



# ***Press Clips***

**(April 11, 2018)**

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**FROM THE OC REGISTER****Sizzling Angels rout Rangers behind 18-hit attack**

By Jeff Fletcher

ARLINGTON, Texas — Although it's far too early to render a verdict, the early evidence certainly suggests the Angels' lineup makeover was a success.

The Angels pounded the Texas Rangers 11-1 on Tuesday night, with all nine starters contributing at least one hit to their 18-hit attack.

At 9-3, the Angels equaled their best 12-game start in franchise history, last achieved in 1982.

They have done so mostly because of an offense that has produced a major-league leading 79 runs. They are now hitting .286, tied for best in the majors.

"Our offense is going to be fun this year," Mike Trout said. "We never think we're out of a game."

After finishing with a below average offense last year, the Angels re-signed Justin Upton, who they had for only one month in 2017. They then added Zack Cozart and Ian Kinsler.

Even without Kinsler, who has been limited to one game because of a groin injury, the lineup has been clicking.

On Tuesday night, they had seven different players each with multi-hit nights, including three apiece from Jefry Marte and Martín Maldonado. Andrelton Simmons hit his first homer of the season and Trout hit his fourth, a 441-foot blast.

The homers were two of the 12 balls the Angels hit harder than 100 mph.

"We've been swinging the bats well for a couple weeks now," Manager Mike Scioscia said. "It's good to see. I think we hit well with guys in scoring position (8 for 11), drove the ball well. We were patient at the plate. It speaks to the depth of our lineup. We've got some guys swinging the bats well."

The offense was so productive that the only drama in the game was whether Tyler Skaggs could persevere to get the five innings required for a victory.

Skaggs described himself as "effectively awful" after a game in which he allowed five hits and four walks in five innings. The seven strikeouts helped him minimize damage.

Ironically, one issue was a problem pitchers love to have. He had to wait so long between innings because of the offense.

Skaggs had a three-run lead before he threw his first pitch, but much of his night was a struggle. He loaded the bases in the first before escaping with a 95 mph fastball to strike out Robinson Chirinos. In the second, he gave up a run but again left the bases loaded, finishing the inning with his 65th pitch.

At that point, it seemed unlikely he'd make it through five. A 10-pitch second helped get him back on track, and he finished the fifth with his 114th pitch. Scioscia said afterward that Skaggs' delivery seemed to be fine and he maintained his velocity, so he felt it was OK to extend him. Skaggs' previous career-high was 105. Skaggs will get two extra days of rest before his next start, likely to be next Tuesday.

"I'm happy Sosh let me finish he fifth," Skaggs said. "I've got to clean it up. Overall, I thought I battled. Our team was great today. We weren't missing much."

## Ohtani fever? They're catching it from Osaka to Anaheim

By Tomoya Shimura

ANAHEIM — Shohei Ohtani is as big of a news story in Japan as President Donald Trump is in the United States — perhaps even bigger.

Flip on TV news or pick up a Japanese paper and you will be confronted by a flood of images and stories of the Angels' new two-way star hitting home runs in three straight games and pitching a near perfect seven innings. The most talked about American figure this week in Japan isn't Trump, it's Babe Ruth.

Many of the 127 million people living in Japan wake up to watch Angels games live on TV — often before 5 a.m.

"People are going crazy... Ohtani fever is unbelievably high," said Kazuma Yano, who is visiting Southern California from a suburb of Osaka, Japan's second biggest city.

"The first thing people talk about now," he added, "is Ohtani."

That excitement is playing out at Angel Stadium. A week into the season — and just days into what might morph into "Ohtanimania" if he continues to play the way he has — Japanese fans are showing up in Ohtani jerseys and T-shirts.

On Sunday, when Ohtani made his home pitching debut, those fans were part of the biggest regular season day game gate at Angel Stadium in 20 years.

A cluster cheered in Japanese from field level seats behind the Angels dugout, waving Japanese flags and holding up hand-made signs that, in Japanese, said things like "Go Ohtani" and "Sho Time" and, referencing his number, "Love 17."

Alyssa Gabel, a long-time Angels fan from Placentia, welcomes the buzz.

"There was more than the usual excitement," Gabel said, adding the Big A atmosphere on Sunday reminded her of the 2002 World Series. "It's really cool that we can get more culture going through baseball. I know it's huge in Japan."

The Angels welcome the buzz, too. At the team's stadium stores, they set up special Ohtani-oriented sections, peddling Ohtani-themed pennants, towels, caps and the like.

Yano, the fan from outside Osaka, bought his ticket online, at home, after learning that Ohtani would be pitching Sunday. It was the first day of a five-day business trip to Southern California, and the 44-year-old (along with his suitcase) took a shuttle directly from LAX to Anaheim Stadium.

"I consider it a half-business trip because the main purpose is to watch Ohtani," Yano said, laughing and wearing an Ohtani jersey from the player's Nippon Ham Fighter days.

"I've only bought a ticket for today," he added, noting that he was watching solo. "But I would probably feel like watching more after this game."

And Yano said that *before* Ohtani delivered — again — taking a no hitter into the seventh inning and striking out 12 on his way to a 6-1 win over the Oakland A's.

Still, while Ohtani is dominating Japanese media the way Trump has taken up all the oxygen generated by American political news, there's a stark difference.

"I don't think there's anyone who dislikes Ohtani," said Naoyuki Yanagihara, a journalist who has covered Ohtani for Sports Nippon since 2013, his rookie year.

Yanagihara is in Southern California this season as part of pack of about 20 Japanese writers who are here to cover all things Ohtani. Everything from Ohtani's dating life (it's sluggish) to his food preferences (he's fond of crepes) have been the grist of Ohtani stories in Japan.

The Japanese say they revere Ohtani's humility and ability to focus just on baseball, as much as his talent and good looks. The fact that he looks like a potential two-way superstar in Major League Baseball doesn't hurt.

"He's so sincere," said Hidemi Eguchi, a 19-year-old from Japan who is studying this year at USC.

"I can tell his character from his comments."

She was at Angel Stadium Sunday with two Japanese friends from LA; they took Uber to get to the game, a ride that cost about \$60.

"I'm so happy that he came to play baseball so close to where I live," Eguchi said.

"My big sister (in Japan) got so jealous."

Tomoki Kameyama, who lives in Detroit with his wife and three children, was spending a week vacation in Southern California, in part to see baseball.

They had tickets for a Dodgers game, but when they found out Ohtani would be making his pitching debut in Oakland, on April 1, they scratched that plan and drove six hours from Los Angeles to the Bay Area for the Angels game. Two days later, they were in Anaheim to watch Ohtani play his first home

game as designated hitter. That night, Ohtani, in keeping with his Babe Ruth week, swatted his first home run.

“He’s at top level in both, pitching and hitting,” Kameyama, 41, said in Japanese.

Kazuto Soejima turned up for the Sunday game as part of a week long vacation in Southern California. He was here partly for top-flight golf (multiple rounds at Torrey Pines; watching the Masters on TV), and partly for Ohtani.

When Soejima and friends found out Ohtani would pitch Sunday, they quickly bought tickets. They even gave up watching the last round of the Masters, and drove more than an hour to Anaheim, for some seats on the third base line.

“This is once-in-a-lifetime experience,” Soejima said.

Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs says there are more than 70,000 Japanese natives living in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties. And, so far, most of the Japanese fans who’ve caught an Ohtani game in Anaheim seem to be from that world.

But as summer approaches, and Japanese schools take a break, Japanese families will take long vacations and Angel Stadium figures to get a surge of business. Japanese travel agencies have already begun selling packaged tours to watch Angels games.

The first wave is expected during Golden Week, from the end of April to early May, when a number of Japanese holidays are celebrated. That week, the Angels are slated to play, among others, the Yankees.

Riko Ieda, who works for a Japanese company in Irvine, sat in the stands Sunday with three Japanese co-workers. As Ohtani dominated, the 27-year-old said she identifies with her countryman.

“It had been my dream to come to the U.S. and work here since high school,” Ieda said in Japanese.

Ohtani, of course, famously had the same dream.

“I was able to achieve that... and come here three months ago, around the same time as Ohtani.”

Seeing him succeed, she added, “motivates me to work harder.”

## **Angels to start Shohei Ohtani against a lefty, set him for Sunday start on the mound**

By Jeff Fletcher

ARLINGTON, Texas — Shohei Ohtani is finally going to get a chance to prove himself against a lefty in the majors.

After Ohtani was out of the starting lineup on Tuesday – the second time the Angels had benched him in the two games he was available to play against a lefty – Manager Mike Scioscia said Ohtani will start at DH against left-hander Matt Moore on Wednesday.

Before Tuesday's game, Scioscia faced questions about whether he was keeping Ohtani from lefties, and he said the handedness of the pitcher "doesn't matter."

