



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

THE SPORTING SCENE

In the Bronx, "Irabu" spells bliss in any language.



NO one got bitten. Stately, plump Hideki Irabu, feet together on the mound, chewing gum clamped down, mind-set unknown, heaved a sigh, leaned and bowed, cricked his left leg, and threw a called strike to the Tigers' first-inning leadoff man, Brian Hunter, ending a sports prehype possibly unmatched since last month's heavyweight debacle in Las Vegas, and beginning a pleasurable evening's work that matched all expectation. "I wouldn't sell this night for anything," the newest and strangest Yankee celebrity declared (through an interpreter) after the game ended—a financial evaluation not to be taken lightly, coming as it did from a rookie who had signed on for \$12.8 million (for four years), and who had enjoyed a full-scale City Hall photo op with Mayor Giuliani before ever throwing (or witnessing) a single pitch to a major-league batter. Before long, he had thrown ninety-eight of them, sixty-one for strikes (good for nine strikeouts in six and two-thirds innings), and was allowed to take his seat, pelted by happy sounds issuing from 51,901—no, 103,802—tonsils, minus surgery, with the Yankees ahead, 10-2 (it was 10-3 in the end), in an interhemispherical laughter. Just possibly, baseball's new era had begun.

After the Yanks helpfully batted around in two successive innings, peeling away all tension, the players and the ecstatic Stadium multitudes were free to give full attention to the other event of the evening, which was international communication. Around the Stadium, fans had been putting down rows of "K"s—a scorecard "K" for each Irabu whiff—on the Stadium facings, but with Japanese variations: a pair of

ideograms for "strikeout" in Japanese, a terser "K," in the katakana phonetic alphabet, behind the loge level in short left. On the opposite, Yankee side, John DeSomma and Steve Palladino, a couple of fans from New Jersey, were hanging up cards marked 伊, one by one, under the impression that they meant "strikeout"—they'd cribbed from a headline in the *Bergen Record* that morning—but they were politely tipped off by some nearby Japanese-born rooters that it was the "I" from "Irabu." "Whatever," opined a gent in the next row. "It's the thought that counts."

Up in the press box, I was struck dumb by an exotic forestry of Japanese appearing on the word-processor screen of a neighbor scribe, Mr. Yoshinori Nakai, of the *Mainichi* newspaper chain, and in a pause he told me that the Irabu story wasn't going to be easy for his readers back home to swallow, since the twenty-eight-year-old pitcher had turned his back on his old team, the Chibe Lotte Marines, while stubbornly (or prudently) insisting on signing only with the Yankees. "This is a story for the younger generation," he said. "Others have . . ." He paused.

"Mixed feelings?" I suggested.

"Ah, yes, 'mixed feelings'! Thank you."

In the Yankee clubhouse later, Derek Jeter, the dashing shortstop, was talking to three female Japanese reporters. "Hideki had a lot of composure out there," he said.

"'Compo-sure,'" said one of the young women carefully.

"You got it," Jeter said, and the women laughed, bending over with happiness.

When the Yankees came off the field after the postgame handshakings and fist-bumpings, Manager Joe Torre cut in front of Irabu, and, with careful mime, tipped his cap toward the fans. Irabu, a quick study, caught on and tipped his—and won a last, full-throated roar of appreciation. —ROGER ANGELL

THE PICTURES

Star treatment for "Men in Black" 's six-legged extras.



THE villain in the movie "Men in Black" is a giant cockroach from another galaxy. The film, consistent with movies dating back to "Them" (1954), takes a fairly traditional approach to insect villainy. "Bugs thrive on carnage," "Men in Black" 's Agent K (Tommy Lee Jones) says in one scene. "They consume, infest, and destroy. They live off the death and decay of other species." Though the film may demonize roaches, the director, Barry Sonnenfeld, wants to make it clear that he and his crew went to great pains to show respect for the living roaches on the set. "We always had to have people there from the American Humane Association," Sonnenfeld said recently from a poolside phone at the Hotel Bel Air. "In each shot we had to tell them how many roaches we were using. So if we had eighty roaches coming out of a Dumpster they would actually count—'We're still missing three, guys'—and we'd be shooting at ten thousand dollars an hour, looking for three roaches."

Needless to say, when Agent J (Will Smith) crushes a number of roaches underfoot late in the movie, those are stunt doubles. "Mustard packs," Sonnenfeld said. "You're allowed to step on mustard-defamation league. We also had hundreds

