

Playing in China, Chipping at a Wall



Robert F. Bukaty/Associated Press

Dodgers Manager Joe Torre, who has seen the Green Monster in Boston many times, visited the Great Wall of China on Friday.

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BEIJING — At the end of a perfect afternoon, when the sky was blue and the sun was not veiled in smog, there was no winner of the first Major League Baseball game played in China. But that did not matter.



Frederic J. Brown/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Wukesong Stadium had some touch-ups before the Dodgers and the Padres played an exhibition.

More than 12,000 spectators watched the [Los Angeles Dodgers](#) play the [San Diego Padres](#) to a 3-3 tie in an exhibition game that introduced a widely unknown — and certainly unpopular — sport to this country. They saw

history: the first pitch, the first hit, the first singing of “Take Me Out to the Ball Game,” which left many of the Chinese spectators perplexed and staring at the words in the program, while the announcer belted out a near solo.

“I had no idea what the players were doing, but it was fun to come here anyway, to see what it was all about,” said Yan Jun, a 24-year-old communications worker, whose ticket cost more than \$100. “It was confusing but kind of interesting.”

In the 1960s, [Mao Zedong](#) banned the sport because of its Western roots, and baseball has struggled to gain a foothold in this country since his death in 1976. Major League Baseball officials say they hope this two-game Dodgers-Padres series helps to spur interest in the game.

Some fans Saturday were American expatriates who took their children to experience a slice of home. They were easy to spot, wearing their faded baseball jerseys and carrying broken-in mitts.

But most of the spectators were Chinese citizens seeing major league baseball for the first time. Some had never watched the sport live, at any level, because it is so rare. About 150,000 people play baseball in China, which has a population of 1.3 billion and has about 100 official fields, Major League Baseball officials said.

Outside the stadium Saturday, dozens of passers-by stopped to stare through the fence to get a glimpse of Wukesong field, one of the few in China with a grass infield. Some said that even if they had the money to attend the game — ticket prices ranged from \$7 to \$180 — they would have passed on it, calling the game incomprehensible and boring. Gong Wan Ming, a retired chemist who was staring at the stadium from a nearby bus stop, said he considered table tennis much more interesting because it is fast-paced and requires cheaper equipment.

Dodgers Manager [Joe Torre](#), who arrived in Beijing on Thursday, said it would take time to chip away at that mentality.

“There’s a history to baseball, a tradition and a certain rhythm and charm to it; you can’t just learn that in a weekend,” he said. “How do you explain to someone what it’s like to watch [Sandy Koufax](#) pitch? Seeing that is like watching a ballet dancer. You can’t jam that information down their throat. They have to realize that themselves.”

Wukesong Baseball Stadium, the site of this weekend’s games, will be used for the Beijing Olympics in August. It is more like a college ball field than a major league ballpark.

Most of the seating consists of aluminum bleachers, which will be torn down after the Olympics because the Chinese government sees no need for a baseball stadium after the Games. (Other temporary sites for Olympic events include those for shooting and field hockey.)

Still, in the shadow of the gleaming new Olympic basketball arena — which is next to the baseball stadium and clearly outshines it — Wukesong Stadium’s bleachers were nearly packed. About 30 percent of the tickets were given free to sports and government officials and youth baseball teams, said major league officials, who added that the investment of tens of millions of dollars to expand the sport in China was worth it.

“I’ve seen thousands of games and still had to pinch myself when I started watching this one,” Commissioner [Bud Selig](#) said during the game. “I’m confident that once people here see this game and grasp it and play it, they will fall in love with it.”

Padres first baseman Adrian Gonzalez said the beauty of this ballpark was that it seemed like any other. But there were indications off the field that the game was held outside of its home country.

The announcer spoke English and Mandarin, and the billboards for products like Snickers were also in both languages. The United States and Chinese flags flew above the left-field bleachers, fluttering side by side. Both national anthems were played.

At the Tim's Texas Bar-B-Q concession stand, workers wore Texas-flag-themed button-down shirts. They sold hot dogs, peanuts, popcorn — and Ramen noodles. The cheerleaders, who performed in foul territory, were also reminiscent of Texas. Like the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders, they exposed their midriffs and wore hot pants.

Vendors walking through the stands showed their inexperience. One carried one Coke, one Tsingtao beer and one bag of popcorn as she strode silently up the stairs of one section. When the concession stands ran out of hot dogs and beer in the first inning, the American fans were incensed.

Other aspects of the game were uniquely Chinese. Government officials approve the music played. At past events, for instance, songs like "[Y.M.C.A.](#)" have been banned because the initials stood for Young Men's Christian Association. On Saturday, the Public Security Bureau canceled the planned pregame entertainment with 70 flag wavers and drummers because of safety concerns.

At the gate, one fan spent five minutes trying to explain her poster, which read "Crouching Padre, Hidden Tiger," to the police officers who were considering confiscating it. Because of those meticulous security checks, only a fraction of the seats were full when the game started.

"We are on the other side of the world, and it's really a different kind of place here, but I'm excited to be a part of this landmark event," said Padres reliever Trevor Hoffman, who climbed the Great Wall last week. He also went to an autograph signing at a local mall where "no one had a clue who we were."

"I know the [Houston Rockets](#) are really popular here because of [Yao Ming](#), so I hope baseball can catch on someday, too," Hoffman said.

Basketball courts are all over Beijing, and updates about the Rockets and Yao Ming are front-page news. But baseball news and knowledge is almost nonexistent.

At Saturday's game, some fans followed along and cheered appropriately, particularly for Asian players like the Korean Chan Ho Park, but others needed a tutorial. The program listed baseball's rules, beginning with an explanation that both teams have an offense and a defense.

The big screen in center field quizzed spectators. After showing a player crossing first base, fans were asked if it was: a) a single, b) a double or c) a triple.

But wiser neophyte fans followed the Americans' lead.

"A lot of them cheered for both teams," said Art Barrios, a contractor from San Diego on vacation in Beijing. "But when I cheered during big plays, they saw me and knew it was time to cheer, too. By the end, they really got into the swing of things. Once when I got really excited, they jumped up and all started giving me high-fives."

The former major league player Jim Lefebvre, head coach of the Chinese Olympic team, said that the public here would learn about baseball and that good players would develop, but that it would happen slowly.

"This is a monumental moment in baseball for my guys and other potential players to see the major league players in person," he said. "And I think the major league players are getting a kick out of this, too. I just told them: Have fun, but be careful on the Great Wall. Don't go up and down too many times because your calves will kill you for days."