In Japan, Ohtani hit .309 against lefties and .279 against righties. Ohtani faced plenty of lefties in spring training, but he didn't hit very well against lefties or righties in Arizona.

Ohtani pinch-hit in the ninth inning against right-hander Bartolo Colon on Tuesday night. Scioscia said the at-bat was to help prepare him for Wednesday's start, which will be his first start since Friday.

Meanwhile, Ohtani is now officially scheduled to pitch on Sunday, so he would be available to hit on Thursday and Friday in Kansas City.

Ohtani was caught by television cameras with a bandage on his finger during Monday's game. Pitching coach Charlie Nagy said Ohtani has had blister problems from throwing his splitter since spring training, but it's not a serious issue.

"All's good," Nagy said.

Another part of the equation is that Albert Pujols needs to play first base whenever Ohtani is the designated hitter. Scioscia said there was no physical reason Pujols needed to DH on Tuesday, but he conceded that "I think we're trying to keep a lot of guys fresh."

Scioscia said it was also a routine day off for Kole Calhoun, another left-handed hitter.

#### **KINSLER UPDATE**

Ian Kinsler is expected to be activated on Thursday, according to Scioscia.

"He'll work out again (Wednesday), and we'll see if he's far enough along, which we anticipate," Scioscia said.

#### **ALSO**

Garrett Richards will start on Saturday in Kansas City. The Angels remain undecided on the first two games of the series, although Andrew Heaney is expected to come off the disabled list to start one of the games. ...

Jaime Barría, the 21-year-old prospect the Angels recalled to make his major league debut on Wednesday, said he was "surprised" to get the call this early in the season: "I knew at some point I'd get the opportunity, but not this soon." Barría, who is one of the few major leaguers from Panama, said he would not have any family at the game, but they'd be watching him on TV. ...

Wednesday's game will be broadcast on KCOP because of NHL playoff coverage on Fox Sports West.

**UP NEXT**

Angels (Jaime Barría, major league debut) at Rangers (Matt Moore, 0-2, 11.05), Wednesday, 5 p.m., KCOP, KLAA (830 AM).

**Angels monitoring Cam Bedrosian's drop in velocity**

By Jeff Fletcher

ARLINGTON, Texas — Cam Bedrosian knows something is wrong.

A day after Bedrosian gave up a homer in a mop-up inning, he conceded that his decreased velocity has been an issue, although he doesn't believe he's hurt.

"I feel fine physically," Bedrosian said Tuesday. "My velocity is still not exactly where I want it to be. I think it may be mechanical. We're working on a couple things right now."

Bedrosian has averaged 93 mph with his fastball so far this year. In 2016, before a series of injuries, he averaged 96 mph. Last April, he still averaged 96 mph. He went on the disabled list with a groin injury, and when he came back he was throwing 93-94 the rest of the season. That drop, Bedrosian said, was related to a lack of lower body strength from the groin injury.

"I think over the past year I may have gotten into some bad habits, with the strain and everything," he said. "It takes a while to get out of them, unfortunately. I'm out there every day working on stuff."

Bedrosian has allowed four runs on eight hits in 4-2/3 innings through his first six games of the season.

"Everything is a concern," pitching coach Charlie Nagy said of the drop in velocity. "It's something we're keeping an eye on and talking to him about some things."

Bedrosian also said that the velocity drop is not solely the reason he's struggling.

"I have to make better pitches, whether I have the velocity or not," he said. "The last couple outings there have been a couple pitches that I left up and they hurt me. I have to make better pitches."

**FROM THE LOS ANGELES TIMES**

**Angels have best start since 1982 after 11-1 win against Rangers**

By Jeff Miller

Tyler Skaggs wouldn't reveal the source, but he was more than happy to share the message.



"Effectively awful," that's what someone in the Angels' clubhouse called his five innings of huffing and puffing Tuesday in an offensively-induced 11-1 victory over Texas.

"Perfectly described," Skaggs said. "A frustrating outing today. But I got through it. Did my job. Happy (manager Mike Scioscia) let me get through the fifth."

The Angels finished with 18 hits and were 8 for 11 with runners in scoring position as they won for the ninth time in 11 games.

All that offense again obscured the lingering rotation issues seen over the first dozen games. A group also hit with injuries, the starters have struggled trying to just hang around.

Entering Tuesday, only the Rays and Marlins — on average — had received fewer innings from their rotation. The Angels have just three quality starts, two of them by rookie Shohei Ohtani.

Skaggs had to work to minimize the damage early, leaving the bases loaded in the first and second. As his teammates scored in each of the first four innings, he battled to make it through the five needed to qualify for the victory.

"I gotta clean it up," said Skaggs, who threw a career-high 114 pitches. "Some mechanical issues still in the first few innings. ... I caught a lot of breaks today."

Entering the game, the Angels' offense led baseball in runs, hits, extra-base hits, homers and total bases.

Then Martin Perez happened. The Texas left-hander never appeared comfortable as the Angels continually twirled around him on the bases.

Every starter had at least one hit, and seven had at least two. And that latter group didn't include Justin Upton, who still reached base four times in four official at-bats.

"We take pride in just passing the baton," said Mike Trout, who contributed two hits including his fourth homer, a 441-footer to left-center. "Our offense is going to be fun this year."

The game was done before it was halfway over, the reeling Rangers as lifeless as the atmosphere inside their ballpark, one that was easily more than three-quarters empty.

Through the first four innings, the Angels were 13 for 23 (.565 average) with four walks and two homers. Only leadoff hitter Zack Cozart hadn't scored or driven in at least one run.

Upton already had walked three times and the bottom third of the order was six for nine with three RBIs.

"It's phenomenal," Skaggs said. "I love the run support. Keep scoring as many runs as possible. Makes my job a lot easier."

The Angels started a lineup Tuesday that had Luis Valbuena batting ninth. Valbuena hit 22 home runs in 2017, a total that was third on the team and would have tied for third on the World Series-winning 2002 Angels.

By the time this one mercifully ended, Rene Rivera was playing first base, Valbuena was playing second and Shohei Ohtani was grounding out in his first career pinch-hitting appearance.

The Angels have now won six of seven and, at 9-3, have matched the franchise record for best mark 12 games into a season.

This is the third Angels team to open 9-3, the previous two coming in 1979 and 1982, seasons that ended with playoff appearances.

Though baseball is still a marathon and not a sprint, it is worth noting that the first strides of the 2018 Angels have been impressive ones.

Even on a night when the performance of their starting pitcher was linked to the word "awful."

"He got out of the jams," Trout said of Skaggs. "He battled tonight."

## **Sunday with Shohei, a new Angels tradition?**

By Jeff Miller

The budding tradition of Sundays with Shohei will continue this week, the next pitching start for the Angels' rookie sensation set for the series finale in Kansas City.

Shohei Ohtani, the reigning American League player of the week, will be making his third appearance on the mound, the first two coming on the previous two Sundays.

In his big league pitching debut, he picked up the win giving up three runs and three hits in six innings at Oakland.

Ohtani beat the A's again seven days later at Angel Stadium by limiting them to one hit over seven shutout innings.

He has a 2.08 ERA with 18 strikeouts and two walks. Ohtani also has a 0.46 (WHIP), and opponents are batting .093 against him.

Having homered in three consecutive games as a designated hitter, he didn't start Tuesday against Texas left-hander Martin Perez. Ohtani is likely to start at DH on Wednesday against Matt Moore, another left-hander.

Garrett Richards will start Saturday against the Royals. The Angels haven't announced their pitchers for Thursday and Friday in Kansas City, but Andrew Heaney is expected to get one of those starts.

After the game, the Angels optioned reliever Eduardo Paredes to triple-A Salt Lake. He pitched two scoreless innings Tuesday.

### **Kinsler to return to lineup soon**

Second baseman Ian Kinsler is scheduled to come off the disabled list and return to the lineup and field Thursday. He has been out since March 30 because of an adductor strain.

Kinsler said there had been talk about him coming back sooner as the designated hitter. But he said he didn't want to take possible at-bats away from Ohtani.

### **Barria to make MLB debut**

Jaime Barria will make his big league debut Wednesday against the Rangers, the right-hander pressed into the rotation because of injuries.

"I am surprised," the 21-year-old said through an interpreter. "I knew at some point I'd get the opportunity but not this soon."

Barria was with the Angels for most of spring training. He has made four career starts at triple-A.

**FROM ANGELS.COM**

## **Angels' bats stay hot in win over Rangers**

*Trout, Simmons homer as offense shows no signs of slowing down*

By Maria Guardado

ARLINGTON -- The hottest offense in the Majors continued to roll on Tuesday night, as the Angels used a season-high 18 hits, including home runs by Mike Trout and Andrelton Simmons, to trounce the Rangers, 11-1, at Globe Life Park and improve to 9-3 this season.

