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Psychological Consulting with Baseball Players in Japan

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In

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Introduction

Baseball is one of Japan's most popular and successful sports. After the sport was introduced from America in 1872, a professional league was established in 1936, divided into two divisions in 1950, and continues to thrive in the modern era. The Japanese national team has won two World Baseball Classic titles, in 2006 and 2009, three medals from the five Olympic Games in which baseball featured, and has dominated Asian baseball, having won 17 of the 26 Asian Championships contested. As of March 2013, Japan was ranked third in the world behind Cuba and America.

The world of Japanese baseball is steeped in a traditional system whereby coaches train their players in the same manner in which they were trained themselves. This time-honoured training practice is a reflection of traditional Japanese culture and can be found in numerous disciplines

from martial arts to fine arts, where a master would teach his apprentice the skills and techniques that were learned from his master. This teaching legacy cycle repeats generationally as the art is passed down to the next generation of artist. Such training practices are deeply rooted in Japanese sports, where use of new coaching methods is often considered to be a show of disrespect towards the tradition of the sport, even if it is a western sport introduced to Japan. With the prevalence of this culturally-ingrained teaching tradition, introducing other sports science methods to Japanese coaches and athletes is often not easy to do.



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view video:
*History of
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Nowadays, with access to global information readily available, Japanese athletes and coaches have the ability to study and gather information about different training practices from around the world. Armed with knowledge of what sports in other countries are doing to enhance performance, there are times when athletes want to try new training methods, but often their coaches are wary because they hold the view that a new training method is disrespectful to the long-standing tradition of the sport. On the other hand, there are times when it is the coaches who are willing to seek new practical solutions for their athletes to improve their performance, but the athletes are unwilling to cooperate because they feel strongly that it defies the culture and tradition of the sport. This never-ending cycle of maintaining and honouring the tradition of a sport has hindered Japanese coaches and athletes from looking beyond tradition and culture to seek practical, science-based solutions to improve performance.

Rarely does an opportunity arise where both coaches and athletes are willing participants in a training program that addresses the psychological aspects of a particular sport in Japan. It can only happen when a sports team decides to take a bold step beyond the strongly-held cultural traditions of a sport to become more open and receptive to new training methods. One sport that decided to take that initial giant step was baseball.



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In Japan, the history of baseball is strongly influenced by *bushido* (the way of the samurai warrior) and *budo* (Japanese martial arts). Although baseball is a Western sport introduced to Japan, it reflects the essence of the samurai days from former times. Today, many coaches and players use the word *yakyu-do*, or literally “the way of baseball”, which categorises and aligns the sport with Japanese martial arts such as *kendo* (the way of the sword), or *judo* (the way of passiveness). Predominant in traditional Japanese martial arts is the idea of *konjo*. Loosely translated into English as “guts”, it actually has a deeper meaning that encompasses additional nuances including high physical endurance, courage under adversity, and the tenacity to face pain and hardship for the good of the team. As with other sports in Japan, there are many generations of baseball coaches and players who have been strongly ingrained with these *konjo* remnants from the samurai warrior class. Hence, introduction of western training ideas is often viewed with suspicion and is usually rejected before it is even applied (Kozuma, 2009).

My involvement with baseball started in an indirect manner when I was asked to be part of a program that evaluated the fitness level of players. In 1986, a professional baseball team in Japan decided to incorporate a post-season physical fitness test for all of its players, and I was asked to be part of the evaluation team. The team’s athletic trainer requested that I contribute to the psychological fitness of the players by evaluating and analysing the players’ psychological aptitudes towards the sport. I utilised a Japanese standardised sport psychology measure that was available at that time, known as the Taikyo Motivation Inventory for Sport (Matsuda, 1981). This was the first time that a sport psychologist or a mental training consultant had become involved with a professional baseball team in Japan. I remained involved with the team every year for their post-season physical fitness test for next six years.

In the 1990s, four other professional teams became interested in learning how to apply mental training skills and techniques for their players. I conducted mental training seminars specifically designed for professional baseball teams during their pre-season and post-season camps as well as during the baseball season. In the 2000s the interest of mental training in Japanese baseball grew to the point where several professional teams considered offering a full-time position to a mental training consultant. Due to the transient nature of sudden changes in the coaching staff or team owners, the full-time positions never quite materialised but, even without access to a full-time mental training consultant, the interest in applying mental training skills to professional baseball teams never waned.

