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The newest and oldest Japanese MLB players are both bargains

By Mike Street

Special to The Asian Reporter

Compensation has been one of the main challenges surrounding players who move from Japan's Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB) to Major League Baseball (MLB). For every successful pitcher like Hiroki Kuroda or Koji Uehara, there's a high-flying pitching bust like Daisuke Matsuzaka or Hideki Irabu. And while there have been plenty of pitching successes, very few NPB hitters at any price have succeeded in MLB.

This season, one NPB player who is outstanding at both pitching and hitting will try to become the next Babe Ruth, while another former NPB player will return to the team where he first made his mark in MLB. And both have proven to be bargains.

In the modern game, baseball is divided into pitchers and hitters, and players almost never do both well. The cringe-inducing sight of a pitcher flailing ineffectively at the plate has become so commonplace that teams in both MLB's American League and NPB's Pacific League use a designated hitter to hit for the pitcher.

The last player to be a top-ranked pitcher and hitter was Babe Ruth. More than a hundred years ago, he began his career as a lights-out lefty for the Boston Red Sox. After he led the league in home runs for two straight seasons, Boston traded him to the New York Yankees, who took him off the mound and put him in the field, where he made history by crushing 665 of his 714 career home runs.

We may see Ruth's equal in Shohei Ohtani, a 23-year-old who had spent his professional career so far with the NPB Nippon Ham Fighters. In five seasons, the flame-throwing righty notched a 42-15 record with a 2.52 ERA (Earned Run Average) and a 1.08 WHIP (Walks & Hits per Innings Pitched). He also struck out more than a batter per inning with a pitching repertoire that includes a 100-mile-per-hour fastball complemented by a devastating slider and splitter.

Any MLB team would be interested in a player like that — especially one who is so young — but Ohtani is a force at the plate too. Hitting lefty, Ohtani collected 48 home runs and 70 doubles along with a .286 average in 1,170 plate appearances. When Ohtani wasn't pitching, Nippon put Ohtani in the outfield or at designated hitter to keep his dangerous bat in the lineup.

This combination of skills makes Ohtani an anomaly on either side of the Pacific. Since the 1960s, there has never been a pitcher who regularly played in the field or at designated hitter. So when the Ham Fighters agreed to post him for MLB teams to sign, Ohtani became one of the most-coveted free agents on the market.

Incredibly, however, Ohtani's youth hindered his contract, thanks to MLB's collective-bargaining agreement. This agreement restricts players under age 25 to the league-minimum salary, while also capping the signing bonuses available to international players. As a result, the Los Angeles Angels signed Ohtani to a two-year contract in December worth around \$4 million.

That's chump change compared to what other NPB pitchers have been paid in MLB. Daisuke Matsuzaka



BASEBALL BARGAINS. Shohei Ohtani (left) of the Los Angeles Angels and Ichiro Suzuki (right) of the Seattle Mariners participate in Major League Baseball (MLB) games on opening day in Oakland and Seattle, respectively, on March 29, 2018. Both athletes played on teams in Japan's Nippon Professional Baseball before moving to MLB.

signed a six-year contract for more than \$52 million with the Boston Red Sox in 2007, and Masahiro Tanaka signed a six-year, \$114-million contract with the Yankees in 2014. And neither possessed Ohtani's prodigious hitting skills.

Even the two other less-heralded NPB pitchers who signed with MLB teams this season are making as much as, or more, than Ohtani. Relievers Yoshihisa Hirano and Kazuhisa Makita each signed two-year deals worth \$6 million and \$3.8 million with the Arizona Diamondbacks and the San Diego Padres, respectively.

Claiming to be uninterested in money, Ohtani said he signed with the Angels because he "just felt something click." But when his deal expires and he becomes eligible for a bigger contract, Ohtani's pay should be more in line with his value — assuming he meets expectations in MLB.

Arguably, Ohtani might never have gotten the chance to sign any MLB contract if it hadn't been for Ichiro Suzuki, the first NPB position player to come to MLB. Since he arrived in Seattle in 2001, Ichiro's accomplishments have been too numerous to mention, but they include winning Rookie of the Year and Most Valuable Player in the same season, breaking George Sisler's "unbreakable" 84-year-old record for the most hits in a season, and collecting his 3,000th hit at age 42.

When he first arrived in the league, however, Ichiro was also undervalued. Because he was the first NPB hitter in MLB, many doubted whether he could hit MLB pitching. So his first Mariners contract was worth around \$4 million per year, at a time when the average MLB salary was about \$2.2 million, and the highest-paid player, Alex

Rodriguez, made \$22 million.

