

# Eretz Ball: Qualitative Change of Professional Sport Watching in Israel Baseball League

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## Abstract

In 2007, a new professional baseball league was established in Israel. The Israel Baseball League (IBL) can be regarded as one example of expanding of sports in recent years that has an increasing relation with capital.

This paper analyzes the IBL from the perspectives of globalization by using three concepts. 1) This league was one example of “de-territorialized” American professional sport business. 2) The “core-periphery” relation could be seen from the observation of players. 3) This new spectator sport in Israel functioned as “imagined community” for American Israelis.

At present, baseball business expands at global scale and the new business model of independent leagues that supplements this flow has appeared in North America. Thus it can be said that the IBL is one of the independent leagues that is also expanding globally.

## Introduction

In June 24, 2007, the Israel Baseball League (IBL), the first professional baseball league in the Middle East, inaugurated its operation.

Klein (2006) claims that professional baseball, of which core is the Major League Baseball (MLB) in North America, is constructing a worldwide professional baseball business network and such network is currently in expansion. The case of the IBL can be interpreted that a professional baseball program, which has started on the barren ground of Israel, was part of such expansion that ran side by side ranking with professional baseball throughout the world.

It was naturally considered that professional baseball performances should be held in a region where the sport of baseball flourished and had been popular

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before. However, it is difficult to say that this sport is popularly spread in Israel.

Klein (1991: 55) also points out the “peripheral” states supply raw price materials, the semi-finished products, and cheap manpower to the “core” states.

Considering about the IBL, there is one question if it also functioned same role as the baseball academy in the Dominican Republic, which Klein pointed out as MLB’s bridgehead of talent development. However, there is a definite difference between the Dominican Republic and Israel. The former has a long baseball history, in which the game has been infiltrated by local people, and professional performances had taken place before the MLB started gaining influence in this region.

This study analyzes the current expansion of baseball worldwide by relation to the capital to observe its outskirts, Israel. This example is seemed to be useful to understand the realities of globalization in the point of frankly presenting flexible development of capital. From the analysis of the IBL, various aspects of the globalization can be perceived. To understand the new professional baseball in Israel, some theories about globalization and aspect of expansion of new baseball business of independent league are utilized. Two key words of “de-territorialization” (Appadurai, 1996) and “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991) will be utilized to analyze the foundation of professional baseball in this “barren ground of baseball”. By doing so, the fundamental question that why new professional baseball league started on such a barren ground. Moreover, the phenomenon not seen in the past study about sports immigration was also discovered in this study.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study points out some aspects of the globalization of sport by observing the case of the IBL. In this chapter, some theories about globalization of sport are introduced for analyzing the IBL.

The issue of the globalization of sport has been the subject of many studies. However, such analysis has mainly been centered on European sports, notably in relations with capital, connections with the media, labor movements, and awaking of national identity (Maguire, 1999). For example, the conflict of local and global in the observation of the professionalized rugby league in England is reported. Rugby has expanded globally through the media such as TV and connections with huge capitals like multi national companies as their sponsor. But its “original” supporters in England were opposed to the development of a worldwide “Super

League” (Denham, 2004).

Thus, many of the recent studies on globalization of sports emphasize the aspect of awakened local identity via the global diffusion of sport rather than the progress of cultural homogeneity by European and American culture. In the colonial era, indigenous people voluntarily accepted modern sports from their suzerain. This phenomenon should be called not “cultural imperialism” (Tomlinson, 1991), but “cultural hegemony” (Guttman, 1994: 171-188)<sup>1</sup>.

The commodification of sport involves the movements of athletes as parts of their commodities. In this sense, the globalization of sport is remarkably manifested in these movements; the “mercenary” athletes cross the borders to seek wealth. Bale and Maguire (1994) assert that sport labor migration is a typical modern phenomenon in this perspective.

The main objects of study in this field have been English sports, such as cricket (Hill, 1994), football (soccer) (Bromberger, 1994; Lanfranchi, 1994; Mason, 1994; Miller and Redhead, 1994; Moorhouse, 1994; Maguire and Stead, 1998; Milanovic, 2005) and Rugby football (Williams, 1994; Chiba and Jackson, 2006). Furthermore, the study about ice hockey (Maguire, 1996), as well as the investment about the track and field (Bale and Sang, 1994) suggest that as sports emphasize its property as a show business, excellent athletes tend to move to core countries. On the other hand, the athletes who spilt from core countries spread out to the periphery to get new jobs. As a result, European and American sports have diffused to the whole world and these spectator sports generate sport labor migration on the world scale.