In the next section, I provide examples of the mental training program and the sport psychology consultations that I have provided to professional baseball teams in Japan. Although the basic steps of my mental training program are the same, the program is adaptable to fit the needs of a particular baseball team or player.

Case Study #1



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In 1997, the general manager of a professional baseball team asked if I could give a seminar to a minor league team during their spring camp. After the initial seminar, I was approached by one of the coaches who thought that their major league division should also start a mental training program and asked me to give a talk to their major league players as well.

From this introduction to mental training, I was able to conduct mental training seminars from 1997-2000 for every spring and fall training camp held by this professional baseball for their minor league division. I had a 3 to 7 day schedule to work with the team during each camp. At that time, many coaches and players were intrigued about mental training and the team was open and receptive to study and learn all they could about mental training.

During the first year, the head coach of the minor league team initially selected four specific players to be involved with the mental training program in order to enhance their performances. As interest grew, eventually all of the players on the minor league team participated in the mental training program. Interest about mental training grew among the coaching staff as well. One coach, who was particularly interested in learning more about mental training, would sometimes invite me and other coaches to his home to further discuss the application of mental training for the whole team.

I worked with the minor league team every week. I would visit their ballpark and observe their morning practices as well as their afternoon official games. During practices, I observed their warming-up routines and their practice sessions. I talked with the players and gave advice on psychological skills that they could readily use in the field. I would especially check the players' facial expressions, attitudes, and emotions they exhibited towards their practice session as they performed their warm-up routine. I videotaped them for feedback analysis and also to show them their demeanour before and during the warm-up routine. If there were any opportunities to speak to the team members individually, I would talk with the players and coaches on the ball ground during practice time.

video feedback
analysis

There are three reasons why I observed the players both during practice and during the actual game. The first reason is so that a comparison of their psychological aptitude and behaviours during practice and during a game could be made. Secondly, I observed the eyes, face, demeanour, and actions of the players during the practice and the game in order to infer any changes in their state of mind. Any emotional or psychological issues or concerns that are evident during practice are often also seen during the game. Thirdly, I videotaped and analysed the players' pre-performance routines in order to show them what routine actions they did or

what nervous movements they made, such as repeatedly removing their cap, tugging on their uniforms, or swinging the bat a set number of times before signalling to the pitcher that they are ready. Through these video recordings, it was often revealed that for some players, their pre-performance routines during the game and during practice were inconsistent or completely different. I would show the players the video of a particular day of practice or game at our nightly seminars, allowing the players to share and discuss their feelings, attitudes, and state of mind during a particular play. To encourage camaraderie with the players so that they felt at ease to approach me with their concerns, I would eat with the players in the dining hall in order to increase communication and to lower any affective filter that might prevent players from being open and honest with me about their game.

After the initial seminar for this team, the original four minor league baseball players continued to attend a 3-hour mental training workshop every week for an entire year. The players were assigned two textbooks and two workbooks for their workshops. One of the textbooks used was a mental training program targeted for coaches (Kozuma, 1995, 2003) and the other book was a Japanese translation of a baseball mental training program for American Major League teams (Ravizza & Hanson, 1995, 1997). The workbooks include step-by-step mental training instructions, with the first workbook designed as a general introduction to mental training and the second workbook especially designed for baseball players. The players would fill out the worksheets found in the workbooks for self-reflection, self-evaluation, and self-study.

At the end of the first season, members of the major league team also started to attend a mental training seminar during their fall camp. At this camp, all of the players used the same two textbooks and two workbooks that I had used for the original minor league players. The team continued to study mental training for the next four years. This was the longest duration for any Japanese professional baseball team to actively apply mental training to their program as an official part of their training. As a result, by year four, the major league team, which was usually ranked at the bottom of their league, won the championship for that season.