With the win, the Angels secured their fourth consecutive series victory and matched their division-winning teams of 1979 and 1982 for the best 12-game start in franchise history. Their nine wins are tied with the Astros, Red Sox and Mets for the most in the Majors this season.

Every hitter in the Angels' starting lineup contributed at least one hit, and seven enjoyed multi-hit nights. Jefry Marte and Martin Maldonado led the way with three hits and two RBIs apiece. The Angels' offense leads the Majors with 79 runs, 128 hits and 20 home runs this season.

"Our offense is going to be fun this year," said Trout, who hit his fourth home run of the season off Rangers left-hander Martin Perez in the second inning. "We never think we're out of a game."

The Angels set the tone early, jumping out to an early 3-0 lead in the first inning after Justin Upton drew a two-out walk off Perez to set up four consecutive singles from Albert Pujols, Simmons, Marte and Chris Young.

"We've been swinging the bats well for a couple weeks now, so it's good to see," manager Mike Scioscia said. "We hit well with guys in scoring position, drove the ball well. We were patient at the plate. I think it speaks to the depth of our lineup. We've got some guys swinging the bat well."

Left-hander Tyler Skaggs needed a career-high 114 pitches to get through five innings, allowing one run on five hits while walking four and striking out seven. He worked out of a pair of bases-loaded jams early and grinded through the fifth to secure his second win of the season. It's only the eighth time since Scioscia became manager in 2000 that an Angels starter has thrown at least 114 pitches in five innings or less.

"Definitely a frustrating outing today," Skaggs said. "In the words of my friend, it was effectively awful. But got through it, did my job. Happy Sosh let me finish the fifth, but I got to clean it up. Some mechanical issues still in the first few innings. I feel great, I'm going out there, but I'm leaving pitches up. It's frustrating, but overall, I thought I battled and our team was great today."

Despite their hot start, the Angels have struggled to get consistent length from their starters early this season. Over their first 12 games, the Angels have received only three quality starts from their rotation, two of which have come from Shohei Ohtani, who made his first career pinch-hit appearance in the ninth and grounded out to second against Bartolo Colon.

Luke Bard and Eduardo Paredes combined to throw four scoreless innings in relief of Skaggs. The Angels' bullpen leads the American League with 55 1/3 innings this season and ranks second with a 2.44 ERA.

#### **MOMENTS THAT MATTERED**

**Skaggs evades trouble:** The Rangers loaded the bases in the first two innings and missed out on chances to do some serious damage. Skaggs struck out Robinson Chirinos to end the first. Drew Robinson had an RBI double in the second and then Skaggs loaded the bases with two-out walks to Jurickson

Profar and Elvis Andrus. But Skaggs, holding a 4-1 lead, escaped that one by getting Adrian Beltre on a fly to deep right.

**Colon assists on spectacular double play:** Colon, pitching in relief for the Rangers, had to go against Pujols with a runner on first and one out in the seventh. Pujols smashed a liner up the middle that Colon reached for with his glove and deflected high into the air. Second baseman Profar caught it on the fly and threw to first base to double off pinch-runner Ryan Schimpf.

"That was awesome," Profar said. "That ball was hit too hard. He's quick. It was coming in my direction but it was hit really hard. I saw him hit it, and I just reacted to that."

### **Beltre passes Biggio**

Beltre had a two-out single in the first inning, giving him 3,061 hits for his career. That passes Hall of Famer Craig Biggio and moves him into sole possession of 23rd place all time. He is 20 hits behind Cap Anson in 22nd place.

### **WHAT'S NEXT**

Jaime Barria will make his MLB debut on Wednesday in the Angels' series finale against the Rangers at 5:05 p.m. PT at Globe Life Park. Barria, 21, is ranked the club's No. 7 prospect by MLB Pipeline and logged a 2.80 ERA over 141 2/3 innings while ascending from Class-A Advanced Inland Empire to Triple-A Salt Lake in 2017.

## **Ohtani makes first pinch-hitting appearance**

*Two-way star will DH Wednesday, get first start against left-hander*

By Maria Guardado

ARLINGTON -- Shohei Ohtani was not in the Angels' starting lineup against the Rangers on Tuesday, though he did come to bat in the top of the ninth inning in his first pinch-hitting appearance. He stepped into the batter's box against veteran right-hander Bartolo Colon, then grounded out to second to end the inning. The Angels won, 11-1.

"It's good to get him off the bench because when he's available that's something he might eventually do is pinch-hit," manager Mike Scioscia said. "It's good to get him in there and just get him acclimated."

Scioscia said Ohtani will be back in the lineup as the Angels' designated hitter on Wednesday against Texas left-hander Matt Moore. It will mark Ohtani's first start against a lefty this season. The 23-year-old two-way phenom batted .309 against lefties and .279 against righties in Japan.

Ohtani's next start on the mound will be Sunday afternoon in Kansas City, which will be his third consecutive start on a Sunday. He carried a perfect game into the seventh inning and struck out 12 in his last start against the A's.

## Star RHP prospect Barria to debut today

*21-year-old has enjoyed meteoric rise through Angels' farm system*

By Maria Guardado

ARLINGTON -- One year ago, Angels prospect Jaime Barria was pitching in the California League for Class A Advanced Inland Empire. Now he's in the Majors.

The 21-year-old right-hander is slated to make his MLB debut in today's series finale against the Rangers at Globe Life Park, capping the rapid ascent he's made through the Angels' farm system over the past 12 months.

Barria, a native of Panama, admitted Tuesday that even he didn't expect to be here so quickly.

"I'm only 21 years old," Barria said on Tuesday. "I thought this moment would come, just not so soon."

Ranked the Angels' No. 7 prospect by MLB Pipeline, Barria recorded a 2.80 ERA over 141 2/3 innings across three Minor League levels in 2017, finishing the season at Triple-A Salt Lake. Known for his command, Barria has a three-pitch mix that includes a low-90s fastball, a deceptive changeup and an 82-83 mph breaking ball.

"I learned at each level," Barria said. "I threw innings across three different levels last year, and it went really well. I feel prepared for my start tomorrow."

Only three other Panamanians were included on Opening Day rosters across MLB this season: the Braves' Johan Camargo, the Padres' Allen Cordoba and the D-backs' Randall Delgado. Barria said his family wouldn't be able to make the trip to Texas on Wednesday and would instead watch his start on TV.

The Angels optioned reliever Eduardo Paredes to Triple-A Salt Lake following Tuesday's 11-1 win to clear a roster spot for Barria ahead of his start on Wednesday.

### Worth noting

- Second baseman Ian Kinsler (left adductor strain) is expecting to be activated off the 10-day disabled list on Thursday in Kansas City.

- Shohei Ohtani will make his next start on the mound Sunday in Kansas City. Garrett Richards will pitch against the Royals on Saturday. The Angels have not yet announced their starters for the first two games of the four-game series, but Andrew Heaney is likely to slot back into the rotation on Thursday or Friday. Heaney opened the season on the disabled list with left elbow inflammation, but he threw a bullpen session on Monday at Globe Life Park and said he feels ready to go.

## FROM THE ATHLETIC

### **“It’s not something you can comprehend’: 17 years after he wowed MLB, Ichiro is in awe of Shohei Ohtani**

By Dave Brown

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Ichiro began to stretch at his locker, bending improbably and eventually twisting himself into something like a human pretzel, preparing the way he has before every game for the past 27 years, counting his time in Japan. He wasn’t in the starting lineup for the Seattle Mariners because the Kansas City Royals were starting a left-hander and, at age 44, Ichiro hasn’t played every day for a while.

Ichiro remains the best player Japan has ever sent to Major League Baseball, though he might not be for long. Shohei Ohtani has been in the majors for less than two weeks, and he’s already turned the league on its head.

“If you’re a star, you shine in the right moments,” Ichiro told *The Athletic*.

Ohtani came to the majors this offseason packing a lot of hype as a two-way player in Japan, where he slugged .500 in 1,170 plate appearances and posted a 2.52 ERA with 82 starts. Not only was Ohtani coming over at 23 years old, sacrificing many millions of dollars because of the peculiar agreements the titans of baseball had reached regarding international free agency, but he was attempting to do something few players had even tried since the days of Babe Ruth. Ohtani would start as a pitcher once a week and as a DH two to three times in between. If everything went according to plan.

It didn’t in spring training, where Ohtani batted .125 with no extra-base hits and 10 strikeouts in 32 at-bats and allowed eight earned runs in 2 2/3 innings on the mound. Ohtani also endured the indignity of some nasty scouting reports regarding his hitting capabilities. After the first 10 games of the regular season, Ohtani had hit three home runs and struck out 12 while taking a no-hitter into the seventh inning of his second career start against the Oakland Athletics, and certain reporters who printed those grim preseason opinions were issuing public apologies.

