

“Koshien” as Big Stage for High School Students



Hanshin Koshien Stadium

The dreams of young baseball players all over Japan focus on the Koshien stadium, where Japan’s National High School Baseball Championship is held every summer. The stories of high school baseball players’ personal growth through their training for the

Koshien championships have always been a great source of drama and inspiration. As we will see in this article, high school students in Japan compete in national tournaments in many other fields as well.

こうしえん

甲子園 Koshien: Traditional Rite of the Japanese Summer

The National High School Baseball Championship, held every August at the Hanshin Koshien Stadium in the city of Nishinomiya, Hyogo prefecture, celebrated its 91st year in 2009. Commonly called “Koshien”* after the name of the stadium, the competition gathers 49 teams—one for each prefecture.** High school baseball teams from more than 4,000 schools all over Japan compete in regional preliminaries to qualify for the national tournament. Playing in Koshien is an enduring dream, not only for high school students, but also for younger children who play baseball.

Media Attention

For the two weeks of the championship, news from Koshien is a major focus of media attention. Newspapers report on the games played each day, and sports magazines publish special feature issues on high school baseball and articles with highlights and features about the players. All the games are reported live on television and radio, from 9 a.m. to after 4 p.m. each day. Each evening, special television programs re-view the games of the day.



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The Excitement of the Game

August is the hottest and most humid month in Japan. So the games, which very often go on for more than two hours under

the scorching sun, are sometimes grueling for the players. The stadium reverberates with the roar of thousands of fans, the drums of the teams’ cheering squads, and the rhythm of the schools’ brass bands, stirring the atmosphere of the games into a festival-like fervor. Fans follow the games closely on television or radio as well. Many people, who might not otherwise take much interest in baseball, look forward to the Koshien of summer with special anticipation.

*The National High School Baseball Invitational Tournament also takes place in the Koshien Stadium in March. It is commonly known as “Spring Koshien.”

**Of the 47 prefectures, Hokkaido and Tokyo have the largest number of high school baseball teams, so two schools compete from these prefectures.



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All together, aiming to be “No. 1,” the team huddles during the game.



This mark indicates that more related information is included on the “Click Japan” website. <http://www.tjf.or.jp/clicknippon/>

The Special Attraction of "Koshien"

How is it that the Koshien summer championship is such an all-absorbing social phenomenon in Japan?

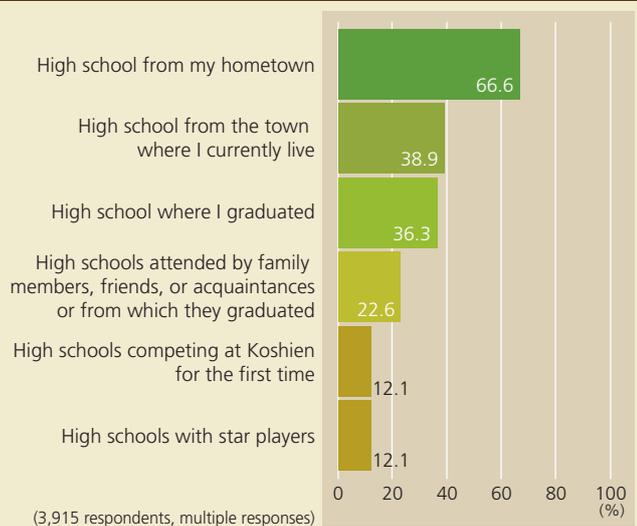
Local Loyalties Fuel the Excitement



A shopping district announcing that the local team will compete at Koshien.

One of the reasons for the popularity of Koshien is that it taps deeply into the sentiments of local society. Once the prefecture team to compete at Koshien is decided, the whole local community of the team's school gets involved in the preparations. The school and local groups organize send-off events. The team visits the local city or township mayor and the governor of the prefecture, who encourage them with speeches expressing the high expectations of the town and prefecture. Large banners announcing that the school's team will go to Koshien are put up at schools, along streets, and in shopping malls. According to a survey (see table below), when asked what teams they support for the championship, respondents said that they cheer for schools from the prefecture of their family roots or where they are currently living. Teams are recognized representatives of the prefectures—and people seem to feel an affinity and connection to such local teams.

What teams do you support at the Summer Koshien?



Source: "Survey on High School Baseball," Tokyo Electric Power Company's Website, TEPORE, 2007. <http://www.tepore.com/>

Giving It Their Best Shot

High school baseball players are famous for training hard throughout the year, hardly taking any holidays. They push themselves hard in both physical training and mental discipline. The stories that come out during the tournament about how certain players have trained tirelessly, determined to realize their dream of playing at Koshien, and the growth they experience in the process, heighten the drama among the spectators. Also, the tension is high, since the competition follows tournament rules and one loss means the team will not have a second chance. When a team loses, the players can be seen on their knees, tears streaming down their faces, shuffling soil from the stadium into bags they have brought. Taking home that physical memento of their chance to play on Koshien's hallowed soil is an established tradition. At Koshien, it is the earnestness and modesty of the players, not whether their team wins or loses, that is most remembered.



Victorious, the team bursts out of the closing line-up.

Birthplace of Heroes

Once the Koshien is over, the nation's focus shifts to what professional teams will try to draft the championship's star players. Many professional baseball players became national heroes from the time they played at Koshien for their high school team. Some of them, including Matsui Hideki* from Seiryu High School and Matsuzaka Daisuke** from Yokohama High School, left their Japanese teams to play in the American Major Leagues, becoming well known in the United States where the sport originated. Many Japanese fans who have known these players from their high school days are not only concerned about their wins and losses, but interested in their character and sportsmanship as professional players.

*Joined the New York Yankees in 2003 and moved to the Los Angeles Angels in 2009.

**Joined the Boston Red Sox in 2007.



High School Students' Growth Through Baseball

Kanagawa prefecture's Yokohama Hayato High School was one of 4,132 schools (about 80 percent of all high schools in Japan) where some 170,000 baseball players trained for Koshien in 2009. Hayato High competed at Koshien for the first time that summer and made it to the second round. But no one would have predicted that impressive achievement a year before.

How the captain changed his team

The 108 members of the school's baseball team had received rigorous training, day after day, 5 hours a day on weekdays and 12 hours a day on weekends. The coach had always told the players: "Anticipate my instructions" and "Think for yourself." But the players hesitated to take the initiative. Sugimoto Masatomo, the team's captain that year, realized that he had to change himself first if he wanted his teammates to take more initiative. So he started speaking frankly to his teammates, even if what he had to say might seem harsh. The team members, most of whom had been no more than passive, eventually began to communicate more openly with each other, and a sense of responsibility, that each member must help lead the team, began to develop among the players.



Team members cheering for the players on the field hold up strings of folded cranes—symbols of their prayers for victory—made by classmates and family members. The colors form the characters for "Hayato" (the school's name; at left) and "nakama" ("we're all together"; at right).

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All 108 team members united as one

However, in reality, only a limited number of players are selected to play in actual games. Sugimoto was extremely disappointed when he found out that he wouldn't be playing in the championship game. It took him some time to realize that he had to put his own wants aside and think how he could best contribute to the team effort. For Sugimoto, the most memorable moment was the day his team won the final game of the Kanagawa prefecture preliminaries, meaning the team would go to Koshien. Even the players who had not been selected were weeping with joy. Sugimoto realized that his team had been able to win because all 108 members had their hearts united on their common goal.

Hometown support

The first time the team practiced at Koshien Stadium, Sugimoto was overcome by the fact that he was actually standing on the stadium of his dreams. He was so moved that his hands trembled as he hit the balls to his teammates. The other third-year students who couldn't play in the game supported their team with all their might by volunteering on the cheering squad. Rooting for them in the stands were the players' families who had supported their training day after day from the background, along with more than 2,000 people from their school and community who had traveled to Koshien in 50 buses, plus 400 who came by superexpress Shinkansen train.

Every baseball team's story is unique. An English film about high school baseball, *Kokoyakyu: High School Baseball*,* documents the story of two high school teams that aspired to play in Koshien.

*Directed by Kenneth Eng, 2006.

History of Koshien

The history of Japanese baseball is said to go back to the 1870s, when American school teachers in Japan taught the game to their students. With the growing popularity of the student baseball tournament sponsored by the Asahi Shimbun newspaper company beginning in 1915, Hanshin Electric Railway Company built the Koshien Stadium in 1924, Japan's first full-scale baseball stadium. With economic development in full swing, the railway company sought to increase use of the railway by expanding the leisure industry. At first through the newspapers and later through radio and television as their national networks developed, people all over Japan began to follow the student baseball games.

Let's Try!

