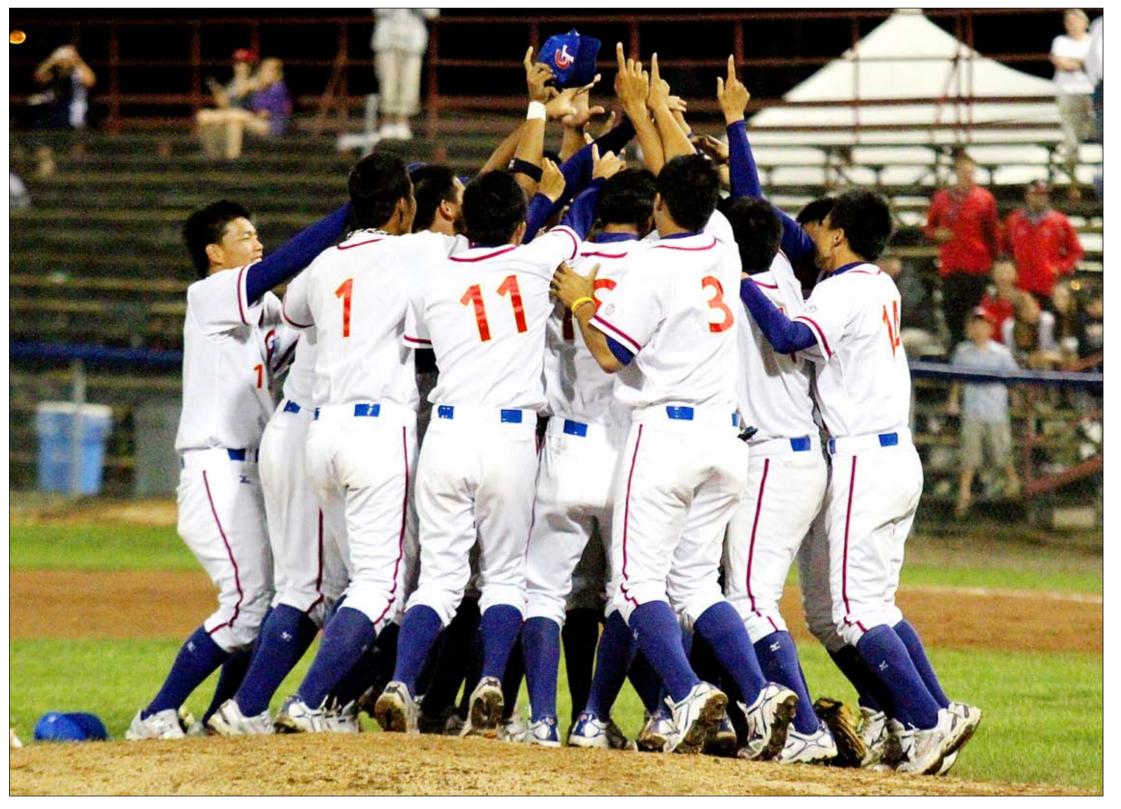
SUNDAY FEATURES



Taiwan celebrates after defeating Australia 8-4 to win the gold medal in the World Junior Baseball Championship for the first time in 27 years.

PHOTO: LEITH DUNICK, THUNDER BAY SOURCE

Searching for the next Wang Chien-ming

The road ahead

inning the gold medal was the goal of each player on the 18-and-under Taiwanese national team at the World Junior Baseball Championship that concluded earlier this month in Thunder Bay, Canada. But many of the players are also aiming for an even bigger prize — one day suiting up for the New York Yankees, Los Angeles Dodgers or another major league baseball team.

It's Lin Tzu wei's (林子偉) dream. The third baseman was named the tournament's Most Valuable Player, with a batting average over .600 and 12 runs scored for Taiwan, which plays under the Chinese Taipei banner.

Lin says he hopes one day to play major league baseball like Wang Chien-ming (王建民). In fact, at this point in his career, he's one step ahead of Tawain's most famous baseball player. His team did better than the silver medalists Wang pitched for in 1997, joining the 1983 squad as the only other team from Taiwan to win the gold medal.

Since its inception in 1981, the World Junior Baseball Championship has featured many players who have gone on to become major league stars. Tournament alumni, in addition to Wang, include players such as American League MVP Joe Mauer, catcher for the Minnesota Twins; Kendry Morales of the Los Angeles Angels, who played for Cuba; and South Korean Shin-Soo Choo of the Cleveland Indians.

Some of the best up-and-coming 16 to 18-year-old players in the world were at the 12-team event, a fact not lost on the 30 major league franchises, which are all involved in the highly competitive process of identifying the best future players. According to Warren Philp, the lead organizer of the tournament in Thunder Bay, about 80 scouts attended the event, in addition to agents and MLB officials, many of whom came with stopwatches,



Third baseman Age: 16 Height: 175cm Weight: 65kg .607 batting average for the tournament, 17 hits, 12 runs scored

Most Valuable Player and Most Outstanding Defensive Player

radar guns and notepads, observing carefully and trying to discover the next Wang Chien-ming.

