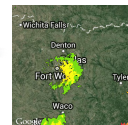


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Independent league shortstop hopes his journey out of Japan is far from complete

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Mchael Ainsworth / Staff photographer

AirHogs shortstop Yasutsugu Nishimoto, runs off the field as they played the Wichita Wingnuts at QuiktTrip Park in Grand Prairie, on Thursday, July 5, 2012.

TAYLOR HARRIS
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GRAND PRAIRIE — Yasutsugu Nishimoto plays only a few miles from fellow Japanese baseball standout Yu Darvish. But Nishimoto's route to the Dallas area was miles apart from that of the Rangers' All-Star pitcher.

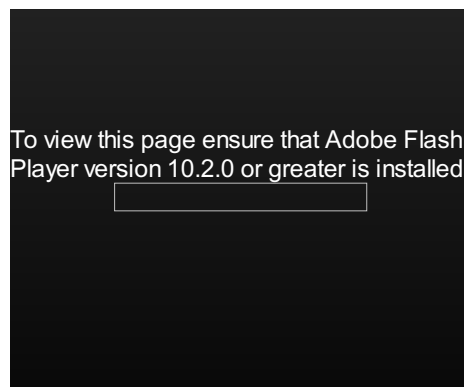
After playing in Japan's College World Series and Shikoku Island League, Nishimoto tried out for the California Winter League in 2011. It was there that he met Grand Prairie AirHogs manager Ricky VanAsselberg.

VanAsselberg was working as an instructor for the league and talked to Nishimoto's agent, Takashi Miyoshi, about the free agent joining the AirHogs, last year's American Association champions.

"I kept watching him and watching him in California, and I just took a chance on him. It ended up working out for everyone who's involved," VanAsselberg said.

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The AirHogs have the best record in the American Association at 37-21, and they enter Friday's home game against Kansas City with a league-record 17-game home winning streak. A big reason is the play of 26-year-old Nishimoto.

The 5-10, 175-pound shortstop is hitting .315 and has 58 hits in 58 games. And his defense may be better than his offense.

"He can bunt, run, and he's got great speed," VanAsselberg said. "He's one of the best defensive players I've ever seen. To me, he's the complete package."

Making it to the major leagues from an independent league such as the American Association isn't easy, but it can be done. The Rangers' Tanner Scheppers, the Tigers' Max Scherzer and the Royals' Luke Hochevar and Aaron Crow — all pitchers — are American Association alumni playing in the majors this season.

Ten players, including former Rangers German Duran, Jason Jennings and Pat Mahomes, have played in the major leagues and then later played for the AirHogs. But no one has played for the AirHogs and then gone on to the majors. Two former AirHogs — shortstop Michael Hollimon (Rochester in the Twins' organization) and pitcher Greg Smith (Salt Lake in the Angels' organization) — are in Triple-A this season.

Nishimoto is the AirHogs' first player from Japan. He is playing thousands of miles from his wife, Narumi, who is six months pregnant.

"I e-mail her every day and call once every three days," Nishimoto said via e-mail. "After I finish this season, I will go back home to see them."

Miyoshi not only helped VanAsselberg acquire Nishimoto but also translates for Nishimoto when necessary.

"I introduced Yasutsugu to Ricky because we help each other for good," Miyoshi said. "We communicate through Facebook and Skype sometimes when Ricky needs to tell me something important about baseball. Other than that, I think Yasutsugu is doing fine."

Nishimoto uses Google Translate and tries to communicate using pictures and hand signals, but his English is limited.

"Playing right next to Nishi is sort of a game of charades," AirHogs third baseman Greg Porter said. "But baseball is a universal language. He's an amazing defensive player, and I can get sort of lazy at third because his range is so good."

Nishimoto isn't sure where his career will go next season.

"Either I play in America or Japan. I haven't decided yet," he said. "When I was little, I went to the ballpark to watch the pro ballgame, and I still have that childhood dream inside of me. I want to win a championship this year, and hopefully I get to go to the next level."

And he's not worried about trying to match the exploits of Darvish.

"I am just trying to be me," Nishimoto said.

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