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Yankees' Chinese players are meant to be start of something bigger

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By Rick Freeman, AP Sports Writer

NEW YORK — Liu Kai and Zhang Zhenwang don't speak much English, don't know anything about American culture and when asked which, if any, members of the pantheon of Yankees superstars they're familiar with, Liu offered up: "Randy Johnson."

But when the Chinese teenagers - the first from the mainland to be signed by a major league club - were given Yankees caps and jackets by general manager Brian Cashman on Friday, the first thing each did was take the cap between his hands and bend the brim into just the right curve before putting it on.

Yep, they're ballplayers.

And it's not just the Yankees who have a stake in their future progress in the United States. Whether either prospect - Liu is a slim left-hander with nice spin on his breaking ball, Zhang is a catcher who takes pride in throwing out baserunners - ever makes it from Tampa, Fla., to the "ta lian mang" (major leagues) isn't as important as what they absorb along the way.

Major League Baseball, which signed off on the Yankees' efforts in the country, would like to see the world's most populous country become a baseball hotbed, too. And the more Chinese they can expose to the game, the better.

"Even though it wasn't that popular, I can't give it up" Liu said, recalling a childhood in which most of his friends played other sports.

Right now, "bangqui" (pronounced "bahng-chee-oh") is a niche game in China, trailing far behind soccer and basketball in popularity. Because the country has excelled at sports and has more than four citizens for every American, it has the potential to be a fertile ground for player development. It also has a growing middle class with the kind of discretionary income that creates a profitable market for the game.

"The only way that's going to happen is for us to assist that process," Cashman said. "The biggest impact that major league baseball can have is at the grassroots level."

Toward that end, the Yankees announced Friday they'd be helping run a baseball camp for 12-16 year olds. The team also will give a video pitching machine - a high-tech device that simulates major league pitching - to the CBA.

This follows the agreement the Yankees came to with the association in January, which calls for the Yankees and the Chinese national team to exchange personnel and support each others' efforts to grow the game. Major League Baseball has also discussed the possibility of opening the 2008 season in China, as it has previously in baseball-mad Japan.

Commissioner "Bud Selig and his office are very serious about the growth of this league internationally," Cashman said.

And it's Liu and Zhang who are at the forefront of baseball's attempts to pollinate baseball culture in the People's Republic. Interest is far behind that in other east Asian nations like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan - all of which have produced multiple big leaguers. The Seattle Mariners recently signed two Chinese players, infielder outfielder Jia Yu Bing and catcher Wang Wei.

All four players signed by big league clubs have played in the China Baseball League, the country's top level of competition. Zhang's Tianjin Lions have played for the title every year since the league started in 2002, and won it in '02, '06 and '07. He played "pushou," or catcher, for China in the World Baseball Classic last year.

Liu, a skinny starting "tushou" whose fastball tops out at 84 mph, played for the Guangdong Leopards.

The two have played together on national teams. Through an interpreter, Liu said that Zhang is "a very good catcher."

The two rarely get to see any major league games in China - understandable as the country is 12 hours ahead of New York in the summer, but have occasionally watched on the Internet. It also makes some sense that the first Yankees star to come to Liu's mind was the Big Unit. Johnson only spent two seasons with the Yankees, but he's been in the majors every year of Liu's life.

When the pair's work visas come through, which Zhang and Liu said they expect to take a couple more weeks, they'll be getting a crash course in all things Yankee - and Yankees. They'll be exposed to Florida and minor league baseball, where Liu said they are hoping to "learn how to get used to the American sports culture."

The two said they have formed few impressions of America so far, although Zhang noted "in the United States it's very free."

They'll be treading mostly unfamiliar ground for Chinese athletes, although there are several Taiwanese players in the majors, including Yankees starter Chien-Ming Wang. China's biggest sports star in America, of course, is Houston Rockets center Yao Ming.

The teens beamed every time they heard Yao's name mentioned, and Liu even cracked that he was "confident that in the future the pictures next to Yao" on billboards back in China would be of himself and Zhang.

Both said they feel more comfortable knowing they'll have another Chinese player on the team with them in an otherwise unfamiliar environment. But sports tends to be the great equalizer among athletes with otherwise little in common.

Just in case, though, there's one phrase of English Liu made sure to learn before his first trip to the States:

"My name is Liu Kai, I come from China."

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