Case Study #2

More recently, there was a case of another team that also requested my services for psychological consultation and advice on mental training. For this team, I was able to work with them a total of 16 times. With one of my mental training staff members, we administered the Diagnostic Inventory of Psychological Competitive Ability for Athletes (DIPCA.3; Tokunaga, 1996) to test the players. In addition, a survey was given to the players to answer questions for self-analysis and evaluation of their psychological aptitude. The first administration of DIPCA.3 was given a week before the spring camp.



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We were able to analyse the data from all 72 minor and major league players from this team. Results of the psychological testing and the survey were presented and explained to all the players and coaches of the team as feedback. An example of the results from the psychological test can be found in Figure 1 (see p.10). After the initial seminar on the first day of spring camp, a special room was designated as the mental training room and from the pool of 72 players, 15 players (21%) came to us to ask for individual mental training consultations.

Around this time, a certification licensing process was introduced in Japan for mental training. As certified mental training consultants, one of my mental training support staff and I worked with the 15 players and others for a total of 10 days during spring camp. After spring camp, we also worked with the whole minor league team another 13 times during the year.

We would fly early Saturday morning to the team's practice location to visit the team and we would stay with the team all day. We talked with the players during practice individually whenever an opportunity was available, such as in the locker room, in the weights room, in the food service area, in the athletic trainer's room, on the bench in the dugout, or on the field. Many coaches, athletic trainers and other specialist coaches would also talk with us on the field during their practice session as well. In addition, we were given permission to be available to the players during the actual games. Some of the major league players from the same franchise also contacted me and requested private consultations. The concerns of one particular major league player were based on the data from his DIPCA.3 analysis that he received as feedback from the introductory seminar. He asked for advice on how he could control pressure, what he could do to focus better on the game, and how he could set aside negative reactions with positive thinking during the game.

For this particular player, I introduced a pre-performance routine that he should perform consistently and taught him some breathing control techniques that he could use while on the field during a game.

pre-performance routine

The breathing control techniques were practiced every day as part of a relaxation program. I encouraged him to perform his breathing control techniques during batting practice so that his breathing rhythm and timing were the same in practice as during the game. The pre-performance routine I recommended started from the dugout. First, he would grab his bat and do his usual warm-up swings. When he entered the on-deck circle, he visualised an image of successfully hitting the ball. As he moved towards the batter box, he did stretching exercises as he was walking. He always entered the batter box with his right foot, prepared his stance for hitting the ball and then took a deep breath. He then stepped back, swung the bat again, and tapped the home plate twice. Finally, he would swing the bat for a third time, take another deep breath and prepare his stance to receive the pitch.

By mid-season, a second administration of the DIPCA.3 and the survey occurred with all players in order to evaluate improvements in psychological ability through mental training. Post-season, both the major and minor teams had a combined fall training camp together, and the DIPCA.3 and survey were administered for a third time. A comparison of the three test results was shared with all involved as feedback during their off-season and before the start of the spring training camp in preparation for the upcoming new season.

The minor team division in Japanese baseball is a preparatory educational and training stage in professional baseball that grooms inexperienced athletes to become more skilful and proficient baseball players so that they can be promoted to the major league division. The minor league is comprised of promising young players from high school, college, semi-professional, and independent professional baseball teams who were selected to start their professional career in the minor leagues in hope of becoming a major league player one day. Once in the minor league program, the young players were often mentored and coached by the major league team's coaches. Given my understanding that the world of baseball in Japan is strongly influenced by traditional Japanese training methods, whereby coaches use the techniques and psychological factors from their own experiences as professional baseball players to teach the new crop of



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players, I was always cognisant that my approach to the introduction of a mental training program needed to be an integration of the old traditional coaching methods with new ideas, skills, and techniques from mental training.



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On the first day of spring camp during the first year that we started working with the team, we conducted a 1-hour mental training seminar to introduce our mental training program to all of the coaches and players of the minor league team. The introduction included an explanation of basic psychological skills to the players and coaches, such as goal-setting, relaxation, psyching-up, visualisation, concentration and focus, positive thinking, self-talk, communication and mental preparation for baseball. Participants at the seminar were issued two textbooks and the same two self-study workbooks. The difference this time was that one of

the textbooks was an introductory book on mental training that targeted athletes, rather than coaches, for performance enhancement (Kozuma, 2002).

