

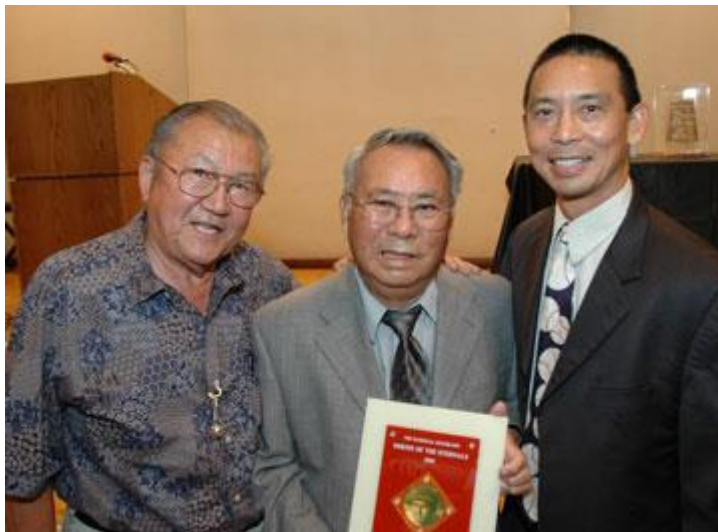
‘They Led by Being’

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Kenichi Zenimura is among three baseball legends inducted into the Shrine of The Eternals.



Photos by MIKEY HIRANO CULROSS/Rafu Shimpō

Tetsu Furukawa, Kenso Howard Zenimura and Kerry Yo Nakagawa pause with the plaque for Kenichi Zenimura, who was inducted into the Shrine of the Eternals, along with Josh Gibson and Fernando Valenzuela. The ceremony was held Sunday at the main branch of the Pasadena Public Library. Below, Zenimura, who dedicated himself to organizing Japanese American teams wherever he lived, is seen in a photo from the 1930s.

PASADENA.—Despite sweltering temperatures upwards of 110 degrees Sunday, a large audience gathered at the Pasadena Public Library’s main branch to celebrate three of baseball’s most important—yet often overlooked—personalities.

The Baseball Reliquary, a Southern California-based nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering an appreciation of American art and culture through the context of baseball history, added to its Shrine of the Eternals Josh Gibson, Fernando Valenzuela and Kenichi Zenimura.

Baseball Historian and author Kerry Yo Nakagawa introduced the award for Zenimura (1900-1968), who was a pioneering player, coach, manager, and organizer in the first half of the twentieth century.

Born in Hiroshima and raised in Hawaii and California, Zenimura took to the game as many boys do. In 1920, he founded the Fresno Athletic Club, a Japanese American organization that lasted more than fifty years and attained national recognition.



Kenichi Zenimura

Zenimura's son, Kenso Howard Zenimura, quietly accepted the award, saying that his father would be humbled by the honor.

"He would be overwhelmed," said the 79-year-old Zenimura. "He was born in Japan, but was educated Hawaii, so he spoke and wrote English very well, but I think he wouldn't know what to say."

The keynote address was delivered by Samuel O. Regalado, a professor of history at Cal State Stanislaus.

"Zenimura advanced the culture of baseball through his love of the game and promoted the American myth of opportunity, while he personally was denied the right to obtain citizenship, solely because he happened to be born in Japan," Regalado said.

Accepting the award for Josh Gibson, who starred with the Negro League Homestead Grays and Pittsburgh Crawfords, was his grandson, Sean L. Gibson, who reminded the crowd that 17 Negro League players will be inducted in the Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown next week. The right-handed hitting catcher was credited with slugging over 900 home runs and, along with Satchel Paige, was the biggest drawing card in the history of the Negro Leagues. Gibson is a member of six Halls of Fame, and his grandson drew a rousing cheer when he quipped, "This is the first time I've been to a hall of fame ceremony when no white player was being inducted."



Sean L. Gibson, left, accepted the award for his grandfather, while former Dodgers pitcher Bobby Castillo received the honor on behalf of Valenzuela.

Tomas J. Benitez, who introduced the award for Valenzuela, said, "These three men led by being."

A native of Sonora, Mexico, Valenzuela electrified the baseball world with his debut in 1981, and in the process, brought fans on both sides of the border closer together.

Benitez said that Valenzuela personified the classic Horatio Alger figure, a rags-to-riches hero who found success in the Land of Opportunity, while enduring questions about his age, criticism of his weight and the notion that any Latin success in the U.S. is temporary. He added that Gibson, among others, taught us about the courage to overcome racism.

Zenimura not only provided guidance to younger Nisei in the pre-war period, Benitez noted, but his baseball activities helped to get his people needed inspiration while they endured unjustifiable incarceration in America's concentration camps.

Despite being only five feet tall and weighing 100 pounds, Zenimura was an intense competitor and he organized goodwill tours of Japanese American teams to Japan in the 1920s and '30s.

During World War II, the Zenimura family was sent to internment camps in Fresno and Gila River, Arizona, where under Kenichi's guidance, baseball fields were constructed and teams and leagues were formed behind barbed wire.

While interned, he and his sons, Howard and Harvey, played on a Gila River team that pulled off a stunning upset of the state champion Tucson High School squad.

Tets Furukawa, 78, was among those attending the ceremony in Pasadena Sunday. He was the Gila High School's starting pitcher for that game in 1945.

"I think we made a huge statement," Furukawa said. "We were the underdogs and we got to their relief pitcher in the tenth inning. That's when Howard's brother, Harvey, hit a line drive to third base and brought the winning run in and we won, 11-10."

Kenso Howard Zenimura went on to play for Fresno State and for the Hiroshima Carp in Japan's Central League. This year, Furukawa joined Lowell Bailey, the Tucson High starting pitcher, to throw out the ceremonial first pitch at a minor league game between the Tucson Sidewinders and Sacramento on Jan. 13.

In October, several Gila players will be on hand when their team and the Tucson team are inducted in the Arizona Baseball Hall of Fame.

Nakagawa himself was honored with the Tony Salin Memorial Award, named for the late baseball author and researcher.

"I can't thank the Baseball Reliquary enough for allowing me to accept this award, not just on behalf of myself, but in the spirit of all our Issei and Nisei ballplayers," Nakagawa remarked.

In thanking his wife and family for their support, Nakagawa became overcome with emotion and took a brief pause.

After the ceremony, Nakagawa signed copies of his book, *Through A Diamond: 100 Years of Japanese American Baseball* and chatted with attendees. He has been working as associate producer and baseball consultant for the film, *The American Pastime*, set for release January of 2007.

"I'm very proud that baseball has been in my family for four generations," Nakagawa said. He added that in coaching his son and Howard Zenimura's grandson on a Little League team, he was touched by how history has led players of all cultures to embrace and respect one another, through the game of baseball.

"I knew then that these 12-year-olds had no clue of the pioneering efforts and the sacrifice and hardships that the Nakagawas and Zenimuras endured and their contributions to American baseball history," he said.

Nakagawa's museum exhibit, "Diamonds in the Rough," traveled across the United States to Cooperstown and to the Japanese Baseball Hall of Fame. Material from the exhibit has also been incorporated into many school history curriculums.

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