Such expansion of sports might be seen as a form of “imperialism” since many of these sports originate in Britain which had been core of hegemony of the world in the past. After World War II, as hegemony moved to the United States, American sports like basketball, American football, and baseball have been expanding throughout the world. And the flow of the athlete also made its core in the United States (Falcous & Maguire, 2005).

The sudden appearance of professional baseball in the Middle East as the barren ground cannot be analyzed with the framework brought forth by the concept of cultural imperialism.

The concepts of “finance-scape” and “ethno-scape” which support the concept

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1. Guttman (1994) grasps the diffusion of modern sports not as one-sided force from the powers to colonies but as the results of the weak’s voluntarily receiving the strong’s cultural events and shows this word of “cultural hegemony”.

of “imagined world” (Appadurai, 1996)<sup>2</sup> are here relevant to understand how professional baseball was established in Israel, a country where the game isn’t penetrated to local people so much. Furthermore, Anderson's (1998) idea of “remote place nationalism” is effective to consider that American immigrants in Israel confirmed their identity to watch baseball game as an “American sport”.

It is difficult to explain the establishment of the IBL. Though this phenomenon is part of the world wide expansion of professional baseball stimulated by the MLB’s world strategy, this professional league’s experiences have been completely different than the one of other newly established professional league (after the 1990’s) like the Colombian or Nicaraguan baseball leagues. In addition, there were some examples of players’ stories that could not be explained by Klein’s (1991) conceptualization of baseball as tool to escape poverty.

This paper causes a stir in the former studies of globalization of sport by drawing some examples which contrast with the conventional explanations from watching the new professional baseball league in Israel.

## **Context of Baseball in Israel**

The Middle East has been a baseball barren for a long time. In 1888, Albert Spolding, who had played baseball professionally and promoted baseball as a business, led a professional all-star team around the world, holding exhibition games in some cities where they visited. One game was held beside the Great Pyramids in Egypt. However, baseball didn’t take root. In this period, when sport diffused from the Powers to peripheral area as cultural hegemonic phenomenon (Guttman, 1994), the peak of that hegemony was the British culture. Therefore, American sport did not set up in these areas in which American influence wasn’t strong.

Baseball was first introduced in 1927 in Israel. At an orphanage in Jerusalem kids had been given baseball equipment and started to play the ball game. The game then expanded to other places in Israel and baseball and softball leagues emerged across many parts of the country. The Israel Association of Baseball and the Israel Softball Association was formed in 1986. In addition to a national team

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2. Appadurai (1996) assumes that landscapes which the individuals can imagine expands remarkably as globalization advanced and presents this phenomenon in the word of “imagined world”. Thereon, he names the landscape through wealth “finance-scape” and the one caused by the diffusion of the ethnicity “ethno-scape”.

which was formed for international tournaments, there are about 3000 ball players today in the country and they compete against each other in youth or adult league<sup>3</sup>. However, baseball is not a popular sport in Israel. Soccer and basketball are more popular and both sports have professional leagues.

There are some baseball fields within the country. Those are mostly for kids. In the city of Modi'in, for example, where a large number of youth and kids play baseball, there is a local baseball field that is larger than stadium track. It is not actually for baseball but a multipurpose sport field. In the city of Bet Shemesh kids play baseball at the amphitheater. In Ra'anana, there is a large baseball field that can accommodate three separate diamonds at opposite corners of the field<sup>4</sup>. These three cities became franchises of the IBL squads in their inaugural season. In July 2005, a Boston-based entrepreneur group established a new baseball business in Israel. In 2006, the IBL headquarters announced their inaugural season would be held, which became the first professional baseball performance in the Middle East.

This new professional baseball league differs from the other existent professional baseball leagues in some aspects. First, baseball isn't a popular sport in this country. In the business of spectator sports, the local popularity of the given sport is considered to be a precondition for the success of the professional performance. On that point, it can be argued that the order was reverse in Israel. In a word, the IBL was founded with the purpose of promoting a new baseball market in the baseball barren, in Israel.