For the next few days at spring camp, we were able to observe their small group practice situations as well as the whole team practice. As a result, we discovered that mental preparation was an issue for many of the players. Many of the participants communicated with us that the pressure to compete and be selected to enter the major league team was often overwhelming. They especially felt pressured to maintain outstanding batting statistics because it reflected to the coaches their ability to perform at the major league level. The players felt that they did not know how to control their anxiety when they were faced with pressure to perform their task well. Since their coaches were not familiar with any self-control skills or techniques, the players were not given any guidance or advice on what they could do. The coaches and players acknowledged that when faced with pressure, they had to develop and devise their own style of self-control without any knowledge of sport psychology or any other psychological methods that might have been effective for them.

Through our work, we were able to help the players establish psychological skills, which included visualisation, concentration and focus, relaxation, and psyching-up techniques. The players continued to practice the mental training program even after they were promoted to the major league level. At the end of the first year after their promotion, their team won the major league championship. In addition, the team was able to recapture the championship again during the following season.



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Mental Training Program for Baseball

I have now conducted many seminars, workshops, fieldwork, and consultations sessions with various professional baseball teams in Japan. The mental training program that I designed is tailored specifically for baseball in Japan and it is most effective when everyone involved with the team supports the mental training program. Because of this, the mental training program consists of an introductory seminar and workshop that is open not only to the players, but also for the coaches, logistical staff, and other associates of the team.

Depending on the situation and the needs of a particular team, the seminars and workshops that I conduct are about 4-16 hours long held over a 1-2 day period. The purpose of the seminar is to provide a beginner's level of mental training to all the players and to evaluate their psychological aptitude through testing and a survey.

Before the start of my seminars, all participants are administered the DIPCA.3 test (Tokunaga, 1996). This test consists of 52 items designed to assess 12 psychological factors associated with sports; namely, patience, fighting spirit, achievement motivation, motivation to win, self-control, relaxation, concentration, self-confidence, decision-making, prediction, judgment, and cooperation. Results are consolidated into a total score, which represents an athlete's psychological aptitude presented visually in the form of a web chart (see Figure 1).

All of the participants received the results of their DIPCA.3 as feedback at the beginning of the seminar with a detailed explanation of their personal data concerning their overall psychological aptitude, as well as their strong and weak points.



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An example of the DIPCA.3 results for a professional baseball player can be found in Figure 1. The total possible score for DIPCA.3 is 240 points and a benchmark of 200 points is used as a baseline score for an athlete in any sport. An athlete who scores above 220 points is considered to have the aptitude or potential to be very successful at the championship level of their sport. Scores for the 12 factors are plotted on a web graphic so that it is easy to recognise areas that may need attention by the athletes and by the mental training consultants. The results from a psychologically well-balanced athlete will resemble a round ball. Indentations in the round figure represent weakness or concerns of the athletes. In the case of this particular baseball player, he has always maintained a very high level of motivation to win throughout the year; however, as seen from the blue (darkest) lines, representing the initial administration of DICPCA.3, areas that need improvement could be found in the other 11 factors. Based on his results, a personalised mental training program was designed that would target and improve problematic areas for him. As the baseball player participated in the program, his scores for the subsequent DIPCA.3 showed a clear improvement, especially in the areas that previously had the lowest scores. His initial DIPCA.3 graph results, which resembled a jagged rock, filled out into a more rounded figure.

