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Japan's 'Knuckle Princess' Arrives in U.S.

By BILLY WITZ
Published: May 30, 2010

CHICO, Calif. — When the former major leaguer Ivan Ochoa laid a well-placed bunt down the third-base line for a single to lead off the game, it drew boos from the home crowd and a loud rejoinder from one fan: “Hit like a man.”

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Anne Chadwick Williams for The New York Times

Eri Yoshida started the game against the Tijuana Cimarrones and pitched for three innings.

But rather than an insult, Ochoa's bunt served as the ultimate compliment. It was a sign that the pitcher, Eri Yoshida, a diminutive 18-year-old woman who arrived from Japan with dimples and a sidearm knuckleball, was just one of the guys.

Yoshida made her debut for the Chico Outlaws of the independent Golden League on Saturday night, the first appearance by a woman in American professional baseball since Ila Borders in 2000.

Yoshida allowed four runs in three innings against Los Cimarrones de Tijuana, and she was hit hard at times; one 70-mile-per-hour fastball was crushed for a two-run homer. But she retired 7 of the first 10 batters she faced before tiring. And in her one plate appearance, she drove in a run by bouncing a bases-loaded single to right field.

“It was unbelievable,” Yoshida said through an interpreter, referring to her hit.

Yoshida seemed to have won the admiration of her manager, the crowd and many of her teammates for her perseverance.

“With all the media hype, all that attention, she went out there and did her job,” said Chico Manager Garry Templeton, the former All-Star shortstop. “To me, she’s got some thick skin.”

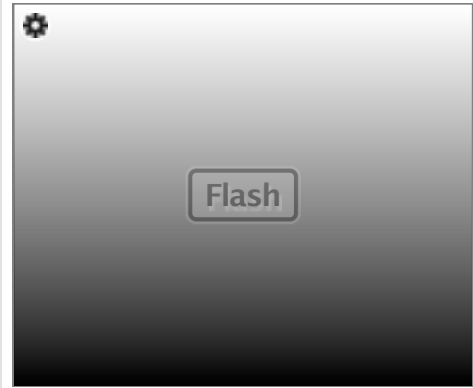
As she stands 5 feet 1 and weighs 115 pounds, her margin for error is slight, and it might be hard to shake the notion that her presence here is little more than a promotional gimmick.

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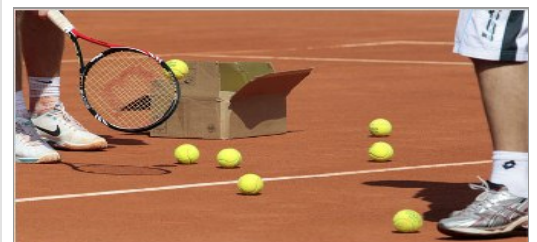
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An Array of Stars Hoping to

Anne Chadwick Williams for The
New York Times

Chico fans show their love for Eri
Yoshida during the game Saturday.

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Anne Chadwick Williams for The
New York Times

Eri Yoshida greeting a teammate
on Saturday. Yoshida played in an
independent league in Japan last
year.

“You don’t know because nobody’s ever going to tell you the truth,” said Tijuana third baseman Kit Pellow, 36, who played briefly with the [Rockies](#) and the [Royals](#). “It’s a good opportunity for her. It’s a good opportunity for the fans. It’s something different. Whether you do it with clowns or players or championships, that’s what it’s about — entertaining the people.”

That is particularly true in independent leagues, where teams are unaffiliated with major league clubs and where players are typically fighting for a shot to make or return to the majors.

The Golden League, the last stop in the careers of [Rickey Henderson](#), Jose Canseco and [Hideki Irabu](#), has tried to gain a foothold mostly in small Western towns as an affordable summer entertainment option.

Chico, a college town set at the foot of the Sierra Nevada about 90 miles north of Sacramento, retains some of its hippie vibe — a municipal ordinance bans the possession of nuclear weapons, and home-brews and homegrown are part of the local ethos.

It is a world away — and halfway around the globe — from where Yoshida grew up, in Kawasaki, an urban city on the outskirts of Tokyo.

“I can relate and then I can’t relate,” said Mike Marshall, the Outlaws general manager and former [Dodgers](#) outfielder who played a season in Japan. “I was in my mid-30s when I went there, I had played major league baseball for 10 or 11 years, I had interpreters, my own apartment and people meeting me at the airport. Everything was made to order. Eri comes here at 18, just out of high school, without her family and just rolls the dice. Her maturity is remarkable.”