It was difficult to recruit the players domestically. As a result, Israeli players were a minority. There were one hundred twenty seven players in the roster of the league when the 2007 season started. The foreign players came from countries where baseball is comparatively popular such as the United States, Japan, Canada, Australia, the Dominican Republic, Colombia and another baseball barren, Ukraine. With seventy nine players, the majority of the foreign players were American, representing about sixty percent of the roster (Table1). This is revealing of a particular character of the league; it is not considered to be domestic professional league in Israel, but a kind of North American independent minor league.

There were thirteen Israeli players on the roster at the beginning of the season. As a whole, their abilities were inferior to the ones of the other players.

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3. See the IBL web site, 'History' ([www.israelbaseballleague.com/baseballinisrael](http://www.israelbaseballleague.com/baseballinisrael)), Visited on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

4. Ibid.

**Table 1: Players Nationality (at the opening of the 2007 season)**

	Total	Israel	U.S.	Canada	Australia	Japan	D. Rep.	Colombia	Ukraine
Bet Shemesh Bluesox	22	3	15	1	1	0	1	0	1
Modi'in Mlacle	22	2	10	4	2	0	4	0	0
Petach Tikva Pioneers	21	2	13	3	1	0	2	0	0
Tel Aviv Lightning	22	2	13	1	2	0	4	0	0
Ra'anana Express	19	2	13	0	1	0	2	1	0
Netanya Tigers	21	2	15	0	0	1	2	1	0
Total	127	13	79	9	7	1	15	2	1
Percentage	100	10.2	62.2	7.09	5.5	0.8	11.8	1.6	0.8

Source: Official 2007 Yearbook: The Israel Baseball

\* "D. Rep." means Dominican Republic

Therefore, there were few opportunities for them to participate on the games, and their salaries were also less than foreign players.

Tryouts had been held in U.S., Israel, and the Dominican Republic. Though all of the Latin American players had professional careers, most of the other players only had amateur experiences at the university or high school level. Some Americans and Canadians had played for minor league teams in North America, but their professional experiences were in independent leagues or the MLB subsidiary class AA minor leagues at most<sup>5</sup>.

There had been only two baseball fields which were eligible for professional play within the country before the league started. Gezer Field, which was located in the Kibbutz near Jerusalem, had actually been used for little league baseball or soft ball. And Yarkon Field was located in the Baptist Village of Petak Tikva, a suburban city of Tel Aviv. The IBL repaired Gezer Field and hastened to construct new ones in Tel Aviv for the inauguration of the league. However, all of them had poor facilities as they had no concrete stands and were enclosed only by wire nets. The auditorium had plastic chairs on the ground or small stands made of iron pipes and wood plates. This echoes the minor league baseball fields for rookie class Gulf Coast or Arizona League in the United States.

Though it was difficult to imagine that these environments fit in professional performance, the league started six team formats. Every team was named after domestic cities like "Bet Shemesh" Blue Sox. The IBL carried out 41 regular season games per team in their 2007 inaugural season. The post season games were held by the tournament system. Its format was based on their regular

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5. In addition, two Dominican players had played for AAA level, and another two had professional experience in Japanese professional league.

season standings.

### **Some Aspects of the Globalization of Professional Sports in the IBL**

This study is mainly based on a fieldwork in Israel (7-15th, August, 2007). Existing theories about globalization are referred in order to analyze the phenomenon of the sudden apparition of a professional baseball league in Israel. The players were observed not only during the games, but also at their dormitory. And interviews were carried out as well. All of the investigations were carried out with the permission of IBL authority. The IBL official web site was consulted on a regular basis and e-mails from the league staffs were a source of information as well. In addition, the official program issued by the IBL was helpful to get the outline of the league. The distinctiveness of this new league, which started in the baseball barren, is analyzed in light of the research results below.

#### ***“De-territorialization” watching in the IBL***

The IBL illustrates how not only players move transnationally, but also the baseball performance by the U.S. enterprise itself can shift and act on barren ground.

The analysis of the IBL as an aspect of globalization, brings forth the concept of “de-territorialization” (Appadurai, 1996). It suggests that the boundaries such as borders between nation states have become less significant with the flow of people, goods and information in the advance of globalization. This “de-territorialized” phenomenon can be observe everywhere on the sport scene. For example, some foreign players change their nationality to participate in another national team squad, while some spectator sports like “English” Premiere League football or “American” Major League Baseball can be watched elsewhere in the world through satellite broadcasting systems.