Even after Ichiro had proven himself, his salary remained relatively modest. His three-year deal in 2004 was worth about \$11 million annually, and his five-year contract in 2008 earned him about \$18 million annually. The league-average contract in both years was around \$3 million, and Rodriguez remained the best-paid player both seasons, earning about \$22 million in 2004 and \$28 million in 2008.

While Ichiro might not have deserved to be the best-paid player, he certainly earned less than he might have if he'd sold his talent to the highest bidder, as Rodriguez had. Ichiro was a bargain for the Mariners because he valued loyalty over money, just as Ohtani and other Japanese MLB players have chosen teams that made them feel comfortable over teams that may have paid them more.

In his latest one-year deal, Ichiro is making just \$750,000, with performance incentives that could double the contract's value. While that may seem like a paltry sum, Ichiro is 44 years old and well past his prime. He hit just .255 last season on 215 plate appearances in 136 games, 22 as a starter. Those are all career lows, except for his batting average, which is second only to his .229 in 2015, his first season in the National League.

This year, back in the American League and familiar Safeco Field, Ichiro might rebound slightly from last year's performance, but his days are numbered. Regardless, he remains as a reminder to Ohtani that it's possible for NPB players to exceed expectations and become one of the best-performing, if not best-paid, players in the game.

The Ohtani Dilemma: Can fantasy accommodate a two-way star?

By Jake Seiner

The Associated Press

Shohei Ohtani had general managers scrambling this winter with his jump to the major leagues.

They weren't alone. For folks who write the code that tracks stats for fantasy baseball websites, Ohtani's two-way talents have caused quite a conundrum.

At CBS fantasy baseball headquarters in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Eric Chylinski and his team nearly ran their markers dry filling whiteboards with formulas and ideas about the Japanese star. As director of marketing and fantasy product, Chylinski was among those charged with solving the Shohei Ohtani dilemma.

"We've never had one player cause such a shift in our workflow," Chylinski said.

With his ace-level arsenal and prodigious power, Ohtani has the tools to become an unprecedented fantasy baseball star — but only if the game can adapt to accommodate him. The quandary faced by Chylinski and others: How does a game predicated on separating hitters from

pitchers account for a player who can do both?

Ohtani signed with the Los Angeles Angels in early December and formally announced his intent to pitch and hit. Two-way play isn't unheard of in the majors — Brooks Kieschnick did it with the Brewers in 2003 and '04, and Padres catcher Christian Bethancourt experimented with it last year — but nobody in the fantasy baseball era has done both at a level that would warrant interest from fantasy players. Even homer-hitting pitchers like Madison Bumgarner don't generate enough offensive power to provide fantasy value, which is why leagues usually disregard pitchers' offensive stats entirely.

"With Ohtani, it's different," said RotoWire.com president Peter Schoenke. "He's an international superstar. He could be the two-way player everybody wants."

Everyone except perhaps fantasy programmers.

Fantasy baseball — and the software that supports it — is structured on the idea

that baseball has two types of players: hitters and pitchers. Batters earn points for stats like home runs, Runs Batted In (RBI), and batting average. Pitchers contribute with figures like wins, saves, and Earned Run Average (ERA).

What happens if one player becomes a worthwhile contributor on both sides?

"There are millions of lines of code, and you're putting in an exception for just one player," Schoenke said. "It gets tricky."

At CBS, Chylinski and his staff spent weeks weighing options, polling users, and implementing new software. They decided their best move was to rewrite the site's code to support Ohtani as a hitter or a pitcher, but not both at the same time. That means owners who draft Ohtani can slot him as either a batter or a pitcher for each scoring period, but they'll only get credit for his contributions on that side of the ball. ESPN has implemented an almost identical system.

"We explored all of the options we could think of and solicited feedback from our users as well as our analysts," Chylinski

said. "In the end, the one player approach was by far the most popular."

There are drawbacks to CBS' plan. If Ohtani hits a home run and throws seven scoreless innings on the same day, frustrated owners will only get points for one of those feats.

In leagues where owners set their lineups only once per week, Ohtani's two-way value will be basically nullified, since players won't be able to move him back and forth from their lineup to their rotation on start days. Both CBS and ESPN allow league commissioners to manually adjust scoring if they want to credit Ohtani for both, but fantasy owners who spoke to The Associated Press didn't plan to do that.

"I think not designating whether Ohtani is solely a pitcher or hitter is going to cause a lot of chaos in my league, especially if a team loses a close game because of him," said fantasy commissioner Roberto Macias. Macias added that several owners in his weekly league want to make Ohtani

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