

My Japan Journey - Episode 4
George Rose: From JET to the New York Yankees

[Music]

George Rose 0:05

I have so much gratitude for the JET Programme and for the country of Japan and I could not do enough to give back to everything that Japan has given me.

[Music]

Yuko Handa 0:19

A single moment of curiosity can lead to unexpected opportunities, some ending in a lifelong involvement with Japan. Our conversation partners all have a unique Japan journey to tell, one that's steeped in connections that have enriched their lives and altered them in deep, meaningful ways. Join us in their Japan journey, and be inspired to embrace what's unfamiliar. Your next single moment of curiosity could lead you to possibilities you've never dreamed of.

[Music]

This is My Japan Journey. I'm Yuko Handa from the Japan Society of Boston.

[Music]

Yuko Handa 1:05

Welcome, George Rose, to our podcast. Thank you for joining us. George Rose is the executive advisor of Pacific Rim Operations for the New York Yankees. He's also the advisory for the Yomiuri Giants and the Yomiuri Shimbun in Japan. Thank you, George, for joining us.

George Rose 1:26

Sure. It's my pleasure.

Yuko Handa 1:27

So we will jump right in and ask my big question. Where did your Japan journey start?

George Rose 1:35

My Japan journey started when I went on the JET Programme. One year after college I was a teacher in Fukushima Prefecture on the JET Programme in a city called Soma.

Yuko Handa 1:51

So may I ask when this is?

George Rose 1:54

Sure, in 1989.

Yuko Handa 1:57

What motivated you to join the JET Programme? Were you always interested in Japan?

George Rose 2:02

Yeah, I honestly didn't-- when I was in college, I was an English major. I did not have a big interest in Japan or anywhere, to be honest, you know. I played rugby in college and that was my biggest interest. But my first job out of college I was a teacher, a middle school teacher, junior high school teacher, in New York City public school system in Brooklyn. And I did that for a year, but in the middle of that year I just felt like I wanted to go on an adventure.

And I was with a friend of mine one night in January and he was leaving for Japan to go work for a brokerage firm in Tokyo. And we were out one night having a couple beers and he said to me, "You know, so what are you going to do next year?" I'm like, "I don't-- you know, I don't know, maybe I'll go on the JET Programme." We had a couple friends from college who were on the JET Programme, so I had heard about it from them. And I said, "You're going to Japan, maybe I'll meet you over there." So I kind of decided over a pitcher of beer with a buddy on a Saturday night that I would apply for the JET Programme.

And it's quite fortuitous because I actually called the Japanese Consulate in New York on Monday to ask if, you know, for an application. And this is pre-internet days, so you couldn't just go online and apply or download one. And they told me the deadline was Friday and I was like, "Oh my gosh, okay!" So I got the application, I got it all filled out, FedExed the recommendation from a college professor down to me and got it all filled out, and drove after school on Friday and dropped it off at the Japanese Consulate Friday afternoon and got in just under the wire.

Yuko Handa 3:53

You drove from Brooklyn to the Consulate in New York?

George Rose 3:56

Yes.

Yuko Handa 3:57

You got the application on Monday and you submitted it, you hand-delivered it, on Friday.

George Rose 4:03

Yes, you know, I might have driven to the Japanese consulate on Monday afternoon and gotten the application too. I don't I don't really remember to be honest with you, but it's very fortuitous because if I even waited till, say, Wednesday to make that phone call, I might have missed the deadline.

Yuko Handa 4:17

We have to thank your friend and beer for prompting you to call on Monday instead of Wednesday because then we wouldn't be sitting here together talking about your Japan journey!

George Rose 4:26

That's true. My good friend Jared Noering, who is taking Japanese-- he lives in London now, but he's taking Japanese lessons through the Japan Society which is in Boston, which is how we [Yuko and I] met.

Yuko Handa 4:36

So, actually, take us back to the moment where you landed. This is the first time in Japan.

