charity.

Despite having only two major leaguers, Japan won the tournament. Despite having no major leaguers, Cuba finished second. The United States feels it has the best players in the world. In this tournament, that was untrue. Japan, as the flying flags showed, was the class of this classic.