

Ichiro walks off into history in 'sayonara' at Tokyo Dome

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TOKYO — At times, it seemed as if he'd go on hitting forever.

But on Thursday night, a player who defined baseball at its very best on two continents for a generation took his final swing.

The great Ichiro has said "sayonara."

Now 45, Ichiro Suzuki left the Tokyo Dome field in the eighth inning, waving goodbye to the packed crowd amid hugs from Seattle Mariners teammates in a three-minute walk that signaled to all his monumental run was over.

"I have ended my career and decided to retire," Ichiro said, speaking in Japanese at a news conference after a 5-4 win over Oakland in 12 innings.

He said his contract was through the two games in Japan, and said he decided before arriving last week to step away.

"After the reception I got today, how could I possibly have any regrets?" he said. "I couldn't play well enough in spring training to earn an extension."

Ichiro went 0 for 4 in his farewell. In his last at-bat, he came up with two outs, a runner on second and a tie score in the eighth. He hit a slow grounder to shortstop and, still hustling the whole way, was barely thrown out at first.

He took his spot in right field in the eighth, then was pulled by manager Scott



Seattle Mariners right fielder Ichiro Suzuki returns to the field for waiting fans after Game 2 of the Major League baseball opening series against the Oakland Athletics at Tokyo Dome in Tokyo on Thursday.

AP Photo/Koji Sasahara

Servais and the walk into history began in front of a sellout crowd of 45,000. He strolled in, turned and waved to the crowd with all of the usually reserved Japanese fans on their feet.

To chants of "Ichiro, Ichiro, Ichiro" he was greeted at the dugout — and later in the dugout — by emotional embraces from teammates.

Yusei Kikuchi, the Japanese rookie pitcher who started the game in his big league debut, openly broke down crying when he embraced Ichiro.

Kikuchi later took a full minute to compose himself before responding about Ichiro's impact. And he cried when the two embraced in the dugout after the game.

"Since spring training to this day, Ichiro told us it is a gift for him to play

in Tokyo," Kikuchi said speaking through a translator. "But for me, he gave me the greatest gift that I can play with him."

Yet when Mariners teammate Dee Gordon bowed, Ichiro broke into a laugh — like, "not necessary, bro."

Oakland players stood solemnly and watched camera flashes and iPhones catch the historic scene. All over the stadium signs read: "Ichiro we love you" and "Ichiro is Life." Fans wore his famous No. 51 in all shades, colors and from all eras.

The fans got one more chance to salute when he came back on the field after the game and acknowledged their ovations.

Ichiro was 0 for 5 in the two regular-season games against the A's in Tokyo, leaving him with 3,089 hits in 19 seasons — a sure

Hall of Fame resume. He had 1,278 before that over nine years in Japan, making him baseball's all-time hits leader.

Ichiro struggled in spring training with only two hits in 25 at-bats. And in two exhibition games in Tokyo against the Tokyo Giants he was 0 for 6.

"I really wanted to play until I was 50, but I couldn't do it," he said. "It was a way of motivating myself and, if I'd never said it, I don't think I would have come this far."

Ichiro praised his countrymen, who are famous for being reserved. Not tonight. Not on this night.

"Japanese people I have always thought don't in general express themselves," he said. "But today's experience blew that away. They were incredibly passionate tonight."

"When I look back on my career, I know I will remember today as the most memorable day, without a doubt."

For years, Ichiro's at-bats were must-see TV in his homeland, with fans tuning in during breakfast and their morning commute. A star before he left, he became an even bigger sensation once he proved that yes, a Japanese hitter could indeed succeed across the ocean in the majors.

He said he'd probably train Friday, keeping up his workout routine, but wasn't sure what comes next. He joked he lacked the "charisma" to be a manager.

"I'll be known as the 'Man Formerly Known as Ichiro,'" he cracked.

Ichiro's retirement had been anticipated for a while.

The outfielder returned to the Mariners before the

start of the 2018 season, then transitioned last May into a role as the special assistant to the chairman that allowed him to still be with the team and take part in pregame workouts, but meant he could not play in any games.

Ichiro was a 10-time All-Star, an AL MVP and Rookie of the Year and won 10 Gold Gloves. He set the record with 262 hits in a season and wound up with a .311 batting average.

He became one of the most important figures in baseball history, and not just because of his stats and awards.

Ichiro carried the burden of an entire country in coming to the United States, and his success created opportunity for the countless others who have followed. Whether he wants to accept the label or not, Suzuki was a trailblazer. His influence and importance shouldn't be understated.

He preceded Hideki Matsui, who had a stellar career with the New York Yankees, by two years. In the years since, players like Nori Aoki, Kosuke Fukudome and Kaz Matsui followed. Last year marked the arrival of two-way sensation Shohei Ohtani.

Ohtani said he watched highlights of Ichiro's final game when he woke up at Los Angeles Angels' camp in Arizona.

"I still can't believe it," he said through a translator. "I won't be able to see him play anymore but I'll still have all the memories."

Boston's Mookie Betts says he expects to become free agent

FORT MYERS, Fla. (AP) — Don't expect AL MVP Mookie Betts to agree to a long-term contract with the Boston Red Sox before he can become a free agent in late 2020.

Despite Mike Trout's \$432 million, 12-year agreement with the Los Angeles Angels, Nolan Arenado's \$260 million, eight-year deal with the Colorado Rockies and Alex Bregman's pending \$100 million, six-year contract with the Houston Astros, Betts is content to remain on track for testing the market.

"That's exactly what I expect," he said Wednesday,

the day after Trout's deal became widely known. "Didn't expect anything to happen until I'm a free agent. So, it's just one of those things where you just got to go out and play. Can't worry about the economics of the game right now. They have to take care of what they have to take care of. I'm going to take care of what I have to take care of. But the common thing is to win a World Series, and I think that's definitely what we both want to do."

Manny Machado joined the San Diego Padres as a free agent on a \$300 million, 10-year deal while Bryce Harper



Boston Red Sox's Mookie Betts connects on a solo home run in the seventh inning of a spring training baseball game against the Atlanta Braves on March 16 in Fort Myers, Fla.

AP Photo/John Bazemore, File

signed with the Philadelphia Phillies for \$330 mil-

lion over 13 seasons.

Betts, 26, one of the best

players in baseball since making his major league debut in 2014, has a \$20 million, one-year contract and is eligible for arbitration again next winter.

"I'm under no pressure to do anything," Betts said. "It's OK for two sides to disagree. That's perfectly fine. It's normal. I got two more years, going to make the best of them. Got to worry about Year 1 right here. I'm going out and doing my best to help the team win, and also next year. It's just one of those things where it's all right to disagree."

Betts said he loves Boston and playing for the Red Sox. But he also has other

things in mind.

"I've definitely grown to love going up north in the cold and all those type of things," he said. "But it definitely doesn't mean I want to sell myself short of my value."

"Everybody values different things — what do you value, where you're going to be in five years."

"I definitely don't pay that much attention to it that far in the future. I kind of worry about what's going on now and just being treated fairly. I think that's just kind of the main thing."

"The biggest thing in my mind is just to be treated fairly."

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