Glenn Barker, director of Pacific Rim scouting for the Houston Astros — one of the dozen or so major league teams that actively scout in Taiwan — travels to Taiwan about four to five times a year and says a tournament like this one is great for assessing talent. "When you come here, you get to see [the Taiwanese players] play against more competition from around the world and so ... you can see how

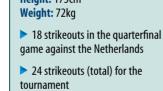
came to Thunder Bay. Based out of Tainan, Wilson is the Pacific Rim Scouting Coordinator for the Chicago Cubs. Wilson says Taiwanese players do well because they play year round and have fundamentally sound skills and that, at the younger levels, Taiwanese pitchers are more polished and have greater command of their secondary pitches, which they throw for more strikes. What hurts Taiwanese players by the time they reach the high school level is their size compared with players from other countries: "When you



Right-handed pitcher

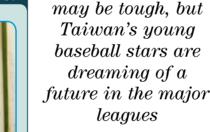


they compare to other guys.' That's the reason Steve Wilson



compare the bodies on the field ... it's just physically [they] don't have the same strength, [they] don't have the same kind of bodies that are going to be able to have the same kind of power." This size difference was evident between the Taiwanese team and some of the other teams at the tournament. Height is a significant factor when determining whether a

player goes to the US to play baseball, says Taiwan's national junior team manager Huang Wu-hsiung (黃武雄). Huang says



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> the general rule is that players should be 185cm or taller to play in the North America. Those who are shorter go to Japan or play professionally in Taiwan. However, Huang says the rule doesn't always apply to pitchers. Wilson agrees that pitching

BY ERIC SHIH

is not a position where size is as a big of an issue, which is why Taiwanese players have had success at the position in the major leagues. "You can be successful in the big leagues if you can pitch and locate and command and have good secondary stuff to go with it, you know ... size doesn't matter," Wilson says. The Cubs currently have four players from Taiwan in their system, three of them pitchers.

Adam Hislop of the Oakland Athletics, who lives in Hsinchu and scouts in Asia, knows the



Lin Chia-ching (林家慶)

Designated hitter/outfielder

Hit tournament-winning three-run

home run in the final against Australia

Signed by the Cleveland Indians

America: "Those who go [over] do

know, but the ones who haven't

yet gone, they don't know. They

of the challenges players must

language barrier.

don't believe how hard it is." One

overcome, Huang explains, is the

Taiwan baseball for the Chicago-

based sports management agency

Octagon Sports, agrees. "The

sooner they learn English and ...

assimilate into the team ... and

get comfortable in the system

[in North America] ... the more

chance they have to succeed."

represents are Wang Chien-ming,

Kuo Hong-chih (郭泓志) of the Los

Angeles Dodgers and Ni Fu-te (倪

Among the ballplayers he

Alan Chang (張嘉元), director of

Age: 18

Height: 180cm

Weight: 78kg



Right-handed pitcher Age: 17 Height: 180cm Weight: 78kg Starting pitcher for Taiwan in the

final against Australia Signed by the Minnesota Twins

passion for baseball in Taiwan. "Japan, Taiwan and Korea, they are baseball countries. There's tons of baseball, there will be a lot of talent," Hislop says. "There

Wangs for sure.' All Taiwanese players going to play for major league teams are signed as free agents and all before they can be signed. Players also have to deal with the issue of Taiwan's mandatory military service, either by



Lin Tzu-wei hits the game-winning home run against the Netherlands in the quarterfinals of the World Junior Baseball Championship. PHOTOS: ERIC SHIH, AND LEITH DUNICH THUNDER BAY SOURCE

福德), who is in the Detroit Tigers' organization.

Part of Chang's job is to educate players and parents about what's involved in going over to North America to play professional baseball. He says he tries to be realistic about a player's prospects. The mental make-up of a player is especially important: how they will deal with the language and cultural barriers, the physical toll of a long season and the always-worrying possibility of injury, as well as going into a situation where they are not the best player.

Chang says each major league team has six minor league teams, with more than 200 players trying to make their way onto the major league roster. It's a long road: Even if a kid sails through the process, it still takes about five to six years. Most never make it. Steve Wilson says that with six or seven players making the major leagues out of the 30 or so signed, Taiwan has a high ratio of success relative to other countries.

Chang says having Wang, Kuo and Tsao Chin-hui (曹錦輝) — who all threw in the 90-plus miles per hour range as high schoolers — emerge at about the same time is a rarity. As were the big signing bonuses they received: US\$1.9 million, US\$1.25 million and US\$2.2 million, respectively.

For most players it's a different story: They'll only experience the minor leagues, with their modest pay and long bus rides. But for many players the dream persists.

"I think with Wang Chienming's success in the majors, it, you know, gives Taiwanese kids, baseball-playing kids, a goal. One of our own has succeeded at the highest level. And, you know, it's something they can shoot for. You know it does really motivate. It's a positive thing for the growth of baseball," says Chang.

Two of the players on the Taiwan junior team have signed with major league teams. But Lin Tzu-wei isn't one of them. He turned 16 in February, which means he'll still be eligible to play on the junior team and have another chance to impress scouts when the next World Junior Baseball Championship take place in South Korea two years from now.

deferring it or by getting credit for it by making and playing for the Taiwan national team in international tournaments. Huang says most of the kids are going to be more Chien-ming who sign with teams don't have a good sense of the difficulties they will encounter playing professional baseball in North

must have a high school diploma