

Already a star, on court and off, Osaka eyes more

By Howard Fendrich
The Associated Press

Naomi Osaka already is a star at age 23. She has the four Grand Slam titles, the record-breaking endorsement deals, and the willingness to speak her mind to prove it.

Now the question is: Where does she go from here?

It was telling that the second question posed to Osaka at the news conference following her 6-4, 6-3 victory over Jennifer Brady in the Australian Open final — after she took a sip of celebratory bubbly that she said made her “feel a little bit funny” — was about turning in better performances at Wimbledon and the French Open.

After all, each of her major championships so far came on hard courts at Melbourne Park (2019, 2021) or the U.S. Open (2018, 2020). She never has been past the third round at the All England Club or Roland Garros.

Even more revealing was Osaka’s response.

Asked whether her first non-hard-court Slam trophy will come on clay or grass, she said: “Hopefully clay, because it’s the one that’s sooner.”

She is not about biding her time or patient improvement.

And she’s been thinking about where she needs to improve.

“It was one of her goals this year to play well outside of the hard courts. She’s still very young. It’s time to grow on those surfaces. She also believes she can do well and, I’m sure, with the right preparation, with a few, maybe, tactical (and) technical adjustments, we’re going to do well,” said her coach, Wim Fissette. “She’s the person that wants to grow.”

Part of what makes Osaka special is embracing challenges and knowing what she stands for.

That’s been the case off the court and on.

With a racket in her hand, it’s about, as Fissette put it, being able to “love big matches and big moments.”

Osaka wanted to face 23-time major champion Serena Williams in the semifinals, for example.

No fear there.

“She was like when I bring my kids to the



toy store: They are very excited. And Naomi was excited to go on court with Serena. It’s just beautiful to see,” Fissette said. “At the end, this is what you train for, right? To be on the biggest stage with the best player of all time, Serena.”

Away from the game, Osaka says, it took time to find her voice and express her views.

She was born in Japan to a Japanese mother and Haitian father, and she moved to the United States when she was three years old. Last August, she was the first tennis pro to join athletes from other sports in walking out to protest the police shooting of a Black man in Wisconsin.

“Before I am an athlete,” Osaka tweeted at the time, “I am a black woman.”

On her way to the U.S. Open title in September, Osaka wore masks bearing the names of seven Black victims of violence to draw attention to racism and police brutality.

Osaka was asked recently whether there was a message she wanted associated with her latest triumph, which made her 4 for 4 in Slam finals.

“Honestly, for me, when everything happened in New York, I got really scared, because I felt like it put me into this light that was a non-athletic light that I’ve never been in before,” she said. “So I feel like there is a lot of topics that people

suddenly started asking me about that I completely didn’t know about at all. For me, I only like to talk when I’m knowledgeable about the subject or at least know, like, one tiny grain of what I’m about to start talking about. So for me, I just came into this tournament just thinking purely about tennis.”

And yet, in the aftermath of winning the

Angels’ Ohtani having more fun, still chasing 2-way dreams

By Greg Beacham
The Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — When Shohei Ohtani’s major league career got off to its incredible start in 2018, the Los Angeles Angels’ two-way star remembers having fun every day he got on the mound or in the batter’s box.

An injured elbow ligament largely ended the good times and sent Ohtani into a 2 ½-year struggle to recapture his dominant form.

The Japanese star is hoping the struggle is almost over and more fun is on the horizon.

Ohtani’s pitching arm is healthy, his swing is solid, and he’s back in camp to resume his dream of establishing himself firmly as the majors’ most successful two-way player in decades.

To get there, Ohtani believes he needs to return to his mindset in 2018, when he joined Babe Ruth as the only players in major league history to hit 20 homers and make 10 starts in the same season.

“It’s kind of how I felt in 2018 (again),” Ohtani said, speaking through his translator in his first interview of spring. “More than (feeling) pressure, I just want to have fun and feel good out there, and just do my job when it’s given. Hopefully, I want to make (Angels manager) Joe Maddon use me as much as possible.”