George Rose 4:43

It was in July that we went and we had a, I believe it was a one-week orientation in Tokyo. I remember when I was in Tokyo and when I got on the subway actually the first time and I looked around and everybody on the subway was Japanese. And I was like, "Whoa!" And I was just amazed because, you know, Japan is... it is as different from the United States as it could be. Every day was an adventure.

And, I'll tell you, I actually remember more vividly when I first got up to Soma. And I was there because that was where I was going to be living and teaching. And Soma is a small village on the Pacific Ocean, about an hour-- 45 minutes to an hour south of Sendai. So it was the northeast corner of Fukushima.

One of the teachers came down and picked me up at the, after the orientation was over, and drove me back up. A really nice guy, one of the English teachers, Mr. Tadano, and we're still friends today. And he took me, I think the first day I was there, he took me to the seafood market. And I'll never forget going to the seafood market and being introduced to some of the people in the town.

And there was an old woman who had a table, basically cinder blocks with a piece of plywood on top and maybe a curtain in front. And he explained to her that I was the new teacher in the high school in town and she reached under the table, pulled out an octopus, and slapped it on top of the plywood. And it was still alive, it was still moving. And then she took a big, huge cleaver and she hacked off one of its tentacles. And she smiled at me and offered it to me. And I had no, I mean, I had tried sushi a couple of times before I went to Japan just to see what it was like and I was not a big, you know, adventurous eater. And she offered it to me and I was just like, "No way!" You know? And she kind of shrugged her shoulders and then she dipped-- I can't remember if she dipped it in soy sauce or not, but she actually went and just took a bite out of it. And I was like, "Wow, this-- so this is Japan."

Yuko Handa 7:04

I grew up eating octopus, just like you eat squid and other fish, and I learned that octopus wasn't really a thing in America, so I can't imagine the surprise! You know, there you are in Soma, Fukushima and all of a sudden this woman-- I'm sure it was her way of really welcoming you, right? Like--

George Rose 7:23

Yeah, I mean, an incredible, incredibly generous gesture by her, you know, to welcome me to town, but kids still don't grow up eating octopus in America, as you know, so.

Yuko Handa 7:34

So this is fantastic. From day one you're faced with, in some ways, culture adventure. So tell us a little bit more about your time, because you were in Soma for two years?

George Rose 7:47

Two years, yeah. Yeah, so Soma is a town of about 35,000 people. It has a port and there would sometimes be big cargo ships coming in, like Russian ships with lumber and stuff like that, getting-- I think they'd come over from Vladivostok and then they'd go back with used cars and bicycles and things like that. And Soma was great, I loved it. It was about three and a half hours north of Tokyo on the train, on the Jōban-sen¹. There was no bullet train to get there.

And the people were incredible, I mean, so nice, you know? And I mean I was like a celebrity, I'm sure you've heard that from a lot of people on, that have been on the JET Programme. When you live in a smaller town like that out in the countryside, everybody knows who you are and they're very gracious and, like, you could go out every night of the week. You have invitations to do things and get to know people and they really were very welcoming.

Yuko Handa 8:48

Do you think your experience would have been different if you had gone to Tokyo back then?

George Rose 8:53

Oh sure, yeah. I mean Tokyo is more like New York City. I'm from Long Island and Tokyo's bigger. And, you know, you get lost in the shuffle more easily I think. I think, in general, Japanese people are very gracious and hospitable though. And you still would, even in your circle, I think, in Tokyo, the school where you taught and things like that, they would take good care of you.

But, I think as well, one of the great things about being in the countryside is the language as well. I didn't speak any Japanese when I went to Japan and in Tokyo so many people speak English. My friend Jared, who I mentioned, I used to go down on the weekends and see him maybe like once a month. And there's a lot of Americans that lived there too, so you end up hanging out with them and speaking English, but up where I lived I was the only American in the whole town. And the closest Westerner was about a half hour train ride away in a town called Haramachi. So I was really forced-- and I remember going to the supermarket and having to do shopping the first, you know, really, I'd say the first few months and it was just, it wasn't easy. They didn't have everything that you were used to in the aisles, you had to decipher and try to figure things out.

