

Visitors from Japan pack happy memories

Written by Jim Ecker

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The baseball team from Yamanashi, Japan gathered in the Kennedy parking lot Wednesday morning to catch their bus and head out of town.

They carried their luggage and equipment bags, as you'd expect, and head coach Kiyoshi Ozawa had several copies of The Gazette tucked neatly under his arm for safekeeping.

The Gazette ran a big picture of Ozawa greeting Kennedy Coach Bret Hoyer and tipping his cap before Tuesday's game, and Ozawa was all smiles Wednesday as members of his traveling party teased him about the photo.

Ozawa was clearly pleased to have a memento of his trip to Cedar Rapids, the final stop on his team's six-game tour in Iowa.

The Japanese players exchanged hugs and handshakes with their host families and boarded the bus for a couple of special visits before heading back to their base in Des Moines.

They stopped at Veterans Memorial Stadium for a tour of the Class A minor league ballpark, and each of the players and coaches was graciously given a Cedar Rapids Kernels cap by the home team. The players snapped more pictures -- a staple of each stop on their tour - and boarded the bus again for Bloomsbury Farm in Benton County.

The trip to the farm was strictly a non-baseball event, and the Japanese kids had a great time bouncing on a giant trampoline, looking at the animals, taking a haystack ride around the working farm and feasting on a lunch of hamburgers, cheeseburgers, hotdogs, cookies, chips, watermelon and all the lemonade, iced tea and water they could drink.

All of the Japanese players are slender fellows with little body fat, but you have to wonder how they stay so slim. Like their American teenage counterparts, they know a good feed when they see one and like to chow down.

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The Japanese enjoyed Tuesday's lunch catered by Genghis Grill, they dove into Tuesday's dinner courtesy of Carlos O'Kelly's, and they made several trips through the line at Bloomsbury Farm. And that doesn't count the food they consumed with their host families.

They spent about 2 1/2 hours at Bloomsbury Farm before boarding the bus again for the trip to Des Moines, dinner at a Hooters restaurant Wednesday night and a visit to Camp Dodge.

The folks from Yamanashi are scheduled to begin their long journey back to Japan at 12:30 p.m. on Thursday, filled with souvenirs and memories of their week in Iowa. They compiled a 3-2-1 record in their six-game series and proved themselves to be worthy ballplayers.

They'll have plenty of pictures to sort when they get home, including a group shot of them happily posing with the Kennedy girls volleyball team during an impromptu stop in the Kennedy gym Tuesday morning shortly after they arrived in Cedar Rapids. A baseball team from Iowa is scheduled to visit Japan for a series of games in 2013, and another team from Yamanashi is scheduled to visit Iowa in 2014 as part of a cultural exchange program sponsored by Iowa AAU.

We Iowans have two years to brush up on our Japanese.