

News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 98): A Visit from the Yokohama DeNA Baystars

5 January 2023

To have the chance to throw a baseball in Australia was something that I never even dreamed of. That's right – when I thought of Australian sports, the prevailing images in my mind were that of cricket, AFL and rugby. But even in this country, I was granted the opportunity to meet two professional Japanese baseballers, and even to throw the first pitch at a game. This is my report from these events.



Canberra Cavalry's main stadium, MIT Narrabundah Ballpark

1. The Canberra Cavalry

Unfortunately, baseball is not one of Australia's major sports. Even so, as I mentioned in [News From Under the Southern Cross \(Edition 94\)](#), there are enough skilled players to take on Japan in an international match. You would expect no less from a great sporting nation!

These skilled players are all drawn from the Australian Baseball League. Canberra's own team in the league is the 'Canberra Cavalry'. Cavalry players

spend the three-month baseball season touring Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and other major cities, playing a total of 20 home games and 20 away games.

2. The Baystars and the winter league

In the southern hemisphere, where the seasons are opposite to those of Japan, the baseball season begins in November. This means that, just as the Japanese season is ending, the Australian season begins. One team which has paid close attention to this is the Yokohama DeNA Baystars.

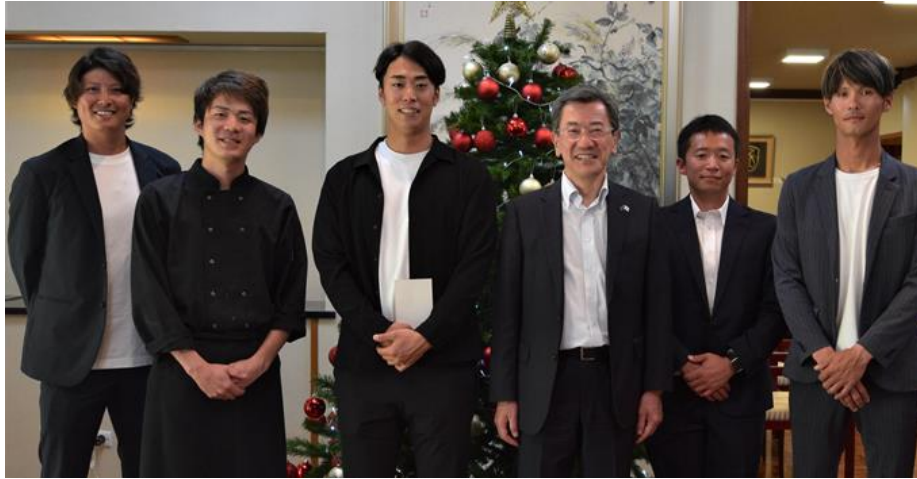
The Baystars established 'a strategic partnership' with the Cavalry in July of 2018. Since then, the Baystars have been sending their players (mostly pitchers) to Canberra for extra training during the Japanese off-season. A few years ago, this included ace pitcher IMANAGA Shota. With his powerful fastballs, IMANAGA left a strong impression on Australian baseball fans.

By the way, this kind of arrangement is not unique to the Baystars; the Softbank Hawks also dispatch players to the Melbourne Aces baseball team. Also, a core member of the current Brisbane Bandits lineup is former Hokkaido Nippon-Ham Fighters and Yomiuri Giants player Dai-Kang Yang. Not to mention that Brisbane's manager is former Chunichi Dragons strongman, David 'Dingo' Nilsson. I'm sure some of these names deliver a blast from the past for the long-time baseball fan.

3. A warm welcome for pitchers IRIE and MIYAGUNI

Although the Baystars could not send players to Canberra during the pandemic, this past November the Cavalry at last welcomed IRIE Taisei and MIYAGUNI Ryosuke, alongside their coach Mr KOSUGI, athletic trainer Mr TOTANI and other members. Their time in Canberra extended until the end of December.