Yuko Handa 10:09

Right, right, everything's in Japanese. And, yes, a very different experience, I think, when you live in a smaller town versus a big city. Given that you did go to Soma, Fukushima, I have to ask what were your reactions when 3/11 happened? The big great East Tohoku earthquake?

George Rose 10:30

Yeah, that was quite a shock. Because a lot of those towns, well, where the nuclear power reactors are in a town called Namie. So I've taught in that high school and, you know, I was in-- Soma High School was my main high school, but I would travel, rotate a little bit to some of the other local high schools. And the-- I remember-- so they're telling, giving all these names of towns that have been, you know,

¹ 常磐線. The Jōban railway line.

devastated by the earthquake and the tsunami and I-- it was my hood, that was where I had lived and I knew all the towns. And a lot of Japanese people don't even know these towns because they're small.

Yuko Handa 11:10

So I think some people may know and some people may not know, but it was really a triple disaster because it was first the earthquake, then the tsunami, and then the nuclear breakdown. So it really hit Fukushima, especially Fukushima, from that perspective, harder than the other Tohoku regions where, you know, tsunami is really, really bad enough. And it was an earthquake, obviously the biggest in, I think, Japanese history.

So that in itself was bad enough, but to be hit with the, you know, the threat of radiation and to evacuate from cities or, I mean, towns that you grew up in, I think was, and still continues to be even 10 years later. Only, I think, still 20% of the people who had to evacuate haven't been able to return to Fukushima, so even after 10 years, it's still a big effect.

I think the one other thing that people don't realize is that day, although, like you say, Soma or Namie area is about three and a half hours away from Tokyo on train, it was still a huge earthquake in Tokyo.

George Rose 12:27

Yeah, yeah. To talk about that impact, I had friends in Tokyo as well that had to walk home. It took them eight hours to get home and things like that. But I had a friend who I met on the JET Programme, Allison, who came the same time I did, 1989, and she ended up getting married to a Japanese man and they had three daughters and they-- she settled down in Odaka-machi, which is now part of Minamisoma. And we stayed in touch, we were always good friends, and her in-laws are rice farmers.

And, you know, the earth-- first the earthquake, then the tsunami came, and I remember checking on Facebook, she was putting up what was going on. And then-- and the tsunami came, like, literally almost right up to the door of their house. Their house didn't get destroyed, but then 24 hours later she said, she posted, "We're leaving." And nobody-- didn't really know why, and then figured out that it was because of the nuclear power plants.

So they were right on the 20 kilometer border, that radius around the plant, and they had to leave. I mean, you know, and they're, they had to abandon the rice paddies, the house, parents-- in-laws' house, and her husband, they all had to leave and they went to the western part of Fukushima. Her in-laws have never-- they actually, it's really sad because her in-laws moved back to Odaka and they grow rice in the rice paddies there now, but they can't sell it anywhere.

Yuko Handa 14:02

The fear of radiation or...?

George Rose 14:03

Yeah, they're not allowed to because of the radiation and they-- but they still cultivate it and they grow it and they cut it down and then they have to throw it out.

Yuko Handa 14:09

I understand they do this because they don't want, in the Japanese way, they don't want to kill the land, right? They feel like they have to keep cultivating to make sure that the land is, quote unquote, "alive" when it-- when they can, in the hopes of, I understand, in the hopes of when they can start, when it's safe enough, when it's deemed safe enough, to eat the crops. They want to tend the land that they have acquired from their ancestors, is what I read about, so.

Yes, but moving on to your journey, becoming an executive advisor to, at Pacific Rim for New York Yankees. Not everybody comes back and does a job with the Yankees. How did that happen?

