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## Matching Matsuis

Like countryman Hideki in 2003, Kazuo Matsui is stepping into the New York spotlight. BY NATHAN HALE

SO MUCH WILL BE NEW for Japanese shortstop Kazuo Matsui as he makes his Major League debut this spring with the New York Mets. Ninety feet will still separate the bases, but they'll be on baseball diamonds in new cities, in the midst of a new culture, shared with new teammates and new opponents.

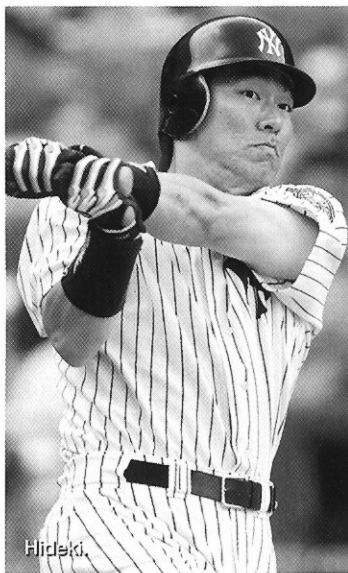
"I'm not thinking about the numbers," Matsui told reporters when he arrived in the United States in December. "My first priority is to play in every game. I've got a lot of work to do. I'll be facing all new pitchers, and I have a lot of learning, but I'm looking forward to seeing how far I can go. I know there are a lot of expectations for me, and I'll just have to do my best."

Expectations are high not just because of his accomplishments in the Japan League — he was a seven-time All-Star and the Most Valuable Player in 1998 — but also because of the success that countrymen Ichiro Suzuki and Hideki Matsui have had making the transition to the Majors.

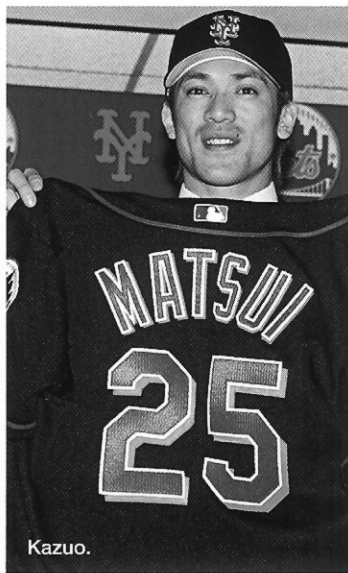
Ichiro spurred the Mariners to an American League-record 116 wins in 2001, when he was the league's Rookie of the Year and Most Valuable Player. Hideki Matsui nearly won the AL Rookie of the Year Award as well, after helping New York reach the World Series last season.

All that "Little Matsui" has to do then is resurrect a Mets team that has spent the past two seasons in last place. And even though Kaz and Hideki don't share familial ties, just imagine the comparisons to come with the two playing for cross-town rivals.

Kaz's saving grace is that he may turn out to be the brightest star from the Land of the Rising Sun. While he hasn't reached the home run totals that earned Hideki the



Hideki.



Kazuo.

nickname Godzilla, Kaz's 69 roundtrippers over the last two seasons with the Seibu Lions are impressive for a shortstop. And as difficult as it may be to believe, he has a half step on the lightning-quick Ichiro according to observers — Ichiro, himself, included. In addition to the switch-hitter's prowess at the plate — he has batted above .300 for seven consecutive seasons — Kaz is a four-time Japan League Gold Glover said to have Omar Vizquel-like range and a cannon arm. Mets scouts thought highly

enough of his glove work to ask homegrown phenom Jose Reyes to shift to second base.

The 28-year-old Matsui is also known for his durability, having played 1,143 straight games — the fifth longest streak ever in Japanese baseball; what might help him stand out most, however, is his flashy personality. Just take a look at that spiky hair, dyed orange at last sighting. Whereas Hideki apologized as he left Japan, Kaz proudly held up a sign pronouncing the Mets as his team of choice, and spoke frankly of his desire and eagerness to take on new challenges half a world away. And at his first New York press conference, he wore a borrowed 1986 Mets World Series ring, pledging to try to win one himself.

It's a lofty goal, but Matsui may be up to the task. When he started his pro career in Japan, Kaz altered the characters of his first name to mean "top earner in the middle," in reference to his goal to become the best possible shortstop. Four years ago, he was voted Japan's greatest shortstop of all time. The Mets hope he achieves similar success in the Majors. ♦

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