It was quite the reckoning: *Holy crap*, the baseball cognoscenti said. *Ohtani really could be as good as they say.*

“Even if you’re preparing before a game and you’re just practicing, and you’re able to throw 100 mph *and* hit bombs, I think people would be shocked to see that,” Ichiro said through interpreter Allen Turner. “But to see it during a game, it’s not something you can explain or even comprehend. You just have to sit back and watch it.”

Ichiro’s first “holy crap” moment as a major leaguer came 17 years ago to the day — April 11, 2001, in his eighth MLB game, coincidentally against the A’s. Presumably not in the starting lineup for the Mariners because Oakland started left-hander Mark Mulder, Ichiro contributed a pinch-hit single in the top of the eighth inning against Jim Mecir that broke a scoreless tie and sparked a three-run rally. That wasn’t the moment, however. That came in the bottom of the eighth, when Ichiro made The Throw.

Charging a single by Ramon Hernandez into right field, Ichiro never broke stride and made a throw from about 200 feet away on the fly to David Bell that would have impressed William Tell. Bell applied the tag and baserunner Terrence Long, who had been trying to go from first to third, was out. Mariners TV analyst Dave Henderson noted the low arc of the throw, just a few feet high, calling it “A strike right down the middle, like David Bell was a catcher.”

Recalling the moment late in Ichiro’s first MLB season, David Shields in the New York Times wrote:

*I got that weird tingle down my spine I get about twice a decade and for the next 24 hours pretty much all anyone in Seattle could talk about was the Throw. Several players, coaches and broadcasters said it was the single greatest throw they had ever seen. “The ball came out of a cannon; it was quick and powerful.” “An eye-high laser.” “It was like something out of ‘Star Wars.’” Even Terrence Long agreed: “It was going to take a perfect throw to get me, and it was a perfect throw.”*

*Asked to explain how he was able to throw the runner out, Ichiro said, through his translator: “The ball was hit right to me. Why did he run when I was going to throw him out?”*

North American baseball was hooked. Beforehand, Ichiro had doubters, partly because everyone does, though scouting reports indicated he perhaps could do things like he eventually did to Terrence Long. He had won seven consecutive batting titles and a mess of defensive awards in Japan, and predecessors brought over from his homeland had succeeded in the MLB (notably Hideo Nomo), but Ichiro was the first position player from Nippon Professional Baseball to try his hand in the big leagues. Few knew for sure he would succeed — winning AL MVP and Rookie of the Year out of the chute, making 10 All-Star teams, winning 10 Gold Gloves in his first 10 seasons, and collecting 3,000-plus (after getting 1,278 in Japan) — until he did it.

And when he started his U.S. career, Ichiro played while being stalked by aggressive media attention, 40-50 reporters a game sometimes, along with paparazzi publishers who, it was rumored, would pay up



to \$2 million for a candid naked photo of Ichiro. The Mariners at the time doubted the rumor's truth, but Ichiro seemed to believe it: There are several accounts of him getting dressed in all sorts of out-of-the-way places to stay away from prying lenses. Ichiro said he would pose for some beefcake "If the people who take the photo, if the people who yank my leg and invade my privacy, if they would disappear — from the planet."

As was the case with Ichiro, Japan is, uh, *interested* in what happens with Ohtani. The A's issued 240 media credential requests — just for media from Japan — for Ohtani's first start as a pitcher on April 1. Ichiro said strong media scrutiny from both sides of the Pacific brings positives and negatives. He's probably most impressed with Ohtani's start because of how many eyes are watching him as he makes his first impression.

"The timing of it is the thing," Ichiro said. "You're seeing a star shine at the right moment. What he's doing now is what differentiates the guys that are stars from the guys that aren't stars. The timing of it is so crucial. He's able to capitalize on it because he's that caliber of player. To see him do this, to do everything at the moment when everyone is focused on him, with all the attention, it's just unbelievable."

Ichiro and Ohtani are friends and keep in touch via text or phone when they don't cross paths in person. Contrary to what one might expect, given their respective ages, Ichiro has likened Ohtani's mindset to that of a father, and his own to that of a son. Ichiro said he thinks that Ohtani's tough mental attitude will help him weather the physical, mental and emotional toll that being an international baseball star will take. And, as is the case for everyone else watching, it really blows Ichiro's mind that Ohtani has been able to perform so well on the mound and in the batter's box. Even a *mediocre* two-way Ohtani would be kind of amazing, said Ichiro, himself a pitcher of sorts.

"I pitched one inning in the major leagues," Ichiro said. "And I said to myself, 'I'm never going to do this again.' It's just that hard. It's so hard to pitch. To be able to pitch in the big leagues and hit in the big leagues is difficult in itself even if you're *not* performing well. So difficult. But to have him be at a high level in both, what he can produce in both, thus far is... it's just unbelievable. It's something that's hard to process."

Of course, so is being a professional baseball player for 27 years. Ichiro's offensive production started dipping around the time he finished his previous full season with the Mariners in 2012. He started 2018 with five hits in 22 at-bats, also logging 42 innings in left field, with the Mariners dealing with several injuries. Ichiro turns 45 in October, and only 17 players in history have lasted that long. He's a shoo-in for Cooperstown someday. When asked during spring training what he still wanted to accomplish after seemingly doing everything (aside from winning a World Series ring), Ichiro said his seasons as a part-time player had changed his perspective. He wanted to "give back everything" to the Mariners he had after they, Ichiro said, had given so much to him.

After returning to Seattle in March, Ichiro jokingly said he wanted to play until he was 51, the uniform number he's most associated with — though he was worried about associating with teammates who are the same age as his children. Ichiro also joked that he wanted to pitch against Ohtani in a game.

He *was* joking, right?

"I want to make sure everybody knows," Ichiro said, "When I say that I want to play until I'm 50, that I mean *at least* 50."

If he lasts beyond this season, it increases the odds of the world witnessing that matchup between Ichiro the pitcher and Ohtani the hitter. He's still up for it, Ichiro says, but there's no sense messing with a triple-digit four-seamer and a split-finger fastball that bends like an Ichiro stretching session. He would rather pitch, thank you.

"I'd throw it right down the middle," Ichiro said. "All three pitches — fastballs."

Three pitches. Wait, a three-pitch strikeout? C'mon, Ichiro.

"No," he said with an animated laugh. "He'd hit it at least 500 feet."

## **The Angels' starting rotation has potential, but the team's injury history is not on their side**

By Brent Maguire

In an age of ever-increasing pitcher injuries, the Los Angeles Angels are caught in the middle of the craze. Angels pitchers led baseball with 1,274 days lost to the disabled list in 2017. The year before wasn't much better, as the Angels had six pitchers undergo season-ending surgeries at various points.

An aspiring contender in 2018, the hope was that injury-riddled seasons are behind many of the Angels pitchers. The additions of Japanese superstar Shohei Ohtani, along with Ian Kinsler and Zack Cozart, have put the Angels in a competitive position. Fangraphs projections have the Angels at 84 wins by season's end, while PECOTA projections have them at 79 wins, which could put the team in the hunt for a wild-card spot in the American League. So far, the Angels are off to an impressive 8-3 start, but there are still plenty of concerns — mainly in the starting rotation.

The Angels believe they have eight MLB-caliber starting pitchers for 2018, with seven of those pitchers having spent time on the disabled list last season. Four of those starters (Garrett Richards, Tyler Skaggs, Andrew Heaney and Matt Shoemaker) had disabled list time in both 2016 and 2017. Parker Bridwell, who surprised with a 3.64 ERA in 121 innings in 2017, is the only starter without recent injury concerns,

but he comes with major statistical red flags. His 14.8 percent strikeout rate was the 11th lowest among pitchers with 100 or more innings in 2017.

The biggest concern for the Angels is how many innings these starters can throw. The 2018 season is already reinforcing the idea that there is a ton of injury risk involved in the rotation. Andrew Heaney began the year on the disabled list with elbow discomfort, a discouraging sign for someone with Tommy John surgery on his resume. Shoemaker recently went on the disabled list for nerve issues in his right arm, which is what led to his season-ending surgery last year. J.C. Ramírez, who rehabbed a partially torn UCL during the offseason, was also placed on the disabled list, and the team announced Monday that he will require Tommy John surgery.

The table below shows innings logged by Angels pitchers from 2016 to 2017, which includes minor league outings for starters and innings in other leagues (for Ohtani).

