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A legend's retirement kicks off a season packed with Asian talent

By Mike Street
Special to The Asian Reporter

Just like the sound of “Play Ball!” and the smell of fresh-cut outfield grass, our annual look at the best Asian players in Major League Baseball (MLB) signals the start of the baseball season. While there are one or two position players, most of the high-impact eastern imports are pitchers, many among the best in the game. And the top Asian baseball player right now, Shohei Ohtani, can pitch and hit with the best — though this season, he will be doing just one of those.

Ohtani joined the Los Angeles Angels in 2019, drawing even more notice than other superstar Japanese pitchers because of his abilities on both offense and defense. Ohtani had previously spent five years playing Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB), where he logged a 42-15 record with a 2.52 ERA (Earned Run Average) and a 1.08 WHIP (Walks & Hits per Innings Pitched) while clubbing 48 home runs and 70 doubles in 403 games.

In 2018, Ohtani won the MLB Rookie of the Year award after hitting .285 with 22 home runs in just 114 games while notching a 3.31 ERA and striking out 63 batters in 51.2 innings. No player since Babe Ruth has made 10 pitching appearances and hit more than 20 home runs, and Ohtani didn't even play a full season.

Last October 1, Ohtani went under the knife for Tommy John surgery, and the resulting rehabilitation will limit him to designated hitter duties this season. His true value to the Angels won't be realized until he returns to the mound in 2020, when he should be able to build on whatever advances he makes at the plate this season.

Hot on the heels of Ohtani, the latest pitching sensation to make the leap from the east is coming to a familiar Pacific Northwest destination for Japanese players: the Seattle Mariners. The Mariners have had a Japan-born player on



their roster every season since 1998, but they've never signed a NPB pitcher with the talent of Yusei Kikuchi, who inked a

four-year, \$56-million contract with Seattle before this season.

In Kikuchi's eight seasons with the

TOP TALENT. Ichiro Suzuki, left, and pitcher Yusei Kikuchi (top photo) of the Seattle Mariners leave a press conference in Tokyo. The Mariners played a two-game baseball series against the Oakland Athletics to open the Major League Baseball (MLB) season at the Tokyo Dome. In the bottom photo, Shohei Ohtani of the Los Angeles Angels takes a swing during an MLB game on September 22, 2018, in Houston.

Saitama Seibu Lions in NPB, he had a record of 74-48 with a 2.81 ERA and 1.18 WHIP. In 2017, his best season, he went 16-6 against a 1.97 ERA and a dominating 0.91 WHIP, striking out more than a batter per inning for the first time in his career. He joins a Mariners team in rebuilding mode, but he will make a great foundation around which to create a winning team.

Many other Asian MLB players will try to make their mark this season, each with his own great storyline. Slugging third baseman Jung-ho Kang will return to the Pittsburgh Pirates after almost two years off due to injury and legal issues in his native South Korea. Yu Darvish, once the top Japanese pitcher in baseball, will look to redeem himself after a lost first season with the Chicago Cubs, while starting pitcher Masahiro Tanaka and the New York Yankees are favorites to win the World Series.

But any catalog would be incomplete without celebrating the retirement of Ichiro Suzuki, the best Asian baseball player to grace an MLB diamond — and one of the best ever to play the game. Without him, it's likely that few, if any, of these other Asian players would be on an MLB team today.

Looking back now, it's hard to remember the skepticism that greeted the arrival of Ichiro. The Seattle Mariners signed him in 2000 to a three-year, \$14-million contract — a bargain, even when you factor in the \$13.1 million fee that Seattle paid for the right to negotiate with him. Back then, that was a lot of money to pay a player, and his price tag and Asian heritage meant that Ichiro arrived with a target on his

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