

Power-hitting infielder Munetaka Murakami has entered the MLB posting system

NEW YORK (AP) — Power-hitting Japanese corner infielder Munetaka Murakami in early November entered Major League Baseball’s posting system and will be available to teams to sign as a free agent through December 22.

Murakami, who turns 26 on February 2, was the Central Leagues MVP in 2021 and ’22 with the Yakult Swallows and is a four-time All-Star.

He batted .273 with 22 homers and 47 Runs Batted In (RBI) this season, limited to 56 games by an oblique injury. He struck out 64 times.

Murakami hit 56 homers in 2022 to break Sadaharu Oh’s record for a Japan-born player in Nippon Professional Baseball while becoming the youngest player to earn Japan’s Triple Crown. He topped 30 homers in four straight years before an injury-interrupted season in 2023.

He has a .270 career average with 246 homers, 647 RBI, and 977 strikeouts in 892 games over eight Central League seasons, all with the Swallows.

After playing primarily at first base in 2019 and 2020, he has spent most of his time since at third.

At the 2023 World Baseball Classic, Murakami hit a ninth-inning walk-off double off Giovanny Gallegos that scored Shohei Ohtani and Masataka Yoshida to give Japan a 6-5 semifinal win over Mexico. The following day in the championship game, Murakami hit a tying home run off Merrill Kelly in the second inning and Japan went on to beat the United States 3-2.

Also entering the MLB posting system, during the third week in November, were Japanese infielder Kazuma Okamoto and pitcher Kona Takahashi, who will be available for teams to sign as free agents through January 4, as well as right-hander Tatsuya Imai, who can sign through January 2.

Kazuma Okamoto

Okamoto, 29, hit .327 with 15 homers and 49 RBI in 69 games this year for the



AP Photo/Sue Ogrocki, File



AP Photo/Hiro Komae, File

Central League’s Yomiuri Giants. He injured his left elbow while trying to catch a throw at first base on May 6 when he collided with the Hanshin Tigers’ Takumu Nakano, an injury that sidelined Okamoto until August 16.

A six-time All-Star, Okamoto has a .277

average with 248 homers and 717 RBI in 11 Japanese big league seasons, leading the Central League in home runs in 2020, 2021, and 2023. He homered off Colorado’s Kyle Freeland to help Japan beat the U.S. 3-2 in the 2023 World Baseball Classic final.

NIPPON PLAYERS. Munetaka Murakami of Japan hits a home run during the gold medal baseball game against the United States at the pandemic-delayed 2020 Summer Olympics in Yokohama, Japan, on August 7, 2021. Several Nippon Professional Baseball players have entered Major League Baseball’s posting system and will be available to teams to sign as a free agent for 45 days. In the bottom photo, Kazuma Okamoto of the Yomiuri Giants plays in a 2025 spring training baseball game against the Los Angeles Dodgers in Tokyo, Japan.

Kona Takahashi

Takahashi, a right-hander who turns 29 on February 3, was 8-9 with a 3.04 ERA this year for the Pacific League’s Seibu Lions, striking out 88 and walking 41 in 148 innings. He had gone 0-11 with a 3.87 ERA in 2024 after compiling a 22-16 record in the prior two seasons.

Takahashi is 73-77 with a 3.39 ERA in 11 seasons with the Lions.

Tatsuya Imai

Japanese pitcher Tatsuya Imai is likely to move to Major League Baseball after the Pacific League’s Seibu Lions said he will be made available to teams through the posting process. A 27-year-old right-hander, Imai was 10-5 with a 1.92 ERA this season, striking out 178 in 163 2/3 innings.

A three-time All-Star, he pitched eight innings of a combined no-hitter against Fukuoka on April 18. Imai struck out 17 against Yokohama on June 17, breaking Daisuke Matsuzaka’s prior team record of 16 from 2004. Imai is 58-45 with a 3.15 ERA in eight seasons with Seibu, striking out 907 in 963 2/3 innings.

Under MLB’s posting agreement with NPB, a player may be posted from November 1 until December 15 and a posted player has 45 days to reach an agreement with an MLB team.

The posting fee is 20% of the first \$25 million of a major league contract, including earned bonuses and options. The percentage drops to 17.5% of the next \$25 million, and 15% of any amount over \$50 million. There is also a supplemental fee of 15% of any earned bonuses, salary escalators, and exercised options.

Ukrainian sumo wrestler Aonishiki nears the pinnacle of Japan’s national sport

By Stephen Wade
AP Sports Writer

TOKYO — Ukrainian sumo wrestler Aonishiki is only 21 but has moved just one step from the top rank of Japan’s national sport.

In an elaborate ceremony in late November, he was promoted by the Japan Sumo Association to the rank of ozeki, the rung just below the top.

Only two now hold the top rank of yokozuna — grand champion in English: Japanese Onosato and Mongolia-born Hoshoryu.

“I’m happy but I feel more strongly about working harder from now on,” Aonishiki said after the ceremony. “There is a higher rank, and that’s my next goal.”

Sumo’s new rising star, who wrestles under the ring name of Aonishiki Arata, was born Danilo Yavhushyshyn in west central Ukraine and has identified his hometown as Vinnytsia.

He moved to Japan after Russia invaded Ukraine just over 3 1/2 years ago, the byproduct of a friendship he had made a few years earlier with a Japanese wrestler at a tournament.

Japanese media identifies him as being the quickest — he’s wrestled only 14 tournaments — to reach the ozeki rank since 1958 when the present tournament scheduling system was installed.

The promotion was inevitable after he won a prestigious tournament in western Japan. He defeated Hoshoryu in

the deciding match.

He explained earlier that his parents fled to Germany after the invasion and said they are living safely. He said he called them after the big tournament and praised them for allowing him to pursue his interests. He said his mother cried on the phone call. He was told his father did too, but tried to hide it.

“They never scolded me even when I didn’t do well in studies, as they believed in letting me do what I liked to do,” he said.

Aonishiki is small by sumo standards. He weighs in the 125 to 135 kilogram range (between 275 to 300 pounds). This is slight in sumo — in the range of an NFL lineman —

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