2016 IP	2017 IP	
Garrett Richards	34.2	29.2
Shohei Ohtani	140.0	25.1
Tyler Skaggs	49.2	85.0
Andrew Heaney	6.0	49.1
JC Ramirez	78.2	153.1
Nick Tropeano	80.0	0.0
Parker Bridwell	80.0	160.1

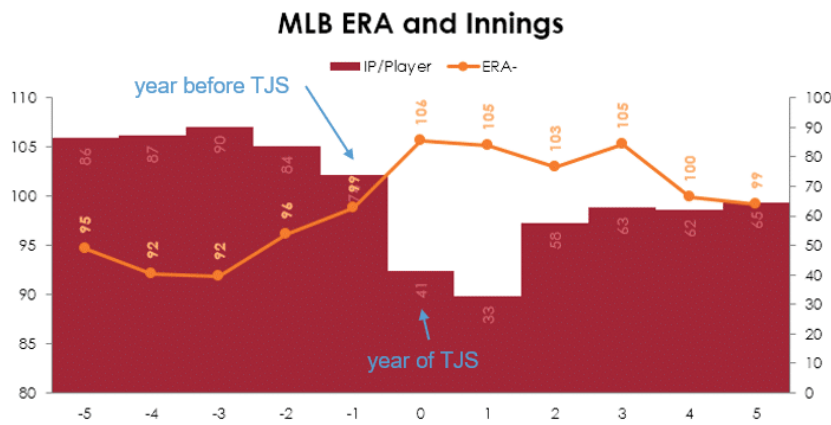
There are clear red flags here, and the Angels will very likely need more arms. From 1998-2015, the average MLB rotation averaged 10.3 starters per season, and the Angels' excess depth is already thinning out. Los Angeles will either have to look for options externally or dip into the prospect well; Jaime Barria, their only impact upper-level pitching prospect, will start on Wednesday.

Taking a deeper look at the medical history for the Angels' other available pitchers is even more alarming. Nick Tropeano, like Heaney, underwent Tommy John Surgery in 2016, while Skaggs underwent the same surgery in 2014. Richards tore the patellar tendon in his knee in 2014, tore his right UCL in 2016, opting for rehab, stem-cell therapy and PRP (Platelet Rich Plasma) injections instead of surgery, and dealt with an irritated nerve in his biceps in 2017. Even prized offseason signing Ohtani was diagnosed with a first-degree sprain in his right UCL shortly after the deal was announced.

This is bad news for the Angels. A 2013 study by Baseball Prospectus came to a fairly obvious but important conclusion: Pitchers who have been injured in the past are significantly more likely to hurt themselves again. In 2013, pitchers who were on the disabled list the prior year were 38.8 percent more likely to land on the DL again compared to those who avoided injury.

Condition	Similar Event Last Year	No Similar Event Last Year
Had an elbow injury	27.4%	2.0%
Had a shoulder injury	32.4%	2.8%
Had any injury	73.4%	5.1%
Spent time on DL	43.7%	4.9%

This means everyone but Parker Bridwell has a high injury risk. Tommy John surgery survivors such as Skaggs, Heaney and Tropeano are likely to have durability issues in their future and most pitchers see a decline in their numbers post-surgery. There is limited data to predict an outcome for pitchers like Richards, who opted for rehab instead of surgery. Only Bartolo Colon and a handful of others have successfully healed a torn UCL without undergoing surgery. Shoemaker’s radial nerve surgery is very rare and there is little data on future production post-surgery.



A six-man rotation is in the works for the Angels, who are using this method not only to accommodate Ohtani (who pitched once a week in Japan) but also to add more off days and fewer innings for the starters. The six-man rotation has been used sparingly in the past, without much success, making the rotation an experiment in 2018.

As a result, the rotation is a ticking time bomb, which is problematic for an aspiring contender whose rotation finished with the fifth worst fWAR (5.5) and threw the ninth fewest innings (871.2) last season. The collective group of those eight projected Angels starters combined for 583.1 innings in 2017 and 635

innings in 2016, a 609-inning average over the last two years. The average MLB rotation threw 893 innings in 2017, meaning the Angels need a 46.6 percent increase of innings from their pitchers to get there.

In an attempt to measure both quantity and quality, a historical search yielded some pessimistic news for the Angels rotation. Since 1920 (the start of the live-ball era), the 2017 Los Angeles Angels rotation, along with the 2017 Cincinnati Reds, is one of just 26 rotations to not have a single member throw 100 or more innings and reach 1.5 WAR.

The question for the Angels is how did those rotations, and those teams, do in the following season? For purposes of this experiment, the following information discludes both the Angels and Reds rotations from last season and didn't include any team involved in a strike year (1972, 1981, 1994, 1995), such as the 1980 New York Mets, who had skewed results for 1981.

The average WAR of the 23 rotations was a measly 4.7, while the rotation's team had an average of 65 wins. Those rotations did see better results the following season, as the average WAR total jumped to 8.2 and their teams won an average of 69.7 games. Sixteen of those 23 rotations also saw improvement in ERA the following season.

Unsurprisingly, none of the sampled rotations made the playoffs in the original year with no members of the 100 inning/1.5 WAR club. In the following season, only one of the 23 teams qualified for the playoffs. The 1997 San Francisco Giants won 90 games, one year after winning just 68 games, and saw a big improvement in ERA (a 45 point decrease) and a slight increase in rotation WAR.

For the Angels, the hope is they can overcome last year's historically poor rotation and buck the trend to make the playoffs. Luckily, they have a few advantages, including the best win total of the original 25 sampled teams (80), a really good position player group and the best all-around player in baseball in Mike Trout. The injury risk in the rotation is real and the historical precedent is poor, but it's not out of the realm for the Angels rotation to succeed this season.

The injury bug is particularly disappointing given that the club has the talent to roll out a strong rotation. Richards is a Statcast darling who has a 3.06 ERA since 2014. Ohtani ranks as MLB.com's top prospect entering 2018 and has been spectacular so far this season, taking a perfect game into the seventh inning on Sunday. Heaney is a former top prospect and has a fascinating pitch mix, as documented by *The Athletic*. Skaggs, too, is a former top prospect who is still only 26 years old. Ramirez averaged 95.5 mph on his fastball last year while posting an above-average 51.4 percent ground-ball rate and Shoemaker has a career 3.87 ERA in parts of five seasons.

However, history foreshadows that the Angels rotation will need significantly better — perhaps even unprecedented — luck in 2018. While there is obvious talent in the rotation, the injury risk is extraordinarily high and makes the club highly volatile this season.

**FROM BLEACHER REPORT****Shohei Ohtani Rookie Card Sells for \$6,725 as His Memorabilia Market Soars**

By Scott Polacek

Los Angeles Angels rookie Shohei Ohtani has started his rookie season on fire, and the sports memorabilia world has taken notice.

According to Darren Rovell of ESPN.com, an autographed Topps rookie card of Ohtani sold for \$6,725 on Monday.

"His autographed cards have tripled or quadrupled in the last two to three weeks," said Rick Probst, whose company was the one to sell the card on eBay, per Rovell.

The soaring market comes after Ohtani posted a 2.08 ERA, 0.46 WHIP and 18 strikeouts in his first 13 innings as an MLB pitcher and took a perfect game into the seventh inning of his last start, against the Oakland Athletics on Sunday.

That alone would be noteworthy, but he has served as a dangerous designated hitter on days he is not pitching, boasting a slash line of .389/.421/.889 with three home runs and seven RBI in 18 at-bats across four games.

If he continues his torrid pace, that \$6,725 price tag will likely grow.

**MLB Superstar Power Rankings: How All 30 Teams' Biggest Stars Stack Up**

By Joel Reuter

Some MLB teams are blessed with more talent than others, but every team has a best player.

Ahead, we've ranked each team's biggest star.

First, we had to decide who would represent each franchise, which presented plenty of tough choices.

Bryce Harper or Max Scherzer for the Washington Nationals?

Nolan Arenado or Charlie Blackmon for the Colorado Rockies?

Francisco Lindor or Corey Kluber for the Cleveland Indians?

Once a representative was chosen, players were ranked based on their overall expected contributions for the upcoming season. These rankings aren't based on a player's full body of work but on how they profile for the 2018 season.

Let's get started.

## **1. Mike Trout, Los Angeles Angels**

### **Top 100 Rank: 1**

Mike Trout is the best player on the planet until someone unseats him.

The 26-year-old already has 54.8 WAR to his credit, and he was on his way to a career year last season when he suffered a torn thumb ligament.

Even limited to 114 games, he hit .306/.442/.629 with 33 home runs and 22 stolen bases, and he finished fourth in MVP voting.

With a better supporting cast on a Los Angeles Angels team that's expected to contend for a playoff spot, another run at MVP honors could be in the cards.

## **Each MLB Team's Most Promising Sign of Hope**

By Zachary D. Rymer

The beginning of the Major League Baseball season is supposed to be a happy occasion, so let's not bicker and argue about what's wrong with everything and everyone.

Instead, let's talk about hope.

Somehow, some way, there's hope for every team in MLB. We're going to prove it by pinpointing one sign of hope for all 30 franchises. These range from contenders' biggest strengths to non-contenders' most relevant rooting interest.

