

Asians in American sports • Asian Americans in world sports

Tanaka is first NPB player brought to MLB with new posting agreement

Continued from page one

The new agreement addresses these issues by changing the posting fee to a "release fee" (capped at \$20 million) established by the NPB club. Any MLB team can negotiate with the player, with the winner paying the release fee only when the two parties agree on a contract. Now, players are guaranteed a higher share of the revenue, NPB clubs are assured their fee (even if it is capped), and MLB clubs must bargain in good faith.

Ten days after the new agreement went into effect, the Tohoku Rakuten Golden Eagles posted star pitcher Masahiro Tanaka. Just 25 years old, Tanaka has a 99-35 NPB record over the past six seasons, including last season's amazing 24-0 record, as well as a 2.30 overall ERA, averaging nearly a strikeout per inning and fewer than two walks per game.

Though many clubs were interested, the Yankees signed Tanaka to a seven-year, \$155-million contract and paid the \$20 million release fee to the Eagles. Tanaka's contract is the fifth-highest in major-league history for a pitcher, and the new posting agreement means that Tanaka will receive most of his \$175 million acquisition cost.

If there is one MLB player that Tanaka should thank for his hefty contract, it's the Texas Rangers' Yu Darvish, who has singlehandedly revived the east-west pitchers' market. Long expected to make the jump from Japan to MLB, Darvish boasted similar NPB numbers to Tanaka before he was signed by the Texas Rangers prior to the 2012 season.

Although his contract was very similar to Daisuke Matsuzaka's in both numbers



TRANSPACIFIC BASEBALL TRAFFIC. Yu Darvish of the Texas Rangers throws pitches during a spring training baseball game against the Los Angeles Angels in Tempe, Arizona. In two seasons, Darvish has amassed a 29-18 record with a 3.34 ERA. (AP Photo/Morry Gash)

and length, Darvish has yet to disappoint. In his two seasons with the club, Darvish has amassed a 29-18 record with a 3.34 ERA, averaging more than a strikeout per inning. In 2013, he improved in nearly every category, leading the league in both total strikeouts and strikeout rate and finishing second in Cy Young Award voting.

What Darvish has done for the reputation of Japanese major-league pitchers, Hyun-jin Ryu has done for Korean major league pitchers. Before the Los Angeles Dodgers signed Ryu in 2013, no other pitcher had come straight to MLB from the Korean Baseball Organization (KBO). Expectations were diminished for the young lefty, who possessed neither a dominating fastball nor a good offspeed arsenal, and his impressive KBO strikeout records

were disregarded because they occurred against lesser competition.

Signed to a six-year deal worth \$36 million, Ryu finished last season with a 14-8 record, two complete games, 154 strikeouts in 192 innings, and a 3.00 ERA that was eighth best in the National League. He will need to show that he can continue his excellence in his sophomore season, but Ryu has already proven the worth of KBO pitchers in MLB.

Successful position players are a comparative rarity among NPB imports, with one notable exception being Ichiro Suzuki. Long a dominant NPB and MLB hitter, Ichiro is 258 hits short of 3,000 for his MLB career. While he once collected nearly that many in a single season, age and opportunity have diminished his

skills. Now 40, Ichiro hasn't hit over .300 since 2010, the last season he collected more than 200 hits. In addition, his current team, the New York Yankees, already has three starting outfielders, so he may only be able to reach that milestone if they can trade him.

Like Ichiro, Norichika Aoki is a speedy outfielder and a good hitter without much power, but he has leveraged those skills to great effect in MLB. After a successful career with the Yakult Swallows, Aoki played the last two seasons with the Milwaukee Brewers, hitting .287 with 50 steals atop the Brewers' batting order. More impressive was his .355 on-base percentage, which measures his ability to take a walk as well as pick up a hit. In the offseason, Aoki was traded to the Kansas City Royals, for whom he will also serve as leadoff man and everyday right fielder as he continues to establish himself as a legitimate MLB position player.

It was once possible to cover all of the Asian MLB players in a single article, but now there are far too many, including Taiwan's Wei-Yin Chen, Korea's Shin-Soo Choo, and Japan's Hiroki Kuroda and Koji Uehara. Each hit, run, strikeout, save, and win chalked up by these players further solidifies the status of Asian players in MLB. What was once an anomaly has become commonplace, and the new posting agreement should grow that transpacific baseball traffic even more.

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