

The Knuckleballer Is a Girl

By Coco Masters / Tokyo Tuesday, Nov. 25, 2008



Eri Yoshida is the first female — and the youngest — professional baseball player in an all-male league in Japan

What began as a long-overdue family vacation in November for the Yoshida family has become national news in Japan — completely out of left field. Last week, Isamu Yoshida drove his family eight hours down to Kobe from their home in Yokohama City (outside of Tokyo) partly so that Yusuke, the 19-year-old college baseball player in the family, could test his skills in the three-day tryouts for Japan's new independent minor league. The Yoshidas wound up getting a family member into pro ball, but it wasn't Yusuke who was drafted. It was his 16-year-old sister.

Eri Yoshida is the first female — and the youngest — professional baseball player in an all-male league in Japan. Even as a lightweight, at 5 ft. (152 cm) and 114 lb. (52 kg), Yoshida pitches a mean right-handed knuckleball — a throw with speeds of about 100 km and an unpredictable trajectory that she says no batter has yet been able to hit. That's the weapon the Kobe 9 Cruise team hopes will lead them to success when the Kansai Independent League starts its first season in April. In the meantime, Yoshida says she's most anxious about her first pitch and will train (running and using light weights) and continue to play in her all-female baseball club that meets on weekends. She started playing baseball when she was 8 years old and says she's had a

desire to go professional since playing first baseman on an all-boys team in middle school. Bring on the hard work.

Yoshida registered with the Kobe 9 one week before tryouts, and on Nov. 16, after pitching a no-hit inning, she was signed with 32 other players — out of about 450 candidates. Her brother did not make the draft. "I was so surprised and thought, Was I really chosen?" says Yoshida, who looks like a typical second-year high school student, now dressed in navy blue Nike sweats in her living room at home, apologizing every time her cell phone vibrates with texts and calls. The first thing she did after being signed was text two of her friends with the message "I made the draft!" and a peace-sign emoticon.

Yoshida started playing baseball to emulate her brother Yusuke. Her father — who preferred Ping-Pong to baseball in high school — thought that she would fare better with a special skill. So he showed her a video of Red Sox knuckleballer Tim Wakefield on the family's 65-in.-screen television. Entranced by Wakefield's pitch, in which the knuckles or fingernails grip the stitches, she spent two years studying videos and reading Wakefield's book before she felt comfortable enough to throw it in a game.

Still, even as Yoshida's schoolgirl smile graces Japanese television and tabloids, some are sceptical of her ability to compete as the only woman in a league of adult males and say that drafting a 16-year-old girl is an easy — and cheap — way to generate publicity for the new four-team league. Toshihiko Kasuga, director of the Women's Baseball Association of Japan, has said, "I think her recruitment is in part for the publicity. It would be extremely hard for women to squarely compete against men in any sport." But women who want to play professionally have little choice, since the professional baseball league for women that Japan had in the 1950s folded after just a few years. Robert Whiting, an expert on Japanese baseball and author of *The Meaning of Ichiro* and *You Gotta Have Wa*, says, "Independent-league teams operate on a shoestring, so any p.r. she can bring will be warmly welcomed."

To her critics, Yoshida admits that she needs to increase her physical strength but adds with confidence, "I've got my knuckleball pitch." Whiting says, "Throwing a knuckleball is an art; speed and power are irrelevant. Control is what is most important." Kobe 9 Cruise coach Yoshihiro Nakata agrees and is confident that Yoshida has what it takes. "Since a knuckleball pitch wavers and then drops irregularly, she needs to work on making the ball go exactly where she wants it to go," says Nakata. "But as she gains more experience pitching in games, she'll be able to hold the other team." Yoshida hopes the knuckleball, which puts less strain on the arm, will extend her career as well. "I want to be like Wakefield," she says. "It's amazing that he can play into his 40s, and that's something that I want to do too." After the news of her selection broke, Wakefield said that he might even be able to learn something from Yoshida — news that made Yoshida as giddy as, ahem, a schoolgirl.

Once Yoshida moves to Kobe after school finishes and the season starts, there will be logistical issues to consider with a young woman on an all-male team in a fledgling, low-budget league. For instance, Nakata says that when the team travels for games, it is likely that Yoshida will have access to the locker room first and then the rest of the team can get ready. Plus, of course, she will get her own hotel room when travelling away from home. "Her presence on the team will give new meaning to the term 'Couldn't get to first base with her,' " quips Whiting. Yoshida says that while not everything has been discussed and sorted out yet, such talk doesn't faze her. "I have an older brother, so I'm used to it," she says.