Klein (2006: 90-124) observes that the U.S. government regulated the total of foreign players for the organized baseball<sup>6</sup> by limiting the H-2B visa issued to minor leaguers, especially after the 9.11 terrorist attacks of 2001. Immigration controls have become more severe, thus the MLB teams send the Latin players who had been developed in the Dominican academy to their subsidiary baseball team in Canada where immigration is not as strict as in the United States. These examples illustrate that MLB’s farm leagues transcend national borders these days.

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6. The “organized baseball” is the word which means the MLB and its affiliated farm leagues.

It is here argued that the IBL is an example of the “de-territorialization” of the sport industry. While the IBL’s head-office was in Boston and most of the field managers and the staffs had lived in the United States, they temporarily moved to Israel during the IBL season. And Americans made up the majority in the rosters. Moreover, the opening game was televised in the United States via cable<sup>7</sup>.

***Finding the “Core” and “Periphery” in the IBL: The “Gringo” and the “Latino”***

In his observations of Dominican baseball, Klein (1991: 42) discovered a “core-periphery” relations presented in the “Modern World System” theory (Wallerstein, 1974), or the “Dependency theory” (Frank, 1967). Peripheral Dominican professional baseball lost its top players who left for the organized baseball in North America. As a result, Dominican baseball has been suffering from a decreasing attendance. This composition of “Underdevelopment in the Dominican baseball” (Klein, 1991: 47-61) can be seen from the observation of the IBL. On the other hand, the composition as peripheral Israeli and core American could not be seen in the IBL.

The observation of Israeli players shows that their lifestyle is same as one from “core” developed countries while their existence seems to be “peripheral”. In other words, they are not playing baseball to slip out of poverty.

The player composition of the league is divided roughly between Latin American players represented by Dominicans and Caucasian players from other developed countries. In the light of the “core-periphery” theory, the term “periphery” will be used in the remaining of this paper to refer to players from developing countries, while “core” will be use to refer to players from developed countries.

Generally speaking, Latin Americans call themselves “Latinos” and refer to Caucasian people as “Gringos” with what Klein refers to as yearning and xenophobic feeling (Klein, 1991: 116). Though these words were used between the IBL players, there seemed to be no derogative nuances and they used them with each other with no emotional hostility.

An ethnic and racial boundary was, however, observed during the course of the fieldwork; “Latinos” shared rooms with other “Latinos” at the dormitory, even if they were not members of the same team. Similarly, “Gringos” usually had meals with other “Gringos” after the game and vice versa.

Observed in their daily life at Kfar Hayarocc in the suburb of Tel Aviv, the

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7. E-mail from Marty Appel, Director of Public Relations of IBL, February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008.



“Gringos”, who took part in the IBL just for fun, stayed up late after the games every night enjoying internet in the lobby located in the dorms. Their fellow Latino players, however, who perceive their participation in this league as a profession would usually stay in. In order to save some money and spend the time, they would sometime mutually cut their hair in the lounge room. Such practices illustrate the relations between “core” and “periphery”.

Most of the “Gringos” didn’t have professional experiences before joining the IBL. The few players who had professional careers in the minor league had already retired, had another profession or had been playing as amateurs before their contract with the IBL. The holding period of the league in Israel corresponded to summer vacation season in Europe and North America. As such, many of the players kept their school registers or their jobs in their home country, participating in this league as if it had been one of their vacation activities. For the “Latinos”, however, the IBL was a tool to wealth. They were motivated by the one thousand dollars salary per month, which is similar to the amount paid to play in their homeland or in North American minor leagues, along with the free lodgings and meals, while they are not familiar to the Middle East where the language, the culture, and the lifestyle were so much different with their home countries.

Moreover, most of “Latinos” had been released from their teams in North American professional baseball for lack of ability or injury. In addition, as the average worker's annual salary only come up about seven hundred dollars in the home countries of the Latinos (Klein, 1989), playing for the IBL was far more advantageous economically than working and training for winter-ball in their home country during summer. Thus the “Latinos” chose to play in Israel as an occupation, and their daily life in Israel is also modest.

The daily life of “Latinos” and “Gringos” reflect these differences of standpoints; there were no visible confrontations between both groups, but they usually spent their free time in their own groups.