George Rose 15:02

This is true. It was really just dumb luck, to be honest. So I, when I first came back from JET, I went to work for an import-export, Japanese import-export company in New York City, small one. And it was great because I worked there for five years, most of my colleagues were Japanese. I learned Japanese fairly well the first two years, the two years I spent there [in Japan] as I was out in the countryside and I was motivated, I wanted to learn it, I studied a lot. And-- but coming back to New York City, my Japanese actually got better because it was like going back to Japan every day, because I had Japanese all around me. So I kept it and I learned, obviously, you know, business Japanese.

So I was getting an MBA, I was actually into my last semester at Columbia. I was going to graduate in the spring of 1998. Over that winter Hideki Irabu², who had come to the Yankees, actually the summer before, 1997. And he came in the middle of the season with a lot of fanfare, the Nolan Ryan³ of Japan, and he was-- started out great, but then he was kind of up and down during the season and he didn't make the playoff roster.

So his translator got fired by the boss, George Steinbrenner⁴. And I had a buddy who went to college with Brian Cashman⁵. And all this news about the translator being fired was in the newspapers in New York and my buddy said to Brian, he said, "Hey, I know a guy who speaks Japanese if you're looking for somebody and you're interested." And I was a month into my last semester at Columbia and they called me, literally, like on a Wednesday and said, "Hey, can you go to spring training on Friday? Pitchers and catchers are reporting and if things go well, you know, we'd like to offer you the job to be the translator for Hideki this season."

So that kind of is how it started. The-- we-- you know, it went well, the trip down there and Hideki and I got along. He-- they learned I really did speak Japanese. And I played baseball growing up and played in

² Hideki Irabu (伊良部 秀輝, May 5, 1969 – July 27, 2011) was the first Japanese baseball player to sign a Major League contract with the New York Yankees. He joined as a pitcher and was on the team from 1997 to 1999.

³ Lynn Nolan Ryan, Jr. is an American former Major League Baseball (MLB) pitcher whose baseball career spanned a record 27 years.

⁴ George Steinbrenner III was the principal owner and managing partner of the Yankees from 1973 until his death in 2010.

⁵ Brian Cashman was the Assistant General Manager of the Yankees from 1992 to 1998. Since 1998, he has served as the team's General Manager and Senior Vice President.

high school too, so that helped, you know, with a lot of the terminology and just familiarity of what was, you know, going on in that environment.

As it turns out, 1998, the Yankees had an unbelievable run. We had 114 wins in the regular season, it was-- and we won the World Series and it's considered the best team of all time because we had the most wins in the regular season and we won the World Series. I mean, I was lucky to be there.

And I'll tell you one thing that I found out later, I had no idea was, until it came out, was I was walking-- after we won the World Series that year, I was walking down the streets in New York City, and Sports Illustrated puts out the World Series commemorative edition and it had a picture of Scott Brosius⁶ on the front raising his hands after he hit a home run and he was the MVP of the World Series that year, and then inside there's a bunch of articles.

They had one that was "10 Keys to the Greatest Team Ever." And I was reading it and then they listed me as the number seven reason for the greatest team ever because, yeah, 'cause Hideki and I, we got along well. You know, we became friends and he kind of, he was a real contributor that year. I think he had 13 wins and nine losses. He had a, you know, a solid season and was a good contributor. And they attributed part of that to me, you know, helping for him to stabilize and fit into the team and so, it was quite unbelievable for me to see that.

Yuko Handa 18:54

That's really wonderful. Do you think your experience of having lived in Soma, Fukushima, where you had to adjust, like, say your cultural norms, so to speak, have helped you help Hideki? Like, it's not just playing baseball, right? There's a whole culture, team dynamic, whole sort of mentality that's different from playing in a Japanese baseball team versus an American baseball team that has a lot to do with cultural differences. Do you think your own experience living in a culture that was very different from yours has been helpful in that regard?

