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 From the Los Angeles Times

The Show Will Go On in 2009

Although Japan won and the U.S. didn't even make the semifinals, the World Baseball Classic figures to remain under major leagues' control.

By Greg Johnson
 Times Staff Writer

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Japan had the pitching, hitting and defense needed to win the inaugural World Baseball Classic, but the tournament remains firmly in the grip of Major League Baseball, which bankrolled the \$50-million event.

MLB's ownership stake isn't likely to change, at least in the near term. Team owners and the Major League Baseball Players Assn. "have a lot invested here," said Paul Archey, MLB's senior vice president of international business. "And, right now, we're in the best position to [keep] it going."

When MLB's tournament steering committee meets next month to consider tweaks to the system, other countries that sent teams undoubtedly will give the league an earful about what changes should occur before the next Classic in 2009. Among the agenda items foreign teams will want to discuss: how to select countries that will appear, and when and where the games will be played.

The tournament turned a profit estimated by baseball officials at between \$10 million and \$15 million, which MLB will share with its players' association and baseball federations in countries that sent teams. Second-place Cuba, however, won't receive a dime because of the long-standing U.S. embargo.

MLB bankrolled the tournament to help broaden its appeal in foreign markets that now generate only 5% of the league's revenue. The tournament is viewed as a marketing vehicle that can help MLB to increase its television presence overseas, push more merchandise onto retail shelves and forge relationships with advertisers in foreign countries. In other words, develop new revenue sources that won't jeopardize the league's domestic operations.

And early indications are that baseball fans elsewhere in the world are hungry for what MLB is pitching. Dentsu, MLB's broadcast partner in Japan, reported a 43.4 rating for the championship game, the third-best of any professional baseball broadcast since 1977.

U.S. team merchandise generated one-third of WBC sales, but goods bearing the Mexico, Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico logos accounted for nearly 40%.

MLB also hopes to use the tournament as leverage to encourage development of ballparks in countries where first-rate facilities are few and far between. Archey noted the success of FIFA's World Cup soccer tournament, which has led to the construction of stadiums capable of staging tournament matches.

The hardest question facing MLB's steering committee will be the same one that dogged baseball before the event.

March became the default month for the WBC because "there's not any great time of the year to hold it," Archey acknowledged.

Though the tournament drew strong support from the MLB Players Assn., the U.S. team that failed to make the semifinal round wasn't as strong as it might have been because some big-name players stuck with spring training routines rather than risk injury. And, to get television exposure in this country, MLB scrambled to fit early-round broadcasts in between college basketball games being broadcast by television partner ESPN.

"MLB deserves credit because it took the risk even though March is such a cluttered marketplace for sports on television," said David Carter, executive director of the USC Sports Business Institute. "There's no ideal time on the calendar, given March Madness and spring training."

Several countries already have indicated that they want to play host to games in 2009. Competition for those games is "a good problem to have," Archey said, because other countries wouldn't be lining up had the tournament been viewed as a failure.

As to which teams will play in 2009 and how they will be selected, MLB is open to a system that would allow national teams to play their way into the tournament, as they do in soccer's World Cup. An "off-year" competition could build fan interest in the tournament as it feeds teams into the Classic, Archey said.

MLB expects to feel some heat from countries that will want a bigger say in how the next tournament is run — and, eventually, who owns it. Japan, for example, initially balked at the financial terms offered by MLB before the tournament. Now, with a championship in hand, Japan probably will push for a stronger financial reward in 2009 and the right to stage profitable later-round games that were played in the U.S. this time.

Ownership of the tournament, however, might someday become a make-or-break issue. "The only way it will succeed in the long term is for the WBC not to be seen as a U.S.-produced and -manufactured tournament, which is what it is now," Carter said. "The baseball federations around the world will have to become more involved for the credibility to be there."

Robert Whiting, an American who has written extensively about Japanese baseball, credited MLB for taking the initiative when other countries and their federations sat idle. "People have been talking about a real World Cup-style event for years," Whiting said. "But nobody's ever done anything about it. MLB took the bit in its teeth and went ahead."

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