During the all-star break, non all-star players were given three day holidays. At that time, many “Gringos” rented cars and went out to Eilat, one of the most famous beach resorts in Israel that faces the Red sea. Considering the high prices in Israel, it can be estimated that they would spend at least a quarter of their IBL season guarantees in this short trip. In addition, they enjoyed visiting many of the domestic sightseeing spots on this holiday. In contrast, “Latinos” usually stayed at the dormitory in which the full meals were served on their off days. Only Jerusalem, the sanctuary of Catholicism, was visited during the season. In sum,

there is big distance in the posture “professional baseball player” between “Latinos” and “Gringos” even if they were both playing on the same stage.

### **“Eretz Ball”: “Imagined Community” for American immigrants in Israel**

Jewish diaspora have called their homeland “Eretz”. This word presents “our home land Israel”. From some factors below, Jewish nationalism can be enumerated for one of the reason of establishing professional baseball league in Israel.

Middle East is actually not ideal location for baseball players to develop their skills. It doesn't have enough rainfall to rear lawns which are indispensable for baseball fields. Furthermore, it can be predicted that there will be difficulties to find young talents to play baseball, as the game is unpopular in the country, contrary to basketball and soccer which have already infiltrated as professional sports.

There is no necessity to spread baseball as a spectator sport to Israel. The MLB have been intending to diffuse the game globally under their world strategy since 1990's. This strategy consists of two pillars; scouting young amateur talents, and promoting their performance in the baseball academies in Dominican Republic or Venezuela. These are expected to generate profits in the near future. As such, the MLB didn't directly invest in the IBL because it didn't expect any potential for a future profit.

There were many American, Canadian and Australian-Jewish players on the roster. For example, Dan Rootenberg, who had lived in New York, had participated in the Jewish national team for amateur international tournaments before establishment of IBL. Though he had professional carrier in the independent Frontier League in the United States, retired as professional player and worked as trainer in the gym in New York when the IBL established. He was the first contracted player of the IBL and move to Israel with his wife and new-born baby for start-up of the league of his home land.

Most of the league administrative office stuffs were American-Jewish as well. For example, Dan Duquett, the Director of Baseball Operations of the IBL was a former General Manager of Boston Red Sox. And Andrew Zimbalist, who had attempted to establish the United Baseball League as “the third Major League” on the occasion of MLB strike in 1995, was named the league adviser. They established the IBL with their know-how of the baseball business management before. Actually, the profit cannot be expected for the short term there. On the

other hand, the IBL managements hoped and aimed to organize Israel national team which consists of Jewish major leaguers and domestic Israeli players for 2009 World Baseball Classic<sup>8</sup>.

There are efforts to link baseball as an American sport and the Middle East. The IBL official program traces origin of baseball in Israel the game in 1927 in Jerusalem. On that game, one of the early Zionist leaders, Judah Magnes, who became the first president of Hebrew University had played as a second baseman. And in ancient Egypt under the rule of Pharaoh Thutmose III, about 3500 years ago, people enjoyed a ball game with a stick. Thus the IBL commissioner, Daniel Kurtzer observed that the inauguration of the IBL could be defined as a “coming back” of ball game to the Middle East (Israel Baseball League, 2007: 6).

Most of the spectators of the IBL were immigrants from the United States. In the immigrant state of Israel, American immigrants have been minorities not only in their birthplace, United States, but their homeland, “Eretz Israel”. Thus baseball functions as the symbol of the identity for minority groups such as American Israelis and Jewish Americans, who shares similar identity, in both countries.

Jewish Americans established the new professional baseball league in this baseball barren to diffuse the national pastime of their native country to their mother country, “Eretz Israel”. It can be argued that American Israelis recollected their native country by watching the IBL’s retrospective baseball scene. Gezer Field, which is one of the oldest baseball fields in Israel, located in Kibbutz in the suburb of Jerusalem, in the most popular ballpark in the IBL. Incidentally, it reminds the audience of the movie “Field of Dreams” because of the cornfield surrounding the baseball field. The tickets for regular season’s last game at this site were sold out in advance sale.

In sum, the IBL functioned as a place of the identity confirmation. Maguire (1999) showed the figuration related to global sport is shaped by the cross-border flow of many elements such as people, technology, capital, image, and ideology, etc. In the case of the IBL, Jewish nationalism of both Americans and Israelis can be considered to be one of the reasons for the establishment of baseball in the region.

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8. See the IBL web site ([www.israelbaseball.com](http://www.israelbaseball.com)). Visited September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

## Functions of IBL: Expanding periphery of professional baseball

### *IBL as sport business*

It can be said that the IBL is one of the independent professional baseball leagues managed by the U.S. capital<sup>9</sup>. It was one of the trans-nationalized and globalized aspects of recent professional sport.