Being myself a former 'baseball kid', I had seen the Taiyo Whales (the Baystars' predecessors) play not only at Yokohama Stadium, but also at their former home of Kawasaki Ballpark. As soon as I heard that the Baystars would be coming to Canberra, my eyes were ablaze with excitement. I immediately invited them to my residence. Over lunch, we had a long and fruitful discussion about baseball and life in Japan and Australia.



From left: MIYAGUNI, Chef OGATA, IRIE, myself, TOTANI and Coach KOSUGI

MIYAGUNI Ryosuke is a graduate of Okinawa's Itoman High School and played for the Yomiuri Giants before the Baystars, while IRIE Taisei is a setup pitcher who played for Sakushin Gakuin High School and Meiji University.

These players are not only tall (with both easily surpassing 185 cm in height) they are strongly-built too. The flow of topics for discussion never ran dry – from a shared love of baseball from a young age and the deep secrets of pro baseball training and body management regimes, to the pitching strategies employed against the 'home run king' of Japan's Central League, Tokyo Yakult Swallows' MURAKAMI Munetaka.

Above all, I was delighted by the sportsman-like fluency of their responses to my questions (thanks to the Baystars' PR training, perhaps!).

Residence Chef OGATA, himself a third *dan* in *kendo* and hence a sports (and culinary) aficionado, exercised impeccable judgement and hospitality in preparing a steak-and-rice bowl packed with white rice and Aussie beef. Sipping an Australian shiraz, I thought to myself that the way those two pros left their bowls spotless was just what I imagined of top-notch athletes.

4. Japan Night

To celebrate their partnership with the Baystars, on 16 December the Canberra Cavalry held a 'Japan Night', which featured the singing of the Japanese National Anthem and a ceremonial first pitch from yours truly.



A promotional image for the Canberra Cavalry Japan Night featuring IRIE Taisei (left) and MIYAGUNI Ryosuke (right)

(Image courtesy of [the Canberra Cavalry Facebook page](#))

As soon as I was called upon to make the first pitch, I secretly embarked on an intensive training regime. That is to say, I shook out my 60-year-old shoulders and my hands which had not gripped a ball in decades, and got to work shadow pitching in one corner of the residence garden. My time as a pitcher for the Toho Gakuen baseball team seemed a rather distant memory!

When the Baystars visited my residence, too, we spent some time playing catch. The very next day, I found myself practicing my pitches in the Canberra Cavalry bullpen at Narrabundah Ballpark. Perhaps I was a little overwhelmed by the honour of practicing alongside pro baseballers, and so my pitches might have been a little wilder than originally intended.



At my residence



In the bullpen



With IRIE, MIYAGUNI, Coach KOSUGI and Canberra Cavalry team members

“The Japanese players are excellent, they have such respect for baseball,” I was told by a representative from the Cavalry. When I heard this, I was so glad to have taken the time to come to the ballpark. The biggest influence on Australians’ perception of Japan comes from seeing each other ‘in-action’ and interacting on a personal level, as this demonstrates the Japanese attitude and way of life.

The day of the match, I was well looked after by the Baystars’ Director of Player Development Mr KUWAHARA Yoshiyuki. A graduate of Nihon University Buzan High School, Mr KUWAHARA himself participated in the ‘Koshien’ national high school baseball championship and became captain of the Nihon University team before joining the Baystars. I was thoroughly impressed with his spot-on commentary of the game.



With members of the Canberra Cavalry and the Yokohama DeNA Baystars

And that all-important first pitch? Let's not talk about that. I will only say that the pitch did stray from its path a little, likely because I overstrained my poor body now in its sixth decade. And if that ball did not take the exact course I'd hoped it would, perhaps it only encapsulated the trajectory of my own life. Thus, it was a very emotional moment. Thank you, readers, for sticking with this story until the very end!



MIYAGUNI ('Guni'), pitching on Saturday, 17 Dec



IRIE ('T.I. '), pitching on Sunday, 18 Dec

(Image courtesy of [the Canberra Cavalry Facebook page](#))

YAMAGAMI Shingo