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One more homer for Japan

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Baseball first appeared at the Olympics in St. Louis in 1904. It became an official part of the program in 1992, only to become the second sport voted out of the program by the IOC in 2005, after Polo in the 1930s.

Finding baseball among the five new sports for Tokyo 2020 was highly predictable. Baseball was first introduced to Japan in 1872 and quickly developed a fan base among students and industrial workers. Backed up by mass media, it soon turned into Japan's de facto national sport. By the 1920s, high school championships, university league games, and workers' tournaments drew large audiences to the ballparks. Until today the Kōshien high school tournament of champions from all 47 prefectures is *the* highlight of Japan's annual sport calendar and a secular ritual celebrating the virtues of youth – and the end of summer.

Professional baseball started in 1934. Nowadays it's shown virtually daily on TV during the season starting in April. Six teams each play in the Central and the Pacific League to qualify for the all-decisive Japan Series in October. Yomiuri Giants and Hanshin Tigers are the most popular teams representing the epic antagonism of East and West Japan.

Tokyo 2020 stars two events of men's baseball and women's softball. Differences between the sibling sports are negligible, with softball using a smaller playing field, shorter bats, a lighter ball, and a distinctively different throwing technique. The host nation's athletes are set for both events, and the remaining five teams of each event are decided at continental qualifiers. The World Baseball Softball Confederation changed some rules for the Olympic event to shorten games and keep audiences in suspense about the result of the three-stage double-elimination format. Group winners from the second knock-off round will play for gold, and runners-up compete for bronze. Japan is one serious contender for the gold medal. The country currently leads the men's baseball world rankings and women are runners-up in softball.

Rule changes also made it possible that for the first time both sports can be staged at the same venue. Most games will be hosted by the Yokohama Baseball Stadium. However, one match in baseball and six in softball are played at the Fukushima Azuma Stadium, close-by to the area hit hardest by the March 2011 triple disaster.