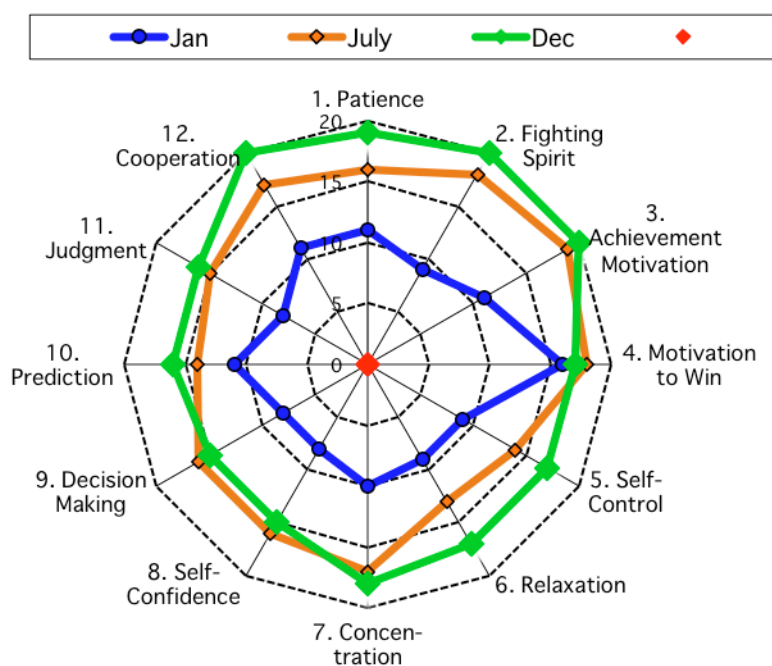


Figure 1. Results of the Diagnostic Inventory of Psychological Competitive Ability for Athletes (DIPCA.3) for a professional baseball player during the pre-season, mid-season, and post-season periods.

The introductory seminar presents the players with background information about mental training. An explanation is provided to the players on why psychological skills are effective and important for their sport. An overview of the history of mental training programs from around the world is included, and the experiences of other sport teams and athletes in Japan who have incorporated mental training as part of their overall training are discussed. Video recordings of specific examples from past consulting experiences are shown to illustrate the advantages of mental training and to justify why mental preparation is important for athletes. In addition, psychological skills that they will learn from the mental training program through the seminars and

workshops are highlighted. These psychological skills include goal-setting, relaxation, psyching-up, visualisation, concentration, positive thinking, self-talk, communication, and mental preparation for games.

For goal-setting, the players are instructed to write down their short-term and long-term goals in the workbooks provided to them. They are told to specifically write down their goals that pertain to baseball and how they are planning to achieve these goals. The goal-setting worksheet is designed to break down the goal planning process by having the players write in a time sequence of a yearly plan, a monthly plan, a weekly plan, and a daily plan. Each player also receives a mental training logbook where they keep a daily diary specifically for mental training.



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The relaxation and psyching exercises are based on a packaged program developed specifically for sports teams and individual athletes in Japan (Kozuma, 1995). The relaxation exercise utilises relaxing music, breathing control, stretching, self-massage, imagery, and meditation. The psyching-up program consists of fun games, dance music, dancing exercise, shadow boxing, and a team routine workout. The relaxation and psyching-up exercises are executed before every practice and every game.

The purpose and method of using imagery for visualisation training is taught in a systematic manner and the players are assigned to do visualisation exercises every day after the relaxation exercises, as homework. In addition, they are told to record their visualisations in their mental training logbook. The systematic process of creating imagery is initially guided by my suggestions. I would first ask them to imagine their best play. Then I would instruct them to recreate that best play image in slow motion and then to recreate it again in full motion. As the players become familiar with visualisation, they progress their visualisation techniques to recall a missed play or an error that happened recently, change that error to a positive image where it had a successful outcome, and then merge that successful image with imagery of the next game.

The main focus of the concentration training is breathing control. The foundation of the breathing control techniques that I use is based on the Japanese martial art of karate and it fits very well into the cultural training tradition of Japanese baseball. Various breathing control techniques are introduced including deep breathing, breathing with physical action, breathing with stretching, and breathing with progressive relaxation techniques. Skills needed for positive thinking are discussed and demonstrated to the player. Due to the traditional environment of harsh and hard training, pessimistic attitudes towards the coaches and the sport itself are often prevalent; therefore, it is important to help the players realise that it is okay to enjoy what they do. It is imperative that the positive thinking skills include discussions and instructions on the techniques for self-talk and positive communication skills as well as self-confidence techniques with positive attitudes. Throughout the seminars and workshops, the baseball players learn how to consolidate all of these skills they have learned and then to apply these skills to their individual practice and competition situations.

breathing control



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Application of a Mental Training Program for Baseball

The mental training program starts early morning on the day of practice before the baseball players arrive at the ballpark. My first job is to locate an area to be able to observe and check the player's expressions, attitudes, and actions before the start of the practice. Once all of the players arrive, the morning relaxation program begins using relaxing music, positive communication, positive attitude training, smiling at each other, breathing control, and breathing control with stretching. In addition, progressive relaxation techniques are performed such as shouting techniques with visualisation, simplified autogenic training, and meditation. All of these techniques are performed in a standing position as well as in a horizontal resting position. Immediately afterwards, the music is switched to an upbeat dance music to indicate the start of a 2-minute psyching-up program.