George Rose 19:33

For sure, for sure, because I, you know, it's not just about the language, as you know, it's about the culture too. And just because you can speak the language doesn't mean that you understand the culture. But, you know, if you understand the culture, it definitely helps you in communicating with people.

And the other thing I would say is I'm a good listener, and Hideki liked to talk a lot and I really, I just, I listened a lot, you know? So, which was great because, you know, Japanese still isn't my first language and I'm pretty good at Japanese, but it's a lot, sometimes a lot easier to listen than to speak sometimes.

Yuko Handa 20:10

For sure, for sure. Tell us a little bit. You're also the advisory for the Yomiuri Giants, how did that happen?

George Rose 20:17

⁶ Scott Brosius is an American former Major League Baseball third baseman who played for the Yankees from 1998 until 2001.

Well, so I was with the Yankees in '98 and '99 as a translator for Hideki and then he got traded to the Montreal Expos⁷ after that, after the '99 season. We won the World Series both years. It was a phenomenal time to be part of the Yankees, I mean, just amazing. I got two World Series rings, one each year.

I went back and finished my MBA after that. So then I graduated from Columbia and I went to work on Wall Street for a couple of years after that.

In 2007 the Yankees called me and asked if I would be interested in taking a trip to Japan to help out and do some translating. And I found out on the trip that they were also thinking of opening an office in Tokyo, and they wanted me to open it. They wanted to try to expand business opportunities over there and also help beef up the scouting operation, because the trip I went on, we signed Kei Igawa⁸ that year, the left-handed pitcher from the Hanshin Tigers, and he didn't work out so great for the Yankees, so they wanted to beef up the scouting. And I'm not a scout, but I help, I can-- I know what needs to be done.

So my family and I moved to Tokyo in 2007 and opened an office for the team and I was there for three years, running the office and coordinating scouting trips. We bring, you know, six to eight scouts over every year to watch players, and a big target for us at the time was Masahiro Tanaka⁹, you know, who just left and went back to Japan, but he played for the Yankees for the last seven years. And his rookie year was 2007 in Japan, right? So three years I spent, we're watching him and then our scouts spent watching him, and over the course of, I think it was about seven years that he played in Japan before he came, before he was posted.

So, the Yankees have a partnership with Yomiuri, with the Yomiuri Giants and with the Yomiuri Newspaper. So we've since, since really, since Matsui¹⁰ came to the team in 2002, the year before he came, the partnership was started in 2002. So I got to know the guys. And when I came back to the States after 2009, so the beginning of 2010, I became an advisor for the Yankees and I also became an advisor for Yomiuri Newspaper and for the Yomiuri Giants.

So Yomiuri Giants have this relationship with the Yankees where we share scouting information on players that-- they might be acquiring an American player, like they call the Four-A players¹¹, who may be not good enough to be a regular in the Major Leagues, when they're up and down. We've done scouting workshops over the years where the Giants will come and spend a couple of days with our scouting department and have learned a lot about how the Yankees evaluate players and our player development system and all these things, so we have a really good working relationship with them now.

⁷ The Montreal Expos were a Canadian professional baseball team based in Montreal, Quebec and the first Major League Baseball franchise located outside of the US.

⁸ Kei Igawa (井川 慶).

⁹ Masahiro Tanaka (田中 将大) is a Japanese professional baseball pitcher for the Tohoku Rakuten Golden Eagles. He was with the Yankees from 2014 until 2020 when he decided to return to Japan.

¹⁰ Hideki Matsui (松井 秀喜) is a Japanese former professional baseball outfielder and designated hitter (player that bats in place of the pitcher). He was with the Yomiuri Giants for 10 years, the Yankees for seven years, and three other US MLB teams before retiring in 2013.

¹¹ A Four-A player is a term for a Minor League player who is consistently successful in the high Minor Leagues but cannot translate that into success at the Major League level.