### **Los Angeles Angels: The Hype Undersold Shohei Ohtani**

Shohei Ohtani came over from Japan with a goal to be a two-way star in MLB. The idea seemed implausible to begin with, and his struggles in spring training pushed the likelihood closer to impossible.

And yet, there he is channeling Babe Ruth.

Ohtani has begun his pitching career with two overpowering performances highlighted by 18 strikeouts in 13 innings. Meanwhile, he's begun his hitting with three homers in his first 18 at-bats.

And it's all legit. On the mound, the 23-year-old has achieved MLB's highest swinging-strike rate via elite fastball velocity (97.1 mph) and a devastating split-finger fastball. At the plate, he ranks second among qualified hitters in average exit velocity (97.3 mph).

Already, Ohtani is building a case as the best player on the Los Angeles Angels. Considering that this is the same team that employs Mike Trout, that's saying something.

## FROM THE RINGER

### We May Somehow Still Be Underhyping Shohei Ohtani

*If looking back at the phenom's one-week WAR made your eyes pop, try looking ahead: One projection system thinks the Angels' two-way star could be a hybrid of Kris Bryant and Noah Syndergaard ... or maybe even of, unfathomably, Giancarlo Stanton and Clayton Kershaw.*

By Zach Kram

Two weeks into the season is far too early to think about All-Star selections, but indulge me for a moment. Here's one potential set of All-Star starting lineups this July:

**Catcher:** Buster Posey in the NL, Gary Sánchez in the AL

**First base:** Cody Bellinger, Edwin Encarnación

**Second base:** DJ LeMahieu, José Altuve

**Shortstop:** Corey Seager, Francisco Lindor

**Third base:** Nolan Arenado, José Ramírez

**Outfield:** Rhys Hoskins, Yoenis Céspedes, and Andrew McCutchen; Justin Upton, Andrew Benintendi, and Adam Jones

The lineups are a little light on star power and missing Mike Trout and Bryce Harper, but they're not too outlandish. A few extra injuries and untimely slumps for the league's best players could result in All-Star ballots that look just like that one. Oh, and there's another thing that all of those players have in



common: One prominent projection system says Shohei Ohtani is already a better hitter than any of them.

Move to the mound, and the forecast from that system, Steamer, is even more bullish on the young Angel's prospects: It predicts just five starting pitchers in all of baseball to record a better ERA over the rest of the season—Clayton Kershaw, Chris Sale, Noah Syndergaard, Corey Kluber, and Max Scherzer. And it already thinks Ohtani will produce the best strikeout rate of any starter over the remainder of 2018, bumping Scherzer down to second place and Sale to third in that metric.

Those assessments might sound outrageous so early in the season, before Ohtani has even reached 25 career plate appearances or pitched against a team other than the Athletics, but it's impossible to imagine anything Ohtani can't accomplish at this point. He's hit three home runs and slashed .368/.400/.842 in five games at the plate, and he's posted a 2.08 ERA and struck out 18 batters in 13 innings on the mound. He was worth a full win above replacement in just one week, and he's been the best player on a team that stars Trout.

But rather than temper the excitement, as they are often wont to do, the projections confirm the ebullience surrounding Ohtani's debut. As purely mathematical, rational algorithms, they can't be swept up in the hype or the spectacle of the first real two-way player in a century or all the "... since Babe Ruth" modifiers that designation brings, yet Steamer still believes that Ohtani is a top-six pitcher and top-25 hitter in the sport. Already. As a 23-year-old just two weeks into his MLB career.

To be fair to Ohtani from an expectations perspective—and to, say, Altuve, who won last year's MVP award and now has a worse batting forecast than that of a rookie with 20 career plate appearances—Steamer is the most bullish on the pitcher-slash-DH among the major public projection systems. Ohtani's outlook at PECOTA, which Nate Silver invented and is hosted at *Baseball Prospectus*, has barely budged since the preseason, and ZiPS, which Dan Szymborski operates, thinks the world of him as a pitcher but is the least encouraged by his bat.

The three systems are in agreement, at least, that Ohtani is a top pitcher. By a small margin, Steamer is the most enthused (particularly concerning his best-in-baseball strikeout projection) because it considers fastball velocity as part of its calculations. That's why Steamer was optimistic about his K potential before he threw a single MLB inning, when Ohtani already ranked fourth among starters in Steamer's strikeout rate projection.

"Coming into the year, we were expecting him to have a 97.5 mile-an-hour fastball, so our expectation around that would be that he's going to be pretty good," says Jared Cross, who runs the Steamer engine. "And then we're adjusting that based on his strikeout rates in Japan." Per the Japanese sabermetric company DeltaGraphs, Ohtani led the NPB in strikeout percentage in 2014, 2015, and 2016 (minimum 140 innings) before missing much of the 2017 season to injury, so that adjustment only confirmed what his elite velocity already suggested about his talent level. Once he came to the majors and both started striking out opposing batters at a prolific rate and threw even harder than expected—his 98 mile-per-

hour average fastball velocity ranks third in the majors thus far, behind only Luis Severino and Syndergaard—that projection received a slight boost, propelling Ohtani to the no. 1 spot.

But again, the other systems are in general agreement about his acehood. They differ on his hitting projection, though, and in particular how to adjust in response to his early home run exploits. Once again, Steamer is the most enthusiastic. It is generally the twitchiest of the prominent projection systems, with the most sensitive responses to in-season events—but even by those standards, Ohtani stands out for the Steamer strides he's made. Before the season, the system forecast Ohtani to finish with a 116 wRC+, meaning he would be 16 percent better than a league-average hitter after adjusting for park and league context. After just a few games at the plate, though, his rest-of-season projection now calls for a 128 wRC+, giving him the most drastic change of any player who's batted this year.

Much of that massive jump comes not from his impressive box-score results but from the underlying batted-ball data that supports them. "If it weren't for Statcast data, I don't think we could have a jump that large for any player," Cross says. Steamer began incorporating Statcast data "in a simple way" last year, so the system doesn't yet use launch angle or sprint speed but does include exit velocity as a factor in its projections.

"If a player is hitting the ball hard, we did some tests and said, 'Hey, his projection should come up ... even beyond what the results of those hard hits are,'" Cross says. Of particular relevance to Ohtani is that Steamer gives extra weight to the most extreme exit velocities, and Ohtani has already hit two batted balls in the air at 112-plus miles per hour. Only eight other players have managed that feat this season.

Entering play Tuesday, Ohtani had also posted the highest average exit velocity of any player with at least 10 batted balls this season, and his early, powerful performance "tells us something right off the bat even in a small number of plate appearances," Cross says. That's especially important given the limited batting data available on the two-way player before this season: Many of his plate appearances in Japan came years ago, when he was a teenager, and he reached 250 in a season only once. Even the best prospects who advance through the minor leagues stateside will have recorded 500-plus plate appearances in the year preceding their promotion.

Entering the season, then, Ohtani's hitting projection came with considerable variation between the best- and worst-case scenarios, and that level of uncertainty means "just the small number of exit velocities he has in the majors this season is given considerable weight," Cross says. It's hard to fake hitting the ball as hard as Ohtani has, so he essentially made the best possible first impression in his first few trips to the MLB plate.

ZiPS, however, doesn't use Statcast data to inform its in-season projection adjustments, and PECOTA doesn't use Statcast at all, so Ohtani's early exit velocities haven't registered at all with those systems. The difference in approach stems in part from sheer computational concerns—Szymorski says via email that it's easier to crunch all the data in-season with a simpler model—and in part because the Statcast

information is new enough that it's less clear how a factor like exit velocity affects a player's future outlook than, for instance, strikeout and walk rate.

That contrast explains why PECOTA would have exhibited practically no reaction to Ohtani's early performance, no matter how impressive. As *Baseball Prospectus's* Rob McQuown says via email, "PECOTA's historically been the most conservative of any projection system. And the weights used on preseason projections are weighted far more than any in-season stats." In other words, McQuown says, PECOTA is somewhat undervaluing Ohtani's in-season stats when constructing his rest-of-season projection, but that inertia has nothing to do with Ohtani specifically. "If any other batter who was projected to go .269/.335/.451 [PECOTA's preseason slash line for Ohtani] started off like Ohtani has, his projection wouldn't change much, either," he adds.

Plus, PECOTA was already bullish on Ohtani before the season even began based on his statistics in Japan. Because Ohtani had experienced such statistical success against relatively tough competition there, his baseline rookie-year projections were rather enthusiastic compared with the usual output for a top prospect (Matt Wieters famously excepted). PECOTA pegged Ohtani as a top-20 starting pitcher and top-60 hitter before the season, so even though he hasn't improved on those valuations yet, it's not as if this system doubts his abilities.

But let's consider the possibility that his first two weeks are reason enough to tilt his projection upward, and that his loud velocity—both pitching and hitting—averages are suggestive of his potential, and that his rest-of-season numbers from Steamer aren't too outlandish. What would that look like for his full-season numbers?

