

UCSD Baseball team's visit to China (special for Bear Facts)

January 12, 1983

Sent to Mrs. Revelle for publication into "Bear Facts" along with release on "honors & awards" (1/10/83)

If you're going to go to China, let me suggest that you take along a baseball team. Especially a team like the UCSD Tritons. It will add a whole extra dimension to your trip.

Since I have only been to China once in my life, and that was in the company of the UCSD baseball team, I really have nothing with which to compare the journey. However, the results were so positive I wouldn't hesitate to repeat the trip if and when the baseball team (or the track team or the basketball team, or any other team) is asked back.

The Triton baseball team was invited to visit mainland China during December as guests of the Chinese government and to play against several of the city and provincial teams in that country. Baseball is not the most popular sport in China. Chinese favorites are a tossup among badminton, ping pong and soccer. But there is interest on the part of the government in developing baseball because of the growing international popularity. Baseball will be a demonstration sport during the 1984 Olympics and China has hopes of entering a team.

In all, 23 UCSD team members, three coaches and assorted media and family members made the trip (39 people in all) spending two weeks in the north and central parts of China. The object was to serve as a good representative baseball team that could compete with the better Chinese teams giving them some international experience. Baseball teams from Japan and Taiwan have visited China but the UCSD Tritons are the first American baseball team ever to compete in that country.

Softball - that is, girls' softball - is popular in China but baseball, or hardball, is not so well known or understood. There is apparently only one true baseball stadium in China located in Beijing. Unfortunately, it was 30 degrees when we were there - hardly baseball weather! The UCSD team did play games in Xian, Chengdu and Shanghai where the weather, at 45-50 degrees, was more like the start or the end of the professional season in America.

All four of the games were played on dirt in large, 30,000 to 50,000 seat soccer stadiums with the soccer goals still in place. The left field fence consisted of a chalk line some 350 feet from home plate. The right field area was cut short by the stadium seating and any ball hit into the stands was a ground rule double. Dirt was brought in for the pitcher's mound and a chickenwire backstop was hastily erected but, believe it or not, you can play baseball on a soccer field even without any grass.

The Tritons won two, lost one and tied one so they are already 2-1-1 on their 1983 season that doesn't even start until March. The tie came in the final game on Christmas Eve in Shanghai when the Shanghai team scored twice in the bottom of the ninth. Lyle Yates, the UCSD coach, was informed by the umpire that tie games are not played out in China. That was the first Lyle had heard of the rule but he didn't argue - it was 40 degrees, the wind was blowing, it was getting dark and our hosts were playing "Silent Night" on the PA system. Lyle figures a tie was probably a pretty good way to end the Chinese road trip.

For the record, Keith Yokomoto, a Revelle College junior applied mechanics major, was the winning pitcher in the first game played in Xian against a team from Gansu Province. The score was 12 to 1 and ended at 5 p.m. with long shadows and 35 degree weather. There was a group of five or six Americans from an institute in Xian that attended the game with a "Go UCSV sign and one of them, Larry Schourup, was a Revelle College literature and linguistics graduate in 1970. He was as surprised to see UCSD baseball in Xian as we were to see him.

Mike Brown, a Third College senior communications major, won the second game in Chengdu against the Sichuan Provincial team. The score was 4 to 2. With a little imagination, UCSD could have been playing in Wriggly Field in Chicago instead of The Peoples' Stadium of Chengdu. There were apartment buildings located around the stadium and people on the roof of one of the apartments across the street were watching the game for free.

The third game, played in Shanghai against the team from Beijing, was won by Beijing 4 to 1. It was, as Coach Yates said, the kind of game you like to get out of your system early in the season. UCSD committed seven errors and was never really in the game. The winning pitcher was a young man by the name of Lee Bing who threw a low, almost underhand, pitch with a fair amount of speed and good accuracy. The Beijing team has played together for four years and has been China's national championship team for three of the four.

In each city the team was treated to an "official" banquet, hosted by local sports federation or city officials. Most of the team members had given up forks and spoons by the third or fourth day and by the end of the first week seemed quite comfortable with chopsticks. No Chinese banquet is complete without a series of toasts between host and guest before, during and after the meal. For some of the players, a couple of quick toasts helped, especially when the next course was jelly fish.

Sightseeing was a large part of the trip and we had been to The Great Wall, the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace and the Ming Tombs before the first baseball game was played. Any group of foreign tourists will attract attention in China but make it 23 young men, many of them blond and all of them wearing bright blue nylon jackets with gold UCSD letters on the front and you can guarantee a crowd.

Even though many of the Chinese we met spoke some English, trying to explain "baseball" or "baseball team" took more than a simple translation of words. I am sure there are a great many Chinese citizens who came away thinking they had seen one of the shorter American basketball teams ever to visit the Forbidden City.

One aspect of the team greatly interested the Chinese officials and we were told later that they were both puzzled and pleased by it. The sports teams from Japan, Korea and other Asian countries that have visited China have practiced, played the games and retired to their hotels - nothing else. The Chinese officials, it seems, were a little surprised to discover that the UCSD baseball team members wanted to visit The Great Wall and the Ming Tombs, wanted to see the Panda Bears at the Chengdu Zoo and wanted to meet and talk to as many people as they could. "Nin hao" (hello) and "Xiexie" (thank you) very quickly became part of their language and several of the team members, with the help of local guides, learned to carry on the basic fundamentals of a conversation.

For many Of the players, it was their first trip outside of the United States. For several of them, it was their first trip in an airplane. For all of them, it was an international cultural experience never to be forgotten. As representatives and ambassadors of American baseball and of UCSD they have a winning record.

Paul W. West Director of Public Information

(January 12, 1983)