The night before her debut, while her teammates were in the locker room after losing their home opener to Tijuana, Yoshida leaned on the railing of the first-base dugout and gazed at the fireworks that were exploding beyond the left-field wall.

She reached into a bag and took out her camera to record a snapshot of Americana. She looked less like a pitcher ready to battle with grown men, some former major leaguers, than an excitable teenage tourist.

A few moments later, she did not try to hide her anxiety.

“I’m a little bit worried,” she said. “But I’m looking forward to it. I really appreciate the opportunity. I’m very curious because it’s the first time.”

She was not the only one wondering how it would go. About 50 members of the news media attended the game, at least half of them from Japanese outlets. And Nettleton Stadium, which holds 4,400, was three-quarters full, more than twice the number that showed for the team’s home opener the night before.

Among the crowd was Michelle Martin, who teaches Japanese at Pleasant Valley High School. She brought about a dozen students, who held up handmade signs in Japanese that read “Do your best,” “We love you” and “Knuckle Princess” — Yoshida’s nickname in Japan.

Hideki Kubo drove four hours from his home in San Jose, where he plays in a Japanese recreational league.

Nicole Ferroggiaro said she was brought to tears when Yoshida got her hit.

“She’s my new best friend,” said Ferroggiaro, who said she felt a bond with Yoshida after having been one of two women in an 89-member security detail in the Air Force. “She’s

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representing a lot of women. She's definitely breaking ground."

When Yoshida spoke to reporters, a handful of fans — mostly women — interrupted with shouts of encouragement.

Although she dresses in a separate room, takes the mound wearing a bright red glove and is followed by one of her agents, Yoshida does her best to fit in.

She lives with a host family, as do many players in independent leagues, that includes two other exchange students from Japan. She has enrolled in an English class at Chico State. She rides the local buses and is working on trying the three Japanese restaurants in the city. In the meantime, she gives a thumbs-up to burritos and Subway.

Yoshida has also shown her teammates that she takes this opportunity seriously. After leaving an exhibition game in the third inning, she got her running in and did not stop until the game did in the 11th inning. She is habitually stretching or flipping a ball in the air with her fingertips, mimicking the release of her knuckleball.

"She's always doing the extra step," pitcher Justin Segal said.

Yoshida, who learned to throw the knuckleball by watching the [Red Sox' Tim Wakefield](#), played in an independent league in Japan last year, generating attention there. When the league folded, the agency that represents her, Dual Arms, arranged for her to play in the Arizona Winter League. From there, she landed with Chico.

Her goal is to reach the major leagues.

The first inning could not have stuck more neatly to script. After Ochoa's bunt, Yoshida retired Eroid Andrus, the brother of [Rangers](#) shortstop Elvis Andrus, on a pop-up. Then she induced Jackson Melian, who once received a \$1.6 million signing bonus from the [Yankees](#), into a 6-4-3 double play.

After retiring the first two batters to begin the second, Yoshida hit the next batter with a two-strike knuckleball and allowed the homer. She retired the next three batters, but then three singles and a walk evened the score in the third, as fans urged her on with chants of "Go Yo-Shida."

"It was a good first start," said catcher Mike Rose, who has played briefly in the majors. "Everybody in the whole stadium was behind her and that energy is contagious."

Yoshida said the experience was good, but she was aware that she will have to do better. Her knuckleball, rather than fluttering, tumbled. And her fastball and slider must be more precise.


"I would give it a 20 out of 100," Yoshida said when asked to rate her performance.

But she is determined to improve, no matter how daunting the task may be. One thing, though, will be the same. As she stands atop the mound, no matter how many people she has pulling for her, it will not be hard to see the bigger picture: a young, adventurous teenager in a foreign land, by herself on an island.

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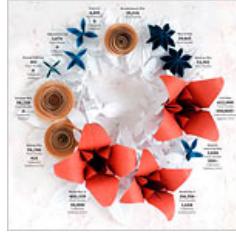


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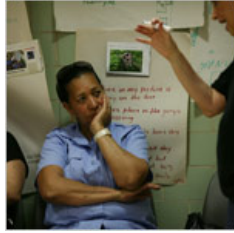
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