Fold in Ohtani's existing at-bats, which entering play Tuesday had produced a 279 wRC+, to his rest-of-season batting projection, and his total wRC+ for the season settles at 137. For comparison, Kris Bryant's rookie wRC+ was 136. Fold in Ohtani's existing innings, meanwhile, to his rest-of-season pitching projection, and his total ERA for the season settles at 3.23 (with a 3.26 FIP to match). For comparison, Syndergaard's rookie ERA was 3.24. Steamer thinks Ohtani boasts the combination of rookie Bryant's bat and rookie Syndergaard's arm. No amount of hyperbole is excessive in expressing such a phenomenal concept.

And yes, those numbers are likely too eager given that Steamer carries the most enthusiastic projections for Ohtani with the most drastic adjustments after his first two weeks. But a projection system like Steamer functions by generating a wide range of possible outcomes and touting the average scenario as its single-data-point projection that appears on public websites and powers playoff-odds calculations. If Steamer's outlook is accurate, that phenomenal concept is Ohtani's average projection—meaning he's just as likely to do even better than that than he is to fall short. "Even better" than half-rookie-Bryant, half-rookie-Syndergaard is unfathomable. What does such a thing even look like?

The best way to answer that question is to look at Ohtani's 90th-percentile projections, which represent the nearest approximation of his ceiling. Cross shared those newly updated numbers Tuesday. These are

the most optimistic outcomes from the optimistic projection system, so Ohtani is unlikely to approach them. But still, just swirl them around and see how delicious they taste: His 90th-percentile rate hitting stats are about what Giancarlo Stanton did last year, and his 90th-percentile rate pitching stats are about what Clayton Kershaw did last year. That's absurd. That's unimaginable. That's two MVP players in one. But it's not impossible. For Ohtani thus far, nothing has been.

**FROM MLB.COM**

## **Predicting when Pujols will reach 3,000 career hits**

By Jordan Shusterman

Albert Pujols joined the esteemed 600 HR Club in 2017, launching his 600th career dinger on June 3 off Ervin Santana. With four years remaining on his contract, Pujols, now at 616 career dingers, has a decent shot at reaching 700, but certainly not this year. What *is* within reach for the future Hall of Famer, however, is career *hit* No. 3,000.

Pujols currently sits at 2,983 career hits, good for 33rd on the all-time list. Assuming he stays healthy, it is safe to assume his 3,000th hit will come at some point in the first half of the season. Surely the Angels are aware of this fact and are prepared to celebrate -- especially if the milestone hit comes at home -- but nobody knows exactly when the historic hit will occur. You can't predict baseball, of course -- but hey, let's give it a go anyway.

While Pujols has already notched 15 base hits so far this season, he entered 2018 only 32 hits away from No. 3,000. As such, the best way to go about predicting when he'll reach 3,000 is by looking at when he traditionally notches his 32nd hit of the season. More specifically, what number game of the season has he usually gotten that hit? Let's take a look...

Pujols' remarkable consistency actually makes predicting when hit No. 3,000 will come a relatively simple task. On average, Pujols has collected his 32nd hit of the season in the 31st game of the season. The earliest Pujols notched his 32nd hit of the season was Game No. 22 (in his rookie season), while the latest he reached that mark was Game No. 39, in 2016. We can then roughly assume it will be in this range that The Machine will reach the 3,000-hit mark.

Now, Pujols isn't quite the same player he was as a Cardinal, so it has taken him a bit longer to get hit No. 32 with the Angels than it did with St. Louis. The earliest he has reached 32 hits with the Angels has been Game 28, so let's set that as the earliest possible game.

To narrow our prediction further, let's also consider where some of these games are going to be played. Games 28 and 29 are against the Yankees, whose impressive rotation and super bullpen -- while

currently struggling -- could be a tough matchup. On the flip side, if Pujols is still searching for 3,000 by Game 36, he'll have a couple of games in hitter-friendly Coors Field to reach the milestone. That also happens to be the site of Ichiro's 3,000th hit back in 2016.

But enough beating around the bush. It's time to muster up some courage and make an official prediction. On average during his time with the Angels, Pujols has collected his 32nd hit of the season in Game No. 35, so we can move up the celebration to before the series in Colorado. In addition, we should also consider that so far in 2018, Pujols has 15 hits in 12 games. With that in mind, let's count on a similar pace over the next month, landing us on Game No. 32: May 3 at home vs. the Orioles.

Book it, Angels fans. Save the date. Mark your calendars. May 3 will be a special day for Albert Pujols.

And if I'm wrong? Well, come on -- you can't predict baseball.

## **Neshek has seller's remorse over Ohtani card**

By Todd Zolecki

PHILADELPHIA -- Pat Neshek seems to have a case of seller's remorse.

Last week in New York, after an April 2 game against the Mets got postponed because of snow, the Phillies reliever bought a few boxes of 2018 Topps Heritage baseball cards to open in his hotel room. Neshek, who is an avid baseball card and autograph collector, pulled a lottery ticket from one of the packs: a Shohei Ohtani card signed in red ink, one of just 69 in existence.

Neshek had the first card in the series, making it even more valuable.

"It was the best card I've ever pulled in my life," Neshek said Tuesday afternoon at Citizens Bank Park. "It kind of blew my mind. I knew somebody would cherish it a lot more than I did, so I was like, I'm going to list this so I can get something I want or go buy another case [of cards]. That's kind of how the hobby works. Yeah, so I put it up, it was pretty fierce bidding there."

The card sold for \$6,100 on eBay.

Of course, almost on cue, Ohtani homered in three consecutive games last week, before he struck out 12 batters in seven scoreless innings in a one-hitter on Sunday against the A's.

Ohtani is the biggest story in baseball, meaning the card might have already appreciated in value.

"Yeah," Neshek said with a smile, asked if he regrets selling it. "I mean, back in the day I sold an Aaron Rodgers card about his second year in [the NFL]. I think I got like \$40 and they were going for like, two or

three grand a couple years ago. That was a dumb one. That's kind of the name of the game. You see it with the Aaron Judge stuff. His stuff wasn't selling, then when he blew up last year, it kind of revitalized the whole baseball card industry. They had their best year in 20 years last year. It's nice to see people doing that.

"Hopefully Ohtani does the same thing, and more people will get into the hobby."

Neshek said he will use the money to buy another case of cards. He knows he has little chance of finding another Ohtani.

"You're not going to get that card again," he said. "It's got to be one in a couple thousand cases."

Neshek is currently on the 10-day disabled list because of a strained right shoulder. He received a cortisone injection on Friday. He said it has helped, and he will be re-evaluated on Sunday. He said he still could be at least a week away from beginning his throwing program, which might take another two-to-three weeks to then rejoin the Phillies.

"I was kind of scared last week, so this is pretty good news," Neshek said.

**FROM MLB.COM**

## **Angels tab Barria for Major League debut**

*Seventh-ranked prospect to start against Texas on Wednesday*

By Gerard Gilberto

Jaime Barria put himself on the fast track through three Minor League levels last season. It took just one start this year before the Angels' seventh-ranked prospect was called upon to make his Major League debut.

Barria jumps into the rotation with No. 1 overall prospect Shohei Ohtani and will start opposite Matt Moore on Wednesday as the Angels face the Rangers in Texas. The Los Angeles pitching staff is without right-hander Matt Shoemaker and left-hander Andrew Heaney due to injuries.

"I'm only 21 years old," Barria told MLB.com. "I thought this moment would come, just not so soon."

The native of Panama pitched two innings in his lone Pacific Coast League start this season, allowing a run on two hits and a walk against Albuquerque. He began last year with Class A Advanced Inland Empire and pitched to a 2.48 ERA with a .202 opponents' batting average in 11 starts before being promoted in June to Double-A Mobile.

In 12 starts in the Southern League, Barria went 1-6 with a 3.21 ERA, with his crowning achievement being a two-hit, seven-inning shutout against Tennessee on June 23. He jumped up to Salt Lake for his final three starts and yielded four earned runs over 14 2/3 innings while holding opponents to a .208 average.

"I learned at each level," Barria said. "I threw innings across three different levels last year and it went really well. I feel prepared for my start tomorrow."

The stocky right-hander offers a three-pitch mix with a fastball, slider and changeup. His heater stays in the low-90's, but it's made effective by his 60-grade control. Barria issued 31 walks and had a 1.07 WHIP over 141 2/3 innings across all three levels last season.

The 6-foot-1, 210-pounder earned an invitation to his first big league Spring Training in 2018. He had some issues with the long ball in five Cactus League appearances, serving up four homers over 9 1/3 innings. But he struck out 12 while issuing three walks.

