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Koshien: The most emotional sports tournament in the world

[切换到简体中文](#)*Japan's high school baseball tourney is sentimental, sappy and saccharine. Just the way we like it*By [Daniel Krieger \(node/47093\)](#) 19 August, 2011

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COURTESY TENNOJI HIGH SCHOOL

Although baseball is a team sport, the one-on-one showdown between pitcher and batter resembles the duels found in sumo, kendo and judo.

"It was a beautiful game," said Hideshi Masa, manager of Osaka's [Tennoji High School](http://www.osaka-c.ed.jp/tennoji/zennichi/) (<http://www.osaka-c.ed.jp/tennoji/zennichi/>) baseball team, after losing in the first qualifying round of the summer baseball tournament.

Masa did not say "disappointing" or mention "the ump's bad calls" or "fumbled fielding" or "lame pitching." His boys gave it their all. And it was beautiful.

Sure, their hopes of making it to the hallowed Koshien Stadium in Hyogo were dashed at the first hurdle -- for the fifth year in a row -- but ultimately that doesn't matter, painful though it may be.

There's more to it. Japan's high school baseball is not a game for fun only -- it's a means of instruction.

Masa calls this "the education of the heart," the point of which is, he says, "to teach students through baseball how to endure whatever misfortune befalls them."

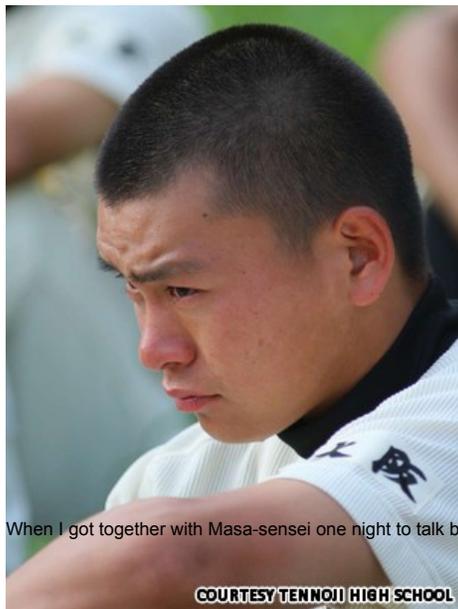
Considering the fierce competition they face and their losing record, the Tennoji squad has ample opportunity to practice this particular mantra.

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Purity of Spirit

For two weeks every August, Japan turns its collective attention away from Nippon Pro Ball to a bigger dog day fixation – the high school baseball championships, or just “[Koshien](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_High_School_Baseball_Championship)” whose final game takes place on August 20 this year.

Nearly 850,000 fans attended the 95th edition last year and, with a TV viewership several times that, its popularity outranks the pro game.



Even Japanese people who ordinarily have no interest in baseball get caught up in the games, broadcast nationally on several stations.

As Japanese baseball historian Robert Whiting wrote in his classic, “You Gotta Have Wa,” for many Japanese, Koshien is “a celebration of the purity and spirit of Japanese youth.”

The contest could be described as more religious rite of passage than sport, replete with ritual and devotion, culminating in the pilgrimage -- for the lucky few -- to Koshien Stadium, the sport’s greatest cathedral.

But for Masa’s boys, just an hour away by train, the Grand Canyon separating them from that destination is so vast they will never make it across, short of a miracle.

Learning experience

When I got together with Masa-sensei one night to talk baseball, over a few beers and with much boyish excitement, he waxed lyrical about the transformative power of the game.

“By playing baseball and persistently trying to get to Koshien,” he told me, “students can learn charity and gratitude and get a better sense of who they are,” regardless of the results.

This year’s team captain, 17-year-old Yusuke Sasaki, who plays third base, wholeheartedly agrees.

“Playing baseball has made my heart and body mature,” he told me.

His teammate, shortstop Kosuke Yamamoto, 16, also credits baseball for his growth. The hard practices, he said, has made him stronger and will give him “confidence in the future” as he faces life’s trials.



At all tournament games, tradition calls for the winning team to sing its school song while the losing team stands by watching tearfully.

Though personal enrichment is all well and good, the players I spoke to also confessed that they really, really want to play at Koshien.

But it's a long and treacherous road -- of the 4,014 teams that went into the regional preliminary rounds in July, just 49 made it out. In Osaka this year, 186 teams competed on what is not exactly a level playing field.

The top teams recruit all-stars from around the country, while the likes of Tennoji have to settle for whoever shows up. One of Osaka's behemoths of baseball, PL Gakuen, has gone to Koshien many times, taking seven championship titles.

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On a muggy, overcast afternoon last month, the Tennoji boys were playing a practice game in the run-up to their first-round game against Kinki Daigaku High School, which they ended up "beautifully" losing 1-0.

A group of elderly men -- called "OB," or old boys -- came to cheer on their team. One of them, Osami Kuwahara, graduated more than a half-century ago.

"Has Tennoji ever made it to Koshien?" I asked him.

"Once," he said. "In 1948. But we lost in the first round."

Different ballgame

In 15 years, Masa has not made it past the halfway point of the prefecture-wide preliminaries that determine which team will advance to the final rounds in Koshien Stadium.

At an academically rigorous school like Tennoji, players can't practice as much as the more accomplished teams, whose boys live and breathe baseball without worrying about such quotidian concerns as study. Nevertheless, Masa demands 100 percent.

"Even if they are losing, they must fight hard until the end of the game," Masa told me.

If they can pull that off, even in defeat they will have achieved a measure of mastery over themselves, which is really the aim beyond hits, home runs, RBIs and strikeouts.

The key is not giving up -- ever. This is the way to educate the heart through baseball.



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