Hirata et al. (2008) locate sport club whose core are professional players to the center of the sport industry and claim that top pro prospects who have excellent playing abilities should be paid large salaries because it causes attendance development and expands markets of sport commodity. However, this approach can be adopted for top professional leagues of popular sports in each country, as the MLB or the Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB), Japanese professional baseball league. It doesn't seem to fit small scale baseball performances such as the IBL. Thus professional baseball in Israel isn't expected to succeed if its aim is only the domestic market.

During the IBL's inaugural season, there were 28,813 attendances in total. That means only two hundred twenty nine attendances per game (see Table 2). The admission fee was seven U.S.\$ (twenty five shukels), while children were free

**Table 2: 2007 season attendance of the IBL**

	Openning	Season Total	per game
Bet Shemesh Bluesox	19	7945	418
Modi'in Mlacle	21	5213	248
Petach Tikva Pioneers	20	4933	247
Tel Aviv Lightning	23	2712	118
Ra'anana Express	20	2148	107
Netanya Tigers	18	1371	76
Regular Season Total	121	24322	201
Openning Game	1	3112	
All Star Game	1	1112	
Playoffs	3	769	256
Championship Final	1	2610	
Total	126	28813	229

adopted from e-mail communication between auther and the former IBL staff

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9. Independent baseball leagues are minor leagues which don't have affiliation with the MLB. They aren't member of the National Association of Professional Baseball League (NABPL).

of charge. Thus in total, the IBL earned only 200,000 U.S.\$ including the all-star game and the play-off series. As players received a salary of two thousand U.S.\$ for a two months season<sup>10</sup> and supposing each team had twenty five players, the deficit of the league would be estimated to about 100,000 U.S.\$ in their financial balance. However, it should be emphasized that the founders would have had to invest a lot initially for the dormitory, food and transportation for the players and the staffs, to rent baseball facilities, and to rebuild the playground.

In light of these observations, it is not considerable that the IBL business model is expectable in this current situation in Israel where baseball is not popular sport. Then, why did the professional baseball start on such a barren ground?

Klein (2006: 96-100) observed that Dominican academies established by the MLB teams functions as reservoir where Dominican young boys develop their skills until they are sent to the United States. The role of these academies is becoming more important as the terrorist attacks of September 2001 have limited the entry of foreign labor. Thus the author claims that there is a need for a place in Latin America where players can develop their skills as cheap manpower until they can play in the United States. The supply of players as cheap manpower is also a result of the MLB's international strategy.

And a new business model of independent leagues is key word of to understand of increase of such cheap baseball labors. These non-organized baseball leagues by the MLB have been ventured in the United States since mid 1990's.

These professional baseball leagues, whose labor costs are comparatively low, play the role of diffusing baseball to the grassroots in the North America, and carry out the same function as the academy in Dominican Republic for the MLB. These new baseball business offer live baseball games to people who lives in the small cities which have no affiliated minor league teams. And the organized baseball can avoid immediate contracts with the players whose eligibility as professional are doubtful and probe their play in the independent leagues. Young players can test themselves to see if they can play as professionals or not.

As previously observed, the IBL season is from late June to August; which is the vacation season in Europe and North America, when students graduate from school and start to hunt for jobs. Actually, as so many IBL players have just graduated, playing in the independent league represents a fine opportunity to test

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10. 1500\$ for local players. (From interview to plural players on the fieldwork.)

their abilities as professionals. Considering that one pitcher made a pro contract with an American independent league team after the IBL season<sup>11</sup>, it can be assumed that the IBL's purpose to develop players was accomplished.

### ***The business model of independent league***

It was in 1869 that professional baseball started in the United States. Following that various leagues repeated to rise and fall in the Midwest to the East Coast, they came to be divided roughly into the major leagues by putting their franchises in the big cities and the minor leagues whose franchise were developed in small cities. Though there were differences in the capital power between the major and the minors and the former sometimes purchased player's possession rights from the latter, there could not seem to be a clear "ruler-subordinate" relation between the two until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Fukui, 2005).

This relation changed in the 1920s. The MLB both nominally and virtually had become the top league and reorganized the minor leagues as their feeder leagues (Kemp & Wolff: 2003, v ). Afterwards, the MLB expanded according to the upgrading of infrastructure, televising its games, and the development of motorization. The minor leagues had become functioned as farms that promoted players who got contracts with major league teams after the 1950s. The baseball leagues and teams without affiliations with the MLB gradually disappeared.

