

Playing Baseball Biggest Thrill for P-G's Iimura

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Cecil Fielder, the Detroit Tigers' first baseman who leads the major leagues in home runs, is receiving rave reviews this year after a season in Japan playing baseball.

Ryo Iimura is the flip side of the same story.

Iimura, a native of Japan, is attending Pandora-Gilboa High School and living with Jerry and Georgia Jennings as part of a foreign exchange program.

"Ryo is doing extremely well for us this season," Pandora-Gilboa baseball coach Ken Brooks said. "Ryo first talked to me about playing baseball in January. He must have been extremely excited because the Jennings told me he was counting the days on a calendar until practice started. He is a joy to have around, because he keeps the guys loose with a few of the wild things he does on the field."

Iimura, who hails from an island on Tokyo Bay, loves the game of baseball, according to Jerry Jennings.

"I have a baseball game on my computer and Ryo always wants me to play the game with him," Jennings said.

According to Jennings, Iimura is modest about baseball, but added that when he has done well he is quick to tell him and his wife.

"After Ryo hit the home run in the Liberty-Benton game, he was so excited that he called his mother in Japan to tell her about the homer," Jennings said.

"Playing baseball has been by biggest thrill in America," Iimura said.

Iimura explained that the Japanese play baseball year round and regularly practice four hours a day, including weekends.

"We practice from 3:30 to 7:30 p.m. each day, even weekends with the games held on Sunday so we do not get any rest," he said. "So, this (Pandora-Gilboa) is much better. In Japan, baseball is more complicated than here," Iimura added. "At home, we bunt more often and we do not hit-and-run in Japan as often as Coach Brooks does."

Iimura said that the Japanese also use signals on attempted pick-offs, instead of just throwing to the base on their own.

This season, Iimura has played first, second and third base for the Rockets, while carrying a batting average around .275.

Blending in with a new culture wasn't easy.

"At first we had somewhat of a language barrier, but we worked together to overcome that," Brooks said. Ryo gets along very well with the rest of the team. I have to give a lot of credit to the four seniors (Eric Hermiller, Dan Grismore, Bruce Alt and Jamie Maas) because they are quality kids, talking and working with him."

"Although we have had a good season (15-5 overall, which sets the Pandora-Gilboa record for wins in a season,) just having Ryo on the team would have made the season exciting enough."

"I have cherished this season because this is the first opportunity I have had to work with a foreign exchange student and luckily he was from Japan where they take baseball seriously."

Jennings said that at the beginning of the school year, Iimura had some problems with school work because of the language, but has worked hard to overcome that.

"Ryo is a very good student," Jennings said. "In Japan, he attended the same school that the emperors' children previously attended."

Pandora-Gilboa's season – and Iimura career at P-G – is winding to a close. In late June he is scheduled to return to Japan, but he'll be leaving something behind.

"I have learned a lot from Ryo this year," Brooks said. "It has been just great having him on the team."