

## SPORTS

## BASEBALL

## Makin' a pitch for a higher profile

MLB dedicated to helping grow the game in China through improved connections with players and fans

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Major League Baseball is bullish on the sport's future in China.

When MLB made its first forays into the country a dozen years ago, most Chinese had never watched a game, let alone seen a real baseball bat — but that's changing.

"Over the past 12 years, MLB has been facilitating youth training while exploring the expansion of the country's baseball market," Tony Qi, managing director of MLB China, said on Monday.

"We have been nurturing top Chinese players through the MLB Development Centers while promoting the sport and its culture to more people throughout China.

"In the past three years we have witnessed fast development of the sport, thanks to government support and the efforts of many people. I believe we can maintain that momentum in the next three to five years."

Detailed numbers of China's baseball industry are included in the Chinese Baseball Population White Paper, published by MLB on Oct 30.

According to the report, China's total "baseball population" — including players, coaches, administrators and fans — reached 41 million in 2019, of which 21 million are classified as "active." Most are located in major cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.

Among active fans, 81.5 percent are classified as "baseball consumers", 45.7 percent regularly watch games and 40 percent have played or are playing the game.

China's adult baseball population is mostly higher-income, white collar consumers, among which 86.9 percent have bachelor degrees and 82.1 percent have a monthly income



MLB China has organized a series of activities like MLB Junior PlayBall! clinics and the MLB Experience Carnivals to get more Chinese kids involved in the sport. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



“The people buying the caps and jackets are all potential baseball fans. Initially, they just like the logo. Then maybe they learn about the Yankees, the Dodgers or other teams. They want to know about them.”

Tony Qi, managing director of MLB China

exceeding 8,000 yuan (\$1,141). Health, quality of life and investment rank high on their list of priorities.

While the numbers also indicate a growing positive impact of Chinese baseball development in recent years, they are not yet big enough given the market potential of the world's most populous nation.

Qi said there are still many challenges ahead — including the lack of suitable baseball fields.

"It's a chicken or egg thing," said Qi. "Investors hesitate to inject funding into building new baseball fields because there's no strong demand. But as we are promoting the sport, people who are interested in playing it might not be able to because there are no fields."

"Some people need to drive for at

least an hour to find a place to play ... and the quality of many existing fields is simply not up to standard."

One strategy that has proven very successful in China is associating MLB with fashion. While most consumers might not be familiar with the storied history of the New York Yankees, for example, stylish caps and jackets bearing the iconic 'NY' logo are hugely popular.

For MLB China, that's a big plus. "I don't have detailed statistics, but I believe many Chinese who wear MLB caps do not know too much about the Yankees or the Los Angeles Dodgers ... but they want those caps because they represent fashion," said Qi.

"The people buying the caps and jackets are all potential baseball

fans. Initially, they just like the logo. Then maybe they learn about the Yankees, the Dodgers or other teams. They want to know about them. That's when they start to have more contact with baseball and start to become actual fans."

MLB is also attracting the younger generation through promotional activities, baseball carnivals and e-sports competitions.

According to Qi, MLB staged its first e-sports tournament in China this year.

Eight teams competed in the seven-stop tournament, with the final in Shanghai last month.

"Gamers can experience very real baseball matches," Qi said. "Many of them might not know too much about baseball, but through e-sports

they learn about the rules and the strategy. The aim is to attract young people and teach them baseball."

This year also marked the return of the China National Baseball League (CNBL). The rebranded professional circuit, comprised of four teams, played a total of 42 games.

Originally established in 2002, the competition was suspended in 2011 and again in 2017 due to a lack of funding and exposure.

With the CNBL's return, MLB has offered its help in growing the competition. Qi said MLB's priority is to use its 100 years of expertise to help grow the domestic league's profile and make it more professional and entertaining.

"The CNBL is doing its best to be more professional," league commis-

sioner Qin Xiaowen said at the end of the season.

"We have to focus on the promotion of baseball culture to let more people enjoy our matches."

"We have to let the younger generation see the potential and the future of baseball in China, and we have to make our fields and facilities meet international standards and make our games more entertaining and enjoyable."

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