After our pre-practice morning routine, the players have a 60-minute session with their strength and conditioning coaches for their physical warm-up. During this time, we are able to talk to the players and give psychological advice and consultation when needed. Our approach to the players is in a casual manner in order to maintain a relaxed and positive atmosphere that was created during the pre-practice morning routine. Often times, the main concern expressed by the players is how to refocus after a game error. Many players are concerned in case they make mistakes during the practice game, due to their high anxiety and self-imposed pressure to perform well, because errors that occur during practice can make them ineligible to play in the official game scheduled for that day, and less likely to be promoted into the major league division. In cases such as these, I would advise them accordingly and would remind them of the refocusing techniques that they can use to help them concentrate on the game and not on the error that was just made.

Before the start of the official game, I videotape the players for post-game analysis and feedback. The purpose of these recordings is so that we can interview each of the players to ask them about their mental state or the emotions that they felt at the start of the game, during the game, after any errors, or at the final outcome of the game. DVD copies of the interviews with the original video recording are given to the players. Many players are not aware that some of their actions can be beneficial or detrimental to the performance of certain tasks or skills. Viewing a recording of themselves and listening to their explanation of the actions or reactions to certain errors and plays allows the players to become more aware of their conduct, so that they can make adjustments in a positive manner.

During game situations, there will be some players who need to hear a few words of advice from me. As a certified mental training consultant, I am fully aware that it is not desirable to give any advice just prior to a game because it may interfere with the athlete's concentration and psychological preparation for the game. However, in the case of the minor league players, some of them are still very young, straight out of high school, and they have not matured enough to control their nervous emotions before a game. In these types of situations, I would offer them just a few pointers or words of encouragement as part of their mental preparation for the game. After the game, I would ask those players how my pre-game advice affected them and whether or not my advice was effective. I do this because I want to keep the communication with these players open so that we can work on how to further enhance and improve their mental preparation skills before a game.

The Future

Interest in mental training in Japanese baseball has grown exponentially from the first baseball team that was willing to try new psychological skills from the West. Mental training is no longer viewed as an alien concept that has no place in the tradition of the sport. For many teams, it is now an accepted scientifically-based method that can be easily incorporated into their overall training and practice. Currently, there are many part-time mental training consultants who are assigned specifically to particular baseball teams.

The usage of mental training programs in baseball has now filtered down into secondary education. Japanese high school baseball teams have now integrated mental training into their general training practices. Out of roughly 4,000 high school teams in Japan, about 1,000 have shown interest in or have tried to apply mental training into their baseball program (Kozuma, Yumigeta & Kanaya, 2008). What is encouraging about the involvement of high school baseball teams with mental training is that for the players who will be eventually drafted into professional or minor league teams, they will be armed with a background knowledge of mental training. In addition, junior high school baseball teams have also shown interest in mental training. Although the basic skills of the mental training program are the same, I have adapted the original program to make it more appropriate and accessible for junior high school players.

As awareness of mental training continues to grow in Japanese baseball, our focus has shifted from trying to break down the long-standing cultural tradition that has prevented many Japanese teams from utilising and accepting mental training and other performance enhancement psychological skills for many, many years. With the recognition of mental training in the world of Japanese baseball, our goal now is to prepare undergraduate and graduate students to become certified mental training consultants who are able to work in any sport field. No longer marginalised from the Japanese sport world, properly educated and licensed mental training consultants have become a necessity for coaches and athletes who are just now beginning to become acquainted with mental training.



view video:
*High School
Baseball
in Japan*



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VIDEOS

page

- | | | |
|----|-------------------------------|---|
| 2 | History of Baseball in Japan | http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=990hTidTzDs |
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PHOTO CREDITS

page

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