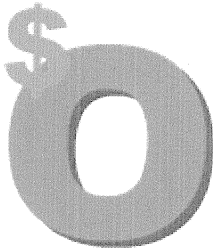


NEW YORK POST

YANKEES INTRODUCE CHINA DUO

By BRIAN LEWIS

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July 7, 2007 -- The Yankees yesterday introduced Kai Liu and Zhenwang Zhang, the first players from China signed by a major-league team with approval of the Chinese Baseball Association. Did those signings merely get the Yanks a pair 19-year-old prospects, or did they secure a foothold in a vast, untapped land of potential pinstriped converts?

Liu is a left-handed starting pitcher on the National Team with an 84 mph fastball and good spin on his breaking ball. Zhang, a catcher, played in last year's World Baseball Classic. They expect to get their working visas in two weeks, and after taking part in a pre-Olympic event, will head to Tampa in late August.

Whether they ever find their way to The Bronx is a different story altogether.

"Chinese baseball is like a baby that is trying to learn how to walk. We need to lend them a helping hand," CBA Chairman Jun Lei said in English.

"Our young players becoming Yankees is very good. Everybody knows that Mr. Yao Ming has become the most famous athlete in the world. Everybody in China watches Houston [Rockets] competitions. In the future our baseball will become the same situation. Maybe everybody will watch on TV and watch the Yankees competition."

With China's population over 1.3 billion - a fifth of the world's total - that would be music to Yankees ears.

From Yao's global appeal, to 7-footer Yi Jianlian being picked sixth in last month's NBA draft, to 110-meter world record-holder Liu Xiang, it's also clear when China focuses on a sport, it produces talent.

"The goal by the Yankees and baseball is to speed that process up. Everyone took notice of the NBA's initiatives and the talent that's been produced," said GM Brian Cashman, who saw Yankees caps while walking the streets of Beijing.

"There's an interest in baseball growth in China, and it behooves us to take advantage of and assist in that because our business is baseball."

In January, the Yankees reached an alliance with the CBA, with delegations from each traveling to both China and Tampa in March. By June 18 they had signed the two teens, and a week later they had inked the majors' first-ever Chinese sponsor, dairy-producer Yili.

The Yankees also are giving the CBA a video pitching machine that simulates big league pitching - from changeups to 100-mph heat - and they're funding and sponsoring a camp for 12-16 year-olds in Wuxi, in the Jiangsu province.

"In China there are more and more people starting to like baseball," Liu said. "The game is getting more and more popular. I believe we can bring more excitement and get the game even more popular."

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