



# Japanese girl inspired by Wakefield makes her pitch for pro team

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Eri Yoshida, left, who throws a side-arm knuckleball, was drafted by the Kobe 9 Cruise in a new independent Japanese league that will start its first season in April.

**TOKYO** - The knuckleball - the fluttering, hard-to-hit pitch that's rare in the major leagues - is propelling a 16-year-old girl to the pros in Japan.

Eri Yoshida was inspired to learn how to throw the knuckler after seeing a video of Boston Red Sox pitcher Tim Wakefield. On Monday, she broke the gender barrier by being drafted for an independent league team as Japan's first female professional baseball player.

The high schooler was chosen by the Kobe 9 Cruise in the Japanese League, which starts its inaugural season in April.

The Cruise are a far cry from the Tokyo Yomiuri Giants. Making the squad is more like earning a tentative slot on a farm team than warming up in the bullpen for the Red Sox.

Even so, the 5-foot, 114-pound Yoshida has smashed the glass ceiling with her unorthodox, sidearm pitch in baseball-crazy Japan, where women normally are relegated to amateur, company-sponsored teams or to the sport of softball.

"I'm really happy I stuck with baseball," Yoshida said in a news conference after she was chosen with 32 other players in the new league's draft. "I want to pitch against men."

Yoshida is hoping to find enough success to one day challenge the likes of the long-established Central and Pacific leagues, home to the best and brightest Japanese players and increasingly a fertile ground for talent headed to the majors in the United States.

Yoshida said she wants to emulate Wakefield, who has built a successful major league career throwing a knuckleball, which is difficult to learn and even harder to throw with success.

Wakefield and Seattle's R.A. Dickey were the only two pitchers who were primarily knucklers to appear in the major leagues last season.

Eddie Cicotte of the Chicago White Sox was the first highly successful knuckleballer and won 20 games three times in four seasons before he was kicked out of baseball following the 1920 season for his role in the Black Sox scandal.

Three Hall of Famers relied on the knuckler: Hoyt Wilhelm, Phil Niekro and Jesse Haines, and the pitch also was associated with Tom Candiotti, Charlie Hough, Joe Niekro, Steve Sparks and Wilbur Wood.

Yoshida started playing baseball when she was in the second grade, tagging along with her elder brother, now 19, and played first base on a boy's team in junior high school. She also joined her high school baseball club, but quit because the training was too tough. Then she joined a private club.

According to media reports, Yoshida was inspired to throw knuckleballs when her father, Isamu, showed her a video of Wakefield pitching. She thought that she could do it, too.

"She must be doing something right," said Dave DeFrietas, a scout in Japan for the Cleveland Indians. "She got signed. I hope it's because of the way she plays, and I wish her success."

Her manager agrees. "Her sidearm knuckleballs dip and sway, and could be an effective weapon for us," said Yoshihiro Nakata.

The news of Yoshida's signing - she was chosen in the seventh round - was met with some skepticism that the league might be trying to grab headlines by naming a woman. In that, they certainly succeeded - Yoshida's photo was all over the morning news Tuesday, and she was featured in a profile in the prestigious Asahi, a major national newspaper.

"I think her recruitment is in part for the publicity," said Toshihiko Kasuga, the director of the Women's Baseball Association of Japan. "It would be extremely hard for women to squarely compete against men in any sport."

But Kasuga said Yoshida's success could encourage other female players, whose population has surged since little league teams opened their doors to girls about 10 years ago.

Baseball history in the United States has occasional examples of women taking the field with men. While pitching for the Class AA Chattanooga Lookouts in an exhibition game against the New York Yankees, Virne Beatrice "Jackie" Mitchell Gilbert struck out Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig in succession. In the last couple of decades, at least three women have pitched in independent minor leagues.