**FROM ESPN.COM**

## **Real or Not: Which hot starts in the standings should you take seriously?**

By David Shoenfield

Frigid temperatures have blanketed ballparks across the land, but that hasn't prevented some hot starts. Six teams are 8-3 or better, creating some fun early plot twists to the season. Let's take a quick look at those six clubs.

### **Los Angeles Angels (9-3)**

**Tuesday:** Ripped out 18 hits in an 11-1 victory over the Rangers.

**How they're doing it:** Ohtani fever plus the best slugging percentage in the majors.

**Hot take:** Shohei Ohtani hasn't been the only one raking and he helps extend the lineup that has played without Ian Kinsler so far after he was hurt on Opening Day. This is a very good defensive team, especially once Kinsler returns, and Ohtani gives them a potential ace-caliber starter. The six-man rotation already has some issues, however, as JC Ramirez is out for the season with Tommy John surgery and Matt Shoemaker is on the DL with a forearm strain. Andrew Heaney could return later this week.

**Gut feeling:** If they get 50 to 55 starts from Ohtani and Garrett Richards, they'll win the wild card. I'd like to see a bullpen upgrade and I'm not convinced Albert Pujols and Luis Valbuena will give them the offense you want at first base and DH, but Mike Trout's awesomeness covers a lot of weaknesses.

*\*\*\*Article edited to include only Angels-related material.*

## **Angels have best start since '82 after 11-1 win at Texas**

ARLINGTON, Texas -- Two-way rookie sensation Shohei Ohtani got a new experience in the majors -- as a pinch-hitter.

By time Ohtani grounded out in the ninth inning against Bartolo Colon, the Los Angeles Angels had already scored all of their runs in what would soon become an 11-1 victory over the Texas Rangers on Tuesday night.

"Good to get him off the bench, because when he's available that's something he might eventually do, is pinch hit," manager Mike Scioscia said. "So it's good to get him out there, and just get him acclimated to it."

In the Angels' first home series last week, Ohtani homered in three consecutive games before pitching seven scoreless innings with 12 strikeouts and allowing only one hit. Scioscia said the 23-year-old from Japan will be the designated hitter in the series finale against the Rangers on Wednesday.

Mike Trout and Andrelton Simmons each homered, and Albert Pujols had two more hits in his push to 3,000 before Ohtani got his first at-bat against the Rangers after not playing the series opener.

The Angels, who went ahead to stay with a three-run first, improved to 9-3 for the first time since 1982. They lead the majors with their 79 runs, 128 hits and 20 home runs.

"It's fun, fun to be a part of," Trout said. "We take pride in just passing the baton and if there's runners on base, we try to drive them in."

Trout's fourth homer of the season was a 441-foot solo drive that hit high above the Angels bullpen in left-center in the second inning. Simmons led off the next inning with his first homer to make it 5-1 against Martin Perez (1-1).

Pujols has 2,983 career hits after his two singles.

Tyler Skaggs (2-0) struck out seven while allowing one run and throwing 114 pitches in five innings. The lefty allowed five hits and walked four.

"In the words of my friend, it was effectively awful," said Skaggs, who refused to say who told him that. "Not going to name names, but it perfectly describes the outing."



After Perez retired the first two batters in the game, five straight Angels reached base. The first run scored on a wild pitch before Jefry Marte and Chris Younghad consecutive RBI singles.

Perez allowed eight runs and nine hits and was done after walking the first two batters in the fourth.

"I think my stuff, it was there," Perez said. "I was just trying to throw a strike and I can't. Just one of those days of trying to do your best but you never get good results back. Not one of the best games."

#### TRAINER'S ROOM

Angels: 2B Ian Kinsler (groin) is expected to be activated from the disabled list for Thursday's series opener at Kansas City. ... LHP Andrew Heaney, on the DL because of left elbow inflammation, felt good following a bullpen session Monday and is expected to make his season debut Thursday or Friday against the Royals.

Rangers: 2B Rougned Odor (left hamstring strain) and RHP Doug Fister (right hip strain) were put on the 10-day DL after both aggravated injuries in the series opener Monday. Odor is expected to be out three weeks, and Fister will be out two to three weeks.

#### SHORT HOPS

Beltre had two hits to increase his career total to 3,062, which is 23rd on the career list after breaking a tie with Craig Biggio. Next is Cap Anson with 3,081. ... Colon threw three innings in his second relief appearance in three days, and only 11th in his 21 MLB seasons. He will be starting again when Fister's turn in the rotation comes up.

"Yeah, Sunday will be on his regular rest. So that would be as if he started tonight and he'd be on regular rest," manager Jeff Banister said. "A little tune up and able to go."

#### SEEING DOUBLE

The Rangers turned three double plays, one started by Colon without catching the ball to end the seventh. Pujols hit a hard liner up the middle. Colon reached up over his head, and the ball ricocheted off his glove in the air to second baseman Jurickson Profar, who caught the ball to retire Pujols and then threw to first to double up a baserunner.

#### UP NEXT

Jaime Barria, a 21-year-old right-hander who was pitching in the Class A California League a year ago, is set to make his major league debut for the Angels. Ohtani will DH against a lefty for the first time when Los Angeles goes for a series sweep at Texas against Matt Moore (0-2, 11.05 ERA).

## **Shohei Ohtani starting Sunday at Kansas City**

The Los Angeles Angels announced that Shohei Ohtani's next start will be Sunday at the Kansas City Royals.

That means Ohtani will have started a game on Sunday his first three times out.

He beat the Oakland Athletics in each of his first two starts, including a dazzling performance this past weekend when he took a perfect game into the seventh inning.

He went seven innings in that start, striking out 12 while walking one and allowing one hit.

Ohtani was not in the starting lineup for the Angels on Tuesday night, sitting against Texas Rangers starting lefty Martin Perez. But he grounded out as a pinch hitter in the ninth inning against Bartolo Colon in what ended up being a blowout victory for Los Angeles, 11-1.

"Good to get him off the bench, because when he's available that's something he might eventually do, is pinch hit," manager Mike Scioscia said. "So it's good to get him out there, and just get him acclimated to it."

In the Angels' first home series last week, Ohtani homered in three consecutive games.

## **Interest in Shohei Ohtani memorabilia on rise**

By Darren Rovell

The sports memorabilia world is buzzing over Los Angeles Angels pitcher and slugger Shohei Ohtani.

On Monday night, his autographed Topps rookie card sold for \$6,725.

"It's a truly foreign market that is buying his memorabilia," said Rick Probst, whose company sold the card on eBay. "Aaron Judge and some of the other baseball stars we have seen on the rise have been boosted by a U.S. market alone."

A year after Judge was compared to Babe Ruth due to his larger-than-life stature and frequency of home runs, Ohtani is also compared to the "Bambino," not only hitting blasts but striking out batters.

"The fact that he is excelling at both hitting and pitching has created somewhat of a frenzy," Probst said.

The red-ink autographed card, from the 2018 Topps Heritage set, could have been bought in the \$1,500-to-\$2,000 range toward the end of spring training when fans were questioning if the hype was real over Ohtani, whom the Angels acquired by paying a \$20 million posting fee to the Nippon-Ham Fighters, his Japanese team.

But Ohtani, 23, has more than matched expectations early in the regular season, going 2-0 with a 2.08 ERA and taking a perfect game into the seventh inning of his most recent start. He has seven hits at the plate, including home runs in three consecutive games.

"His autographed cards have tripled or quadrupled in the last two to three weeks," Probst said.

Topps, which signed Ohtani to an exclusive autograph and memorabilia deal in January, said Tuesday it has sold 102,501 on-demand cards of Ohtani on its website in the past 32 hours.

Topps priced one autographed card at \$4,000. It sold immediately.

Phillies reliever Pat Neshek, a noted card collector, pulled a Topps Heritage signed Ohtani card, one out of 69, out of a pack last week. He sold the card on eBay for \$6,101 on Sunday.

"When Major League Baseball players are flipping a card for a profit, you know it's big," said Clay Luraschi, vice president of product development for Topps.

"We've seen things that look like this -- Ichiro and [Albert] Pujols in 2001 and obviously what we saw with Aaron Judge last year," said Luraschi, who has been with Topps for 18 years. "But nothing I've seen in the past has matched what we've seen the last couple weeks with Ohtani."

## ***FROM SPORTING NEWS***

### **Shohei Ohtani news: Angels star to DH vs. lefty, make next mound start Sunday at K.C.**

By Bob Hille

Angels rookie sensation Shohei Ohtani's next start on the mound will be Sunday in Kansas City, the Angels announced Tuesday, meaning he'll be available to DH Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.

A key distinction: The lefty slugger will be in the lineup Wednesday against Rangers left-hander Matt Moore, Ohtani's first such test in the regular season.

Asked Tuesday if he was purposely keeping Ohtani from facing left-handed pitching, manager Mike Scioscia downplayed the matchup, according to the Orange County Register, saying it "doesn't matter" whether a pitcher is right-handed or left-handