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Postponed baseball season delays debut for four Asian stars

By Mike Street

Special to The Asian Reporter

Part of baseball's perennial cycle is the offseason anticipation, when fans watch the arrivals, departures, and development of players on their favorite teams. This year, thanks to COVID-19, Major League Baseball (MLB) has postponed opening day until at least mid-May, giving us even more time to anticipate the arrival of four new Asian stars.

After the posting system changed in 2018, MLB teams have signed even more players from Japan's top baseball league, Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB). In the past, teams had to bid for the chance to negotiate with NPB players, and then they could sign the player to a contract. Most famously, this led to the ill-fated acquisition of Daisuke Matsuzaka by the Boston Red Sox for more than \$103 million in 2006.

Under the new system, MLB teams pay the player's former NPB or Korean Baseball Organization (KBO) team a sliding percentage of the player's MLB contract, from 20% for smaller contracts to 15% for the most expensive contracts. Under the new terms, Matsuzaka's \$52-million contract would have cost Boston a posting fee of \$9.675 million, instead of the \$51.1 million they paid.

This new system has brought more Asian players to MLB, especially at the lower end of the pay scale. This season, MLB teams inked relatively modest deals with three players from the NPB and one from the KBO.

The KBO has become a new source of talent, bringing players such as Hyun-jin Ryu, the Los Angeles Dodgers' all-star lefty. Prior to this season, Ryu signed with the Toronto Blue Jays, where he will be joined by NPB veteran pitcher Shun Yamaguchi.

Toronto signed the right-handed Yamaguchi to a two-year deal for just \$6.35 million, plus a posting fee of about \$1.27 million to the Yomiuri Giants. Yamaguchi pitched 14 seasons as a starter and reliever with the Giants and the Yokohama Bay Stars, amassing a 65-58



AP Photo/Jeff Roberson



AP Photo/Frank Franklin II

record with 112 saves, supported by a serviceable 3.33 ERA (Earned Run Average) and 1.24 WHIP (Walks & Hits per Innings Pitched).

Since he's 32, Yamaguchi's best pitching years are behind him, and he could end up as a starter or reliever, but he'll have to change his pitching style to succeed. He creates ground balls by pitching down in the zone, but that is where MLB hitters

increasingly look for the ball, using uppercut swings to hit home runs.

A player who made adjustments even before coming to MLB is 31-year-old pitcher Kwang-hyun Kim of the KBO. Like Toronto, the St. Louis Cardinals took a low-risk chance by signing Kim to a two-year deal for \$8 million, plus about \$1.6 million to Kim's former club, the SK Wyverns.

AP exclusive: MLB vets get \$4,775 daily during virus outset

By Ronald Blum

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Gerrit Cole, Mike Trout, and other veteran major leaguers will receive \$4,775 per day in advance pay for the first 60 days of the season during the stoppage caused by the coronavirus pandemic, a total of \$286,500.

That's just 2.5% percent of the \$193,548 the New York Yankees pitcher and Los Angeles Angels outfielder were scheduled to earn each day during the 186-day season from their \$36-million salaries, tied for the major league high this year.

The daily total was obtained by The Associated Press after it was confirmed by Major League Baseball (MLB) and the players' association following their agreement in March on how to proceed during the stoppage.

Less veteran players receive smaller amounts specified in the agreement: \$16,500, \$30,000, or \$60,000, depending on the contract.

MLB has delayed opening day until mid-May at the earliest, and it remains unclear when or if the season will start.

Under the terms of the deal, teams are combining to give \$170 million in advance pay to players on 40-man rosters, injured lists, and outright assignments to the minor leagues. The payments will be made in equal installments on the normal



payroll schedule and do not have to be repaid if the season is scrapped. They cover from March 26, the original opening day, through May 24 or whenever the season starts, whichever is earlier.

Money is being split into four classes based on contract status. Young players not yet eligible for salary arbitration have what baseball calls split contracts, with different salaries depending on whether the player is in the major leagues or in the minors. Payments to the more senior players were determined by accounting for the less senior players, then dividing the

remainder among players with so-called straight salaries — the same amount in the majors and minors.

A player receives \$275 daily if his salary while in the minors is \$46,000 to \$91,799, a group that includes highly touted rookies such as Boston infielder Bobby Dalbec and Atlanta outfielder Cristian Pache.

Those with salaries in the minors from \$91,800 to \$149,999, a group that has signed at least their second big league contract, get \$500 daily. Those players include well-regarded rookies such as Los Angeles Dodgers infielder Gavin Lux and

SEASON DELAYED. Pitcher Kwang-hyun Kim (top photo) of the St. Louis Cardinals throws during a spring training baseball game against the Miami Marlins on February 26, 2020 in Jupiter, Florida. In the bottom photo, Shun Yamaguchi of the Toronto Blue Jays takes part in a drill during a spring training baseball workout on February 16, 2020 in Dunedin, Florida.

Kim was the KBO's best pitcher last season, logging a 17-6 record with a 3.03 ERA and a 1.24 WHIP. This came at the tail end of 12 seasons with the Wyverns, with a 136-77 overall record, 3.27 ERA, and a 1.33 WHIP.

Kim's adjustment came after he missed the 2017 season due to Tommy John surgery. When he returned, his control improved dramatically, and he cut his walk rate almost in half. This is a good sign for Kim, who doesn't have a dominating pitch, so he needs to keep the ball in the strike zone to succeed in MLB. If he can, he would be a great pickup for St. Louis, who hasn't had a quality left-handed starter since 2016.

Pitchers like Kim and Yamaguchi have often been the most significant Asian imports, but this year, two promising NPB outfielders made the move to MLB. The first, left fielder Yoshitomo Tsutsugo, comes to a Tampa Bay Rays team that already has a standout Asian player in Ji-man Choi, the South Korean who clubbed 19 homers last season.

Like Choi, Tsutsugo is a lefty who fits in at first base or designated hitter, giving the Rays depth and flexibility. And Tsutsugo has an impressive career as a power hitter with the Yokohama Bay Stars, where he hit 205 home runs with a .284 batting average in 10 NPB seasons.

But Tsutsugo is not like the typical free-swinging MLB slugger, trading tons of strikeouts for the longball. He has a fantastic .382 on-base percentage in NPB, and if he can combine that plate discipline with his power in MLB, he should be a formidable threat in the middle of the batting order for the Rays.

The other NPB outfielder coming to MLB, Shogo Akiyama, also gets on base a lot, but he supplements that with a different skill set. He joins the Cincinnati Reds, the last known MLB team to have a

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PLAYER PAYMENTS. Shohei Ohtani of the Los Angeles Angels follows through on a two-run home run against the Texas Rangers during the eighth inning of a baseball game in Arlington, Texas, in this September 5, 2018 file photo. Major League Baseball delayed opening day until mid-May at the earliest, and it remains unclear when or if the season will start. MLB and the players' association have agreed on advance pay for players for the first 60 days of the season during the stoppage. (AP Photo/Ray Carlin, File)

Tampa Bay pitcher Brendan McKay. Players with salaries in the minors of \$150,000 or more receive \$1,000 daily, among them 2019 NL Rookie of the Year Pete Alonso of the New York Mets, 2019 AL Rookie of the Year Yordan Alvarez, and 2018 AL Rookie of the Year Shohei Ohtani of the Los Angeles Angels.

Those with single salaries get the \$4,775 per day. By agreeing to a long-term contract in January, White Sox outfielder Luis Robert moved up to that category.

Projected over a full 186-day season, the payments would work out to salaries of \$888,150, \$186,000, \$93,000, and \$51,150.

Players with straight salaries had the right to opt out of the advance payments, but none did in order to simplify the process, the players' association said.

Illustrating the huge gap between unionized major leaguers and those with minor league contracts, MLB said it was extending its \$400 weekly allowances through May for players with minor league deals.