Something that's kind of cool, like, this last summer, right? Sakamoto¹², the shortstop for the Giants, he got 2000 hits. He's the youngest player I think, maybe the second youngest player? He would have been the youngest player ever if the season started on time. And for his recognition ceremony at the end of the season they wanted a video from Derek Jeter¹³, right, to say congratulations. So I coordinated getting that video to them for that.

And then with Yomiuri Newspaper, people may not be aware of it, but all these Major League Baseball regular season opening games-- the Yankees played over there, right, in 2004, the Mariners¹⁴ have played over there, there's been a bunch of teams that have gone over and played and and Yomiuri basically runs those events. They are the partners with Major League Baseball, so I helped them with negotiations with Major League Baseball and translating and things like that.

They are also, last year, just to give another example, they were looking to put a new field turf in their Minor League stadium, so we did a research tour down to the south and we met with a field turf manufacturer, a couple of field turf manufacturers, about what would be the best artificial surface to put down in a new stadium. So all things like that.

I usually take them to the All-Star Game¹⁵ every year as well, so I probably do three, four, five business trips a year where they come to the States and I'm kind of their guide and help set up the meetings and all these kinds of things. So it's, it's a lot of fun.

Yuko Handa 25:08

So who would have thought, right? That night you were drinking beer with Jared? Thank you, Jared, for that sake.

George Rose 25:16

Thank you, Jared!

Yuko Handa 25:20

Right? Who would have thought that that would lead you to this really interesting, unique, exciting life in between US Major Leagues and Japanese baseball?

George Rose 25:31

Never in a million years! You know, when I moved to Japan in 1989 there were no Japanese players in the Major Leagues then. There had been Mashi Murakami¹⁶, right, who spent a year or two with the Giants,

¹² Hayata Sakamoto (坂本 勇人).

¹³ Derek Jeter is an American former professional baseball shortstop who spent his entire 20-year career with the Yankees.

¹⁴ The Seattle Mariners are an American professional baseball team based in Seattle, Washington.

¹⁵ The Major League Baseball All-Star Game is an annual professional baseball game held every summer. One team is from the MLB's National League (NL) and the other is from its American League (AL).

¹⁶ Masanori "Mashi" Murakami (村上 雅則) is a Japanese former professional baseball player who was the first Japanese player to play for an MLB team. He was a relief pitcher (a pitcher who enters the game after the starting pitcher is removed) for the San Francisco Giants for one year before returning to Japan.

but that was back in the 1970s. But Nomo¹⁷ didn't come to the Major Leagues until 1995, so it wasn't even something I thought that I wanted to do. I didn't even know it was something you could do. And it kind of just turned out that way, I mean, obviously, really, I-- I just pinch--

You know, Lou Gehrig¹⁸ says, "I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth"? I can say the same thing for sure, because I grew up as a Yankee fan in New York, I get to work for the Yankees. If I didn't have a Japan connection, I wouldn't be working with the Yankees, right? And along the way I've gotten to meet so many people, you know, friends with Hideki Irabu, may he rest in peace. Also Hideki Matsui, Ichiro¹⁹, you know, Masahiro Tanaka. And so many other people, you know, that-- how would I ever get to meet these people? You know, be intimately connected to them?

So, yeah, the JET Programme. I have so much gratitude for the JET Programme and for the country of Japan and I could not do enough to give back to everything that Japan has given me.

[Music]

Yuko Handa 27:10

As a person who knows the ins and outs of both American baseball and Japanese baseball, what do you think is the biggest difference?

George Rose 27:24

The biggest difference? Well, it's the level of competition for sure. And Hideki Matsui, any of the players will tell you that. There's the cultural stuff, but the biggest difference is how hard it is here. You know, you have the best players from all over the world. You know, I think about 35 or 40% of the Major Leagues are from foreign countries, you know, a lot of Latin American countries, Asian countries, Canada, the US, and the level of competition-- I mean Japan is good, very good, you know, it's the second best professional baseball league in the world, but the Major Leagues is, it's just another level. And that is the biggest adjustment, really, when you come, is the level of competition.

