

# Nomination of Kenichi Zenimura for the Buck O'Neil Lifetime Achievement Award

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Buck O'Neil Lifetime Achievement Award  
National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum  
25 Main Street  
Cooperstown, NY 13326

Dear National Baseball Hall of Fame Board of Directors,

Please accept this letter as my nomination of Kenichi Zenimura (1900-1968), the Father of Japanese American Baseball, for the Buck O'Neil Lifetime Achievement Award.

Below are the top 10 highlights from Zenimura's career that demonstrate how his "extraordinary efforts enhanced baseball's positive impact on society, broadened the game's appeal," and how his "character, integrity and dignity are comparable to the qualities exhibited by O'Neil."

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## Top 10 Kenichi Zenimura Career Highlights for the Buck O'Neil Lifetime Achievement Award

### 1. **A True Baseball Ambassador**

Before, during and after WWII, Zenimura leveraged the game of baseball to break down barriers and build bridges between people of different racial, cultural and geographic backgrounds. In 2007, MLB.com called Zenimura "a true baseball ambassador," showcasing his quote: "It is much easier to make efforts of starting a better understanding between us in the field of sports than trying to talk your way through rough spots."<sup>1</sup>

### 2. **Bridge to the Pacific**

Zenimura was a tireless exporter of the American style of baseball to Asia, including goodwill tours to Japan, Korea and China in 1924, 1927 and 1937. In fact, between 1923 and late-1931, no MLB team toured Japan. One reason was because of the thrown-game incident of 1922 when the MLB-stars lost 9-3 to a Japanese ballclub on purpose.<sup>2</sup> "We welcomed the American team because we thought they were gentlemanly and sportsmanlike," said the Japanese players. "They have now shown themselves to be full of the mean professional spirit ...they disappointed our hopes and left an unpleasant impression upon us."<sup>3</sup> Zenimura, his Nisei peers, and Negro League counterparts stepped in and served as the U.S. baseball ambassadors during this eight-year MLB-team void.

### 3. **Royal Giants' 1927 Japan Tour**

After the all-black Los Angeles White Sox were guests of Zenimura's in Fresno during Fourth of July weekend 1926, he convinced manager Lon Goodwin to take his club on a tour of Japan. Goodwin changed his ballclub's team name to the Philadelphia Royal Giants and departed for Japan in April 1927. Japanese author and historian Kazuo Sayama credits the 1927 tour, especially Biz Mackey and his gentlemanly teammates, for inspiring the start of professional baseball in Japan in 1936.<sup>4</sup>

### 4. **Babe Ruth's 1934 Japan Tour**

In October 1927 Zenimura was teammates with Lou Gehrig in an exhibition contest against Babe Ruth and a team of local all-stars. Several months after the game Zeni sent a copy his photo with the Yankee sluggers to his contacts in Japan. "I got a call from Japan to see if I could get Ruth to go to the Island and play for \$40,000 guarantee," said Zeni. "I contacted Ruth and he said he would go for \$60,000. It was too much but a few years later (1934) he went (to Japan) and made a big hit."<sup>5</sup> Ruth's visit is widely believed to have inspired the start of pro baseball in Japan in 1936 as well.

### 5. **Breaking Down Barriers**

"No Japs Wanted!" These were the words displayed on billboards in 1923 Livingston, CA. Zenimura and his team courageously "put together enough guts and made the trip – trying especially hard to play clean ball."<sup>6</sup> Zeni scheduled return games in Livingston and soon the signs disappeared.<sup>7</sup> This event was one of the earliest known cases of Zeni using the game of baseball to transcend the ignorance and intolerance of his era.<sup>8</sup>

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**6. Turning a Negative into a Positive**

In 1924 Zenimura’s all-Japanese Fresno Athletic Club applied to join the newly formed San Joaquin Valley Baseball League. Before the season could start, the team from Porterville protested: “We don’t want the Japanese to play in Porterville ... We have kept them out in other lines and if we let them come in baseball, they will bring a following and this we don’t want ... This is a white man’s town and we intend to keep it as such.”<sup>9</sup> Turning the negative into a positive, Zeni instead scheduled a three-game series against the Salt Lake City Bees of the Pacific Coast League. The FAC surprised everyone by taking one game 6-4. The series also marked the first time for Lefty O’Doul – future goodwill ambassador to Japan – to compete against players of Japanese ancestry.<sup>10</sup>

**7. Twilight League Leadership**

Zenimura transcended the racial tensions of depression-era California by serving as player/manager of the predominately white Twilight Leagues in the 1930s. Twilight League teammate Don Jorgensen said of Zeni: “He was a little small, but real smart in baseball, real smart. He knew all the trick of the trade in baseball ... He had my respect and he had the respect of all the ballplayers on his team.”<sup>11</sup>

**8. The Nisei-Negro Leagues Brotherhood**

Japanese Americans and African-Americans shared a bond through their common struggle for equality. Throughout the 1920s and 30s Zeni scheduled numerous contests against west coast Negro League teams. In fact, Zenimura won 7 of 12 games against Negro League teams. And when the all-black squads were not competing against Zeni’s ballclub, they were welcomed guests at his Fresno Japanese Baseball Park. In fact, O’Neal Pullen, former Philadelphia Royal Giants catcher, leveraged his relationship with Zenimura to use the field as late as 1935 as player-manager of the Bakersfield Cubs.<sup>12</sup>

**9. From Internment to Hope**

During WWII, Zenimura was one of 120,000 people of Japanese Ancestry sent to internment camps by the U.S. government. Behind barbed wire in Gila River, Arizona, Zeni constructed a ballfield and organized leagues that gave internees a sense of hope and normalcy. The late Pat Morita, actor and former Gila River internee, said of Zeni: “(He) showed that with effort and persistence, you can overcome the harshness of adversity ... Zenimura and others created a fraternal community in the desert—and baseball was the glue.”<sup>13</sup>

**10. Little Man, Big Impact**

During his four decades in baseball, Zenimura made a positive impact on the lives of thousands of players. Tets Furukawa, pitcher with the 1945 Butte High Eagles, captured the essence of Zenimura’s legacy best: “Coach Zeni ... indeed possessed a tremendous knowledge of baseball savvy, but above all, he wanted every player to become a better human being by realizing his responsibility and compassion for his fellow man.”<sup>14</sup>

The final testimonial for Nisei baseball and the man recognized as “The Father of Japanese American Baseball” comes from Buck O’Neil himself: “(Nisei baseball) is what America is all about. All men and women were created free and equal and (it) shows that when you make up your mind, you can be the best that you can be. Japanese Americans proved that they were the best that they could be.”<sup>15</sup>

Thank you for your time and thank you for your consideration of Kenichi Zenimura for the next Buck O'Neil Lifetime Achievement Award.

Sincerely,

PRINT NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_