However, in the 1990's new baseball businesses were established. The Northern League and the Frontier League, that had no affiliation with the MLB, launched their operations in 1993. After that, the new baseball business model of "independent league" expanded in North America though it repeated to rise and fall. As such since the era which began in the 1990's is the development for the North American baseball business.

In light of such prosperity within the baseball businesses in North America, it can be said that the organized baseball and the independent leagues are coexisting together. The independent leagues function as a player-development system without investments for the MLB, and play the roles of diffusing baseball to the grass roots. They also function as gateways to success for baseball players all over the world. Thus this new business model of the independent leagues can be seen as the result of the globalization of baseball.

Considering about the case of the IBL, the expansion of professional baseball to the baseball barren like Brazil, South Africa and Europe can be forecasted.

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11. Rafael Bergstorm had signed and played with the Bridgeport Bluefish of Atlantic League after the IBL season. He continued to play for that team in 2008 season.

Baseball is gradually diffusing to these areas in actual (Azzoni, 2006; Carino, 2006; Klein, 2006; Shapiro, 2006). However, if professional operations were to start in these areas, it shouldn't be read as diffusion as "cultural hegemony", but rather as the expansion of the player reservoir to the "periphery". That's why most of them may be invested by the U.S. capital or left under American influence.

The IBL, which inaugurated in the baseball barren, is considered not as an Israeli national professional baseball, but as a North American independent baseball league expanded to Israel.

## Conclusion

This study analyzes the outline of the Israel professional baseball that started in 2007 and its meaning in the context of the globalization of the sport of baseball. From the analysis of this new professional baseball, some aspects of the realities of the globalization come to the surface.

After the inaugural season operation, the IBL announced the plan for second season and looked for sponsors for each team in Israel. However, it was "frustrating"<sup>12</sup>. Once the IBL had given up 2008 operations<sup>13</sup>, they decided to carry out a shortened one-month operation in early July of 2008. However, eventually the league tournament couldn't be operated. Then as the substitution for the tournament, "IBL Summer Baseball Festival" was planned. It contained promotions for the franchise city and an exhibition game of the "Israeli All Star Team" v.s. the "IBL All Stars"<sup>14</sup>. However, it also couldn't be held. The owner group of the IBL didn't have enough money to operate the league tournaments. The first professional baseball league in Middle East had actually disappeared.

Considering the current unwillingness of the media, which even refused to report the result of the IBL games, it is difficult to estimate whether attendance for professional baseball will increase in a short term in the future. Moreover, there remains the issue of the custom of the Sabbath among Jews, which means that sport performances can't be held on weekends (Friday afternoons and Saturdays) for religious reasons. So the IBL held the games on weekdays and Friday's mornings.

The sport of baseball turns into the production tool for profit or market development for impresario, and player development. It can clearly be argued that

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12. Interview with Andrew Wilson, the IBL staff. August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

13. E-mail from Marty Appel, May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2008.

14. IBL web site. Visited on September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

cultural events like sport qualitatively changes in advance of globalization, as exemplified by the case of the IBL.

The existence of professional baseball in the Middle East cannot be expressed by the words like cultural imperialism. This phenomenon rather suggests that globalization has strengthened the relation between sports and the capital in recent years.

In the expanding flow of capitalized sport, it is not surprising that venture businesses such as the minor league baseball can emerge anywhere in the world. Considering the baseball history about establishment of professional baseball leagues in England, where soccer originated, during the inter war period when the hegemony of Britain and the United States was alternating (Chetwynd, 2006; Bloyce, 2008), it is possible to operate professional baseball in Europe or Africa by the U. S. capital. The case of the IBL shows that it is becoming less important whether baseball has already diffused or not for the establishment of professional baseball leagues in the de-territorialized world.

And in this case, it can't be considered Israeli as an acceptor of the western sport culture from "cultural hegemony" perspective. It is more appropriate to see the IBL as a stage where American immigrants can imagine their birthplace in the de-territorialized world as a result of globalization. And the more important matter is the fact that this phenomenon was realized by the capital. The establishment of the professional baseball in the baseball barren in Israel is essentially different from how baseball expanded to Japan, as the symbol of civilization, or to the Dominican Republic, as a symbol of power, caught hearts of the local people first, then developed to one of the show business at last.

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