The Angels remain committed to the Ohtani experiment, but they aren’t making any grand declarations about their designated hitter’s pitching future after Ohtani managed to make just two terrible mound starts in the past two seasons.

The club is aware the baseball world is wondering whether Ohtani should concentrate solely on his hitting career, particularly after he slumped at the plate last season. But they still believe in Ohtani’s potential.

“I’m eager to watch this just like everybody else,” Maddon said. “If we get Shohei in the right direction, that would be a pretty good offseason acquisition right there. We’ve seen what he’s capable of doing.”

Ohtani missed all of 2019 as a pitcher while recovering from Tommy John surgery, and his return last year during the coronavirus-shortened 2020 campaign was scuttled early due to a strained elbow and forearm. It was a steep decline from

AMAZING ATHLETE. Naomi Osaka celebrates after defeating Jennifer Brady in the women’s singles final at the Australian Open tennis championship in Melbourne, Australia, last month. Osaka already is a star at age 23. She has the four Grand Slam titles, the record-breaking endorsement deals, and the willingness to speak her mind to prove it. Now the question is: Where does she go from here? (AP Photo/Andy Brownbill)

trophy, she was ready to think about a larger role, too.

Many looked at her win against Williams as a passing of the mantle. Osaka also won their meeting in the 2018 U.S. Open final — who could forget that one? — and has eclipsed the 39-year-old American as the highest-earning female athlete because of millions in sponsorship deals.

But to Osaka, Williams is still, and always will be, an idol and an inspiration, a player whose example she wanted to follow.

And the best way to repay that, Osaka figures, is to hold that role for others.

“Hopefully I play long enough to play a girl that said that I was once her favorite player or something,” Osaka said. “For me, I think that’s the coolest thing that could ever happen to me. ... That’s how the sport moves forward.”

Howard Fendrich covers tennis for The Associated Press.

2018, when the AL Rookie of the Year had a 3.31 Earned Run Average (ERA) and a 1.161 Walks & Hits per Innings Pitched (WHIP) over 10 starts.

Ohtani and the Angels both believe he is fully healthy now. He had recently thrown a 27-pitch bullpen session, and Ohtani said his arm currently feels “much better than last year.”

Ohtani is doing a few things differently in a bid to maintain his overall health, although he prefers to keep many of the details private. He said he changed his diet “to make my body feel better.”

Ohtani touched 90 miles per hour when he threw in the bullpen session while wearing a band on his right forearm. He said the device tracks the stress on his arm, hoping to avoid a repeat of last season’s problems.

The Angels hope to insert Ohtani into a six-man rotation headlined by Dylan Bundy and Andrew Heaney, but they will wait until late March to firm up their plans. After the struggles of the last two seasons, the Angels want Ohtani to be fully comfortable.

Regardless of his mound performance, the Angels also need an improvement in Ohtani’s work at the plate. While he still had incredible power last season, his overall designated hitter performance declined sharply to a .657 On-base Plus Slugging (OPS) with just 29 hits in 175 plate appearances.

Again, Ohtani thinks he’s in prime position to return to his 2018 form with the bat as well.

“I’ve been swinging, hitting all offseason, and I think my swing is feeling really good right now,” Ohtani said. “My body is feeling really good. I think we’re in a good spot, hitting-wise.”

The Angels’ commitment to Ohtani as a two-way player was underlined in his contract negotiations last month.

Ohtani sacrificed untold millions when he elected to move from Japan to the majors in late 2017 instead of waiting a couple of years. The Angels got Ohtani for a relative pittance and six years of organizational control, but they avoided arbitration in February by giving him a two-year, \$8.5-million contract through 2022.

“I’m glad that’s out of the way and I can just focus on baseball,” Ohtani said. “I’m not worried about the total amount, and I don’t want to think too far ahead.”

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What you think the risk looks like

What the risk actually looks like

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