

# [***Here's what Korean baseball is all about ahead of MLB's 1st season-opening matches in Seoul***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BKD-HW91-JC5B-G1WN-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

SEOUL, South Korea — For most fans around the world, [*Shohei Ohtani’s*](https://apnews.com/hub/shohei-ohtani) debut in Dodger blue is the story to watch as Major League Baseball [*opens its season*](https://apnews.com/article/dodgers-padres-south-korea-opener-mlb-fd9353c2936c299c90a4ee98de28cb39) this week with games between Los Angeles and the San Diego Padres in Seoul.

In South Korea, the opener means something else: the world’s top league has finally come to the baseball-loving Asian nation.

South Korea’s 42-year-old domestic league is most known for its rock concert-like cheering culture, with fans collectively singing personalized fight songs for each batter as cheerleaders dance. Sports cable TVs still frequently re-air the national team’s gold medal winning performance at the 2008 Beijing Olympics and a landmark run to the finals of the 2009 World Baseball Classic.

Here is what you need to know about baseball in South Korea ahead of the two Dodgers-Padres games in Gocheok Sky Dome on March 20-21.

**BASEBALL IN KOREA**

Baseball was reportedly introduced to the Korean Peninsula in 1905 by American missionary Phillip Gillet. But some observers say the sport was played here far earlier than that.

During the 1910-45 [*Japanese occupation period*](https://apnews.com/article/south-korea-japan-yoon-kishida-history-135badc84df0b545f44edcb2b86921fe), the colonial rulers tried to promote baseball in a bid to better assimilate Koreans into their culture. Those efforts were hindered because many Koreans viewed baseball as a noble sport and harbored anti-Japan sentiments, experts say.

After the peninsula was divided into a U.S.-backed South Korea and a Soviet-supported, communist North Korea at the end of the Japanese rule, baseball gradually gained popularity in the South but was largely ignored in North Korea as it was considered a capitalistic-style sport.

In the 1970s, high school baseball tournaments expanded in popularity in South Korea, with the results of finals making frontpage news and winning teams given parades in their hometowns.

In 1982, the country’s professional Korean Baseball Organization league was launched by [*Chun Doo-hwan*](https://apnews.com/article/arrests-seoul-south-korea-8e5b79e27593738ab4a472437779b072), who critics say attempted to divert public attention from ***politics*** following his bloody crackdowns on a pro-democracy uprising in 1980.

The league began with six teams but now has 10. Last year, the KBO drew about 8.1 million spectators, the third highest attendance since its 1982 launch.

Prof. Lee Jong-Sung, a sports expert at Seoul’s Hanyang University, said he worries about the future of baseball in South Korea because it has a weak fanbase among younger people and its national teams have shown a series of disappointing performances at recent international competitions.

“I teach a class for about 80 students, mostly freshmen. But less than 5% of them said they like baseball. Most of them like soccer or e-sports,” Lee said. “We would never know what the landscape of our country’s sports would look like 10-20 years later.”

**KOREAN MLB PLAYERS**

A total of 25 South Koreans have played in the majors since right-handed power pitcher [*Chan Ho Park*](https://www.si.com/mlb/2012/11/30/chan-ho-park-retires-ap) with the Dodgers became the first Korean-born MLB player in 1994.

When his prime began in the late 1990s, South Korea was suffering a huge financial crisis that left hundreds of thousands of people jobless. That historical circumstance made Park a national hero at home, with each of his wins providing rare good news. Park, dubbed as “Korean Express,” holds the MLB record for most wins by an Asian pitcher, going 124-98 with a 4.36 ERA during his 17 years in the league. Park, who also played for the Padres, will have a ceremonial first pitch for Wednesday’s opener.

In 2001, Byung-Hyun Kim, then an Arizona Diamondbacks reliever, became the first South Korean in the World Series. He gave up a two-run homer with two outs in the ninth inning in both Games 4 and 5, allowing the New York Yankees to win both games in extra innings. He still got a World Series ring, though, when Arizona won the series in seven games.

Other former Korean MLB stars include [*Shin-Soo Choo*](https://apnews.com/choo-signs-2-4-million-deal-to-play-for-south-korean-club-6458d09f841f69b4a024f74dfe6ebf79), a former Texas Rangers All-Star, and [*Hyun Jin Ryu*](https://apnews.com/article/toronto-blue-jays-ryu-korea-eagles-8c2b77aa9cdd0a39717c756f9df28f7e), the National League starter in the 2019 All-Star Game.

During this week’s games, many local fans will likely root for the Padres’ two Korean players — Ha-Seong Kim, who in November became the first Asian-born infielder to capture a Gold Glove Award, and Woo-Suk Go, a closer of last year’s KBO champion LG Twins who recently joined the Padres.

Go’s brother-in-law, outfielder Jung Hoo Lee, signed a $113 million, six-year contract with the San Francisco Giants in December. It’s the biggest deal for a KBO Korean player coming to the U.S. Lee has a .340 career average during his seven KBO seasons, the highest record among any KBO player with more than 3,000 plate appearances.

**JAPAN RIVALRY**

There is a [*sports rivalry*](https://apnews.com/58a5a6f2f8614a9286f5e846c8ddb8cb/'Deep-down':-Rivalry-between-Koreas,-Japan-transcends-sport) between South Korea and Japan, which is largely associated with their historical grievance stemming from Japan’s colonial rule.

In South Korea, major baseball and soccer matches against Japan are always the focus of keen public attention — much bigger deals than against any other country including even North Korea. South Korean baseball players who led their teams to critical wins against Japan have been dubbed by local media as “uisa” or “yeolsa,” honorific titles given to late prominent anti-Japan independence fighters.

Japanese baseball legend [*Ichiro Suzuki*](https://apnews.com/article/baseball-hall-of-fame-2025-ichiro-suzuki-1d6a359e01e5f7fd09d3aa2a30b3a84c) angered many South Koreans after he told reporters ahead of the inaugural 2006 WBC that he wanted to beat South Korea and other Asian teams so overwhelmingly that they could never challenge Japan in the next 30 years. A Korean pitcher later intentionally hit Ichiro during a WBC game after a senior teammate jokingly said he would put up a 10,000-yen ($68) reward for it, the two Korean players have revealed.

Japanese star Ohtani still enjoys unusually high popularity in South Korea, where many fans praise what they call his good manners as well as his baseball greatness. He told reporters Saturday that he’s always respected South Korea’s national teams and called South Korea “one of my favorite countries.”

Prof. Son Hwan, a sports history expert at Seoul’s Chung-Ang University, said South Korea’s intense attention to sports matches against Japan will likely be eased a lot in the future, as many younger Koreans now like Japanese culture and don’t share the same ill feeling toward Japan harbored by older people.

“When there is a Korea-Japan baseball match, I’d strongly hope Korea would win. But I think there are lots of things that we should learn from Japanese baseball,” said Park Woo-seong, a 28-year-old South Korean.

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Associated Press writer Jiwon Song contributed to this report.

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