

Ichiro walks off into history in “sayonara” at Tokyo Dome

By Stephen Wade and Tim Booth
AP Sports Writers

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

But on the night of March 21, 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 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 Servais and the walk into history began in front of a sellout 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 résumé. 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 MLB 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.

PROLIFIC PLAYER. Fans of Seattle Mariners right fielder Ichiro Suzuki cheer with banners reading “Ichiro” at the spectators' stand prior to game one of a Major League Baseball opening series between the Mariners and the Oakland Athletics at the Tokyo Dome in Tokyo. (AP Photo/Toru Takahashi)

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.”

At the New York Yankees' spring training site, New York Yankees pitcher Masahiro Tanaka said it was hard to describe Ichiro's legacy on aspiring players in Japan.

“It's too grand of an impact. I can't even put them into words,” Tanaka said through a translator.

As for the reception at Ichiro's finale, he added: “I think that atmosphere, it only happens to special players. You sense respect. Because of who he is, that happened today.”

Ichiro became a one-word, household name in Seattle. It was only right his final professional game came with that team.

But it was time for Ichiro to step away. He hit .205 in 44 at-bats and all nine of his hits last season were singles. This year, too often, he looked like a 45-year-old trying to hang on.

Ichiro admitted he badly wanted to get a hit in Tokyo. And his fans always wanted to see him play in the World Series — his teams made it to the playoffs just twice, never advancing to the Fall Classic.

He expressed no regrets, however. Well, maybe one.

“I had 3,089 hits in America,” he said. “But I think my wife — who always makes me rice balls before games — said she made 2,800 rice balls. So I wish I could have played long enough so she could have hit 3,000 as well.”

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