Yuko Handa 28:10

Are there differences in ways actually teams practice? I'm curious.

George Rose 28:14

Sure. They practice a lot more in Japan than they do here, right? Yeah, Japan is well known for spring training practices where it goes all day long, right, and they live in the dormitories and all that. I mean,

¹⁷ Hideo Nomo (野茂 英雄) is a former Japanese professional baseball pitcher who was the first Japanese major leaguer to permanently relocate to the US to play for the MLB, debuting with the Los Angeles Dodgers in 1995. Nomo played with eight different MLB teams over 13 seasons before retiring in 2008 as part of the Kansas City Royals. Although not the first Japanese player in the MLB, he is often credited with opening the door for other Japanese players due to his popularity.

¹⁸ Henry Louis Gehrig was an American professional baseball first baseman who played for the Yankees for 17 seasons from 1923 until 1939.

¹⁹ Ichiro Suzuki (鈴木 一朗), also known mononymously as Ichiro (イチロー), is a Japanese former professional baseball outfielder who played for a total of 28 seasons with teams including the Orix BlueWave in Japan and the Seattle Mariners, Miami Marlins, and New York Yankees in the US. He retired in 2019 as part of the Mariners.

you know, spring training in the US is, it's really only a couple of weeks really of-- and then games, spring training games start. And that's, that is the practice, you know, for the most part is the games. They do, you know, batting practice in the cages and things, you know, before and after the games, but they practice way more in Japan than we do here.

Yuko Handa 28:51

This could be wrong, but I heard that there's a lot more focus on individual responsibilities [in the US].

George Rose 28:56

Yeah, as far as your training regimen and conditioning and all that, yeah, a lot, that's really up to the players and they manage themselves that way. I think sometimes Japanese players come here and they're kind of like, "Now what?" You know, because they're used to having their full, their entire day, and even into the evening, scheduled and regimented, you know, with the team and by the team, and they're with the other players. And then here, you know, you're done by noon. There's a lot more free time that players need to figure out how they want to use.

Yuko Handa 29:31

But again, I think it does showcase a little bit the cultural differences between US and Japan, right? I think for sure America is a lot more individualistic focused versus Japan is a lot more, sort of... I wouldn't call it team focused, but a lot more...

George Rose 29:53

Group oriented?

Yuko Handa 29:55

Group oriented, that's right. That's the word I was looking for.

George Rose 29:57

Here the thought is that you practice intensely when you practice, but then you want to save it for the game, really, so that you can leave it all on the field during the game. And in Japan it's not that they don't, you know, save it for the game, but they-- I think they, in Japan, it just feels like, you know, you practice long and intense and you play a game long and intense. And it's totally a difference between not just baseball I think, but, you know, lots of... even the work style and companies and things like that, I think, is kind of like that too.

Yuko Handa 30:33

But isn't it beautiful that you get to see both?

George Rose 30:36

It's amazing.

Yuko Handa 30:37

If it weren't for that night of beer with your friend who encouraged you to like, "Yeah! You should do JET," this would have never happened.

George Rose 30:46

It's really stunning when you put it that way and you think back on it, how different life could be. I don't know what I would have been doing today if I hadn't gone to Japan and taught. I don't know. Maybe I'd be like an accountant somewhere, I don't know.

Yuko Handa 31:00

At least I hope you were doing US-Japan accounting!

George Rose 31:03

Yes, right! They don't give you World Series rings for accounting.

Yuko Handa 31:08

No, I don't think you get-- and you have multiple! You have multiple World Series rings, not just one!

George Rose 31:14

Three, yeah. Actually, well, the first two I mentioned, '98 and '99. And then 2009 when we won, and Hideki Matsui was the MVP that year, I got a third one, you know, 10 years later. It was like lightning. You never think lightning's going to strike a third time, but it did, and who knows? We've been waiting for the fourth time ever since. Maybe this year is the year.