Which of the following is sold as a lucky food at baseball stadiums? Why do you think it is lucky?



amerikan doggu
アメリカンドッグ
(corn dogs)



furaido poteto
フライドポテト
(fried potatoes)



hanbaga
ハンバーガー
(hamburger)



katsu-sando
カツサンド
(pork-cutlet sandwiches)



furaido chikin
フライドチキン
(fried chicken)



onigiri
おにぎり
(rice-balls)

The answer can be found at

<http://www.tjf.or.jp/takarabako/bi02.htm>

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Attention for High School Achievement

In Japan, there are many country-wide competitions where high school students can demonstrate their ability in fields other than baseball, and where their achievements win widespread attention. Many of these competitions, especially those in various cultural fields, borrow the term “Koshien,” which has become a generic word used for high school competitions. For example, there are “Koshien” competitions in photography, manga, haiku, debate, and fashion (see “Meeting People”).

Shashin Koshien <http://town.higashikawa.hokkaido.jp/phototown/koshienofficial.htm>

Manga Koshien <http://manga-koshien.net/>

Haiku Koshien <http://www.haikukoushien.com/>

Debate Koshien <http://nade.jp/koshien/>

ものづくり甲子園 ^{こうしえん} Monozukuri Koshien

(National Contest for Technical High School Students)

About 8 percent of all high school students in Japan specialize in technical subjects in high school. At Monozukuri Koshien, technical high school students compete in various fields of technology. The competitions are opportunities for students not only to improve the skills, but also to think about what kind of work they want to do in the future.

At first glance, the Monozukuri Koshien looks like a competition among individuals. However, contestants are supported by their teammates throughout the intensive training they undertake in preparation for the competition. When Arai Yasuhiro (who went to the national championships) and Iwashita Sho (who competed at the regional level) from Gunma Prefectural Fujioka Technical High School decided to enter the electric engineering division of the Monozukuri Koshien, five other students contributed their time to help them train. These students helped the contestants by preparing materials, working with them, and thinking of ways to speed up the process of completing the assigned competition task within the time limit. The seven students practiced at school for hours every day, even during their summer vacation. Once, when Iwashita was on the verge of giving up, one of his friends said to him, “Sure, you can quit now, but



Students put their techniques to the test at Monozukuri Koshien.

© TJF

are you going to give up like this when you're in the working world?" Knowing that his friend was hard on him because he cared about the competition as much as he did, Iwashita was able to keep going. His friends stood by him the entire time.

The official name of this contest is Kokosei Monozukuri Kontesuto. It is organized by the National Association of Principals of Technical Senior High Schools.

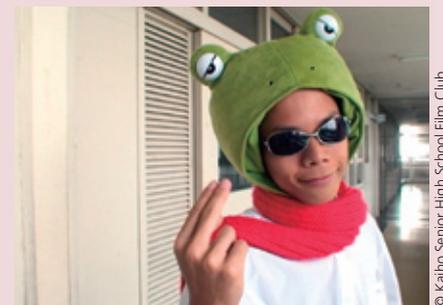
<http://www.zenkoukyo.or.jp/>

えいがこうしえん 映画甲子園 Eiga Koshien

(National High School Film Contest)

Some high school students are passionate about film-making. There were over 200 entries for the 4th Eiga Koshien in 2009.

Akaten Hiro 赤点ヒーロー (Failing Grade Hero), made by the Film Club at Kaiho Senior High School in Okinawa prefecture, is a comedy about the relationship of two classmates who sit next to each other at school. The Film Club members take pride in their amazing teamwork. The 20 club members divided up the script-writing, filming, and editing work; they also composed and performed the theme song for the film. Everyone was delighted when the film came out the way they had imagined, making the students proud of the time and effort they had invested.



A scene from *Akaten Hiro*.

© Kaiho Senior High School Film Club

The film *Sakura* さくら (Cherry Blossoms), entered by the Broadcasting Club at Saitama Prefectural Fukaya Daiichi High School, is set in the year 2099, when the earth has become a different place due to the destruction of the environment. The film tells the story of the encounter and separation of two girls who live in this changed world. Miyakawa Tatsuya, advisor of the Broadcasting Club, saw the students' perspectives deepening through the film-making process. “Your film is like a part of you. When you work on a film, you discover a part of yourself that you don't usually see.”

The official name of this contest is Kokosei Eiga Konkuru. It is organized by the School Multimedia Network Support Center, an NPO.

<http://www.smn.or.jp/eigakoushien/>



A scene from *Sakura*.

© Fukaya Daiichi High School Broadcasting Club