Yuko Handa 31:34

What would you say to young people right now who's considering either going to Japan or Japanese people considering coming to America?

George Rose 31:43

Oh do it, by all means. I mean it will open your horizons and there will be possibilities you can't even dream of that will become available to you, I think, if you go live in another country. I would say not just, you know, for Japan and the US, but any country. I think it's for any young people, whether you're Japanese or American, go spend some time living in another country. Because, you know, really, I mean, that's ultimately kind of how the grassroots, you know, relationship between a country grows and exists.

The great thing about Japan and the US is we have such common love for baseball. Baseball is even bigger in Japan than it is here since Nomo came to the US in 1995. It's interesting because if you think back to when I was on the JET Programme in 1989 to 1991, and it's probably difficult for young people to imagine this, but Japan was, like, taking over the world back then, right? And they bought Rockefeller Center, their economy was on fire. And they were, basically nobody could compete with Japan, they were going to buy the US all, the whole US and just take over the world! Kind of similar to what you hear about China these days, although Japan obviously isn't communist, right? But, you know, and there was some, you know, friction at that time I think.

I think with Nomo coming to the US in 1995, that just opened things up. The Japanese people got to know us in a different way, we got to know them in a different way. And, you know, at any given time there's,

you know, 10 to 15 Japanese major leaguers in the States now and we've gotten very familiar with each other as people and as countries thanks to baseball, you know.

I mean, Hideki Matsui is one of the most popular New York Yankees ever. People in New York love him. And they can tell what a classy guy he is and what a gentleman he is, you know, and they feel the same way about Masahiro Tanaka too. He was beloved. People were very sad that he, you know, because of free agency, he went back to Japan this year.

So these are fruits, fruits of people going and living-- and these are, you can even say these young baseball players are young people that are going to live overseas, right? So these things make a difference, make a big difference, in the relations and relationships between countries.

Yuko Handa 34:11

Thank you for bringing that up. I think you're right. I think the beauty of the US-Japan relationship, I mean it's, when you look at it through history, it's gone through a lot of transformations. But I think you are right on to say that the grassroots people-to-people connections have really flourished the US-Japan relationship and has really formed what it is today, so thank you for reminding us for that.

Actually, one last question, George. If you were to redo this, totally, would you still get on that JET Programme? And would you still go to Soma, Fukushima?

George Rose 34:50

Oh, for sure I would recommend that. Absolutely. And I would still go back to Fukushima. I love Fukushima and the people there and it was a great place. But I would not change a thing.

Yuko Handa 35:05

Actually, would you eat that octopus this time around?

George Rose 35:09

Actually, today I do eat octopus. I mean, I love sushi! I have it at least once a week, although I must say that octopus is probably my least favorite piece of sushi. I don't order it unless it's included. But everything else I do, you know, eel, squid, all of it, the ikura, the salmon eggs. I love all that stuff. I don't-- for some reason octopus never.... It's just kind of rubbery and I never really got the idea behind octopus to be honest.

Yuko Handa 35:40

Oh, thank you so much for this time, George. Thank you. This was a beautiful, wonderful Japan journey story.

George Rose 35:46

Oh, thank you for having me on. It's great. Thank you for allowing me to tell this story. It helps refresh my memories and reminds me of a lot of things that I haven't thought about in a while, so thank you.

[Music]

Japan Society Boston 36:00

Support for My Japan Journey comes from the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership and the Toshiba International Foundation. To learn more about the Japan Society of Boston and our guest speakers, or to find the transcript of each episode, please visit our website at www.japansocietyboston.org/podcast. My Japan Journey is produced by the Japan Society of Boston and edited by Luci Jones. Our theme music is "These Times" by Blue Dot Sessions and additional music is composed and performed by Pianimo.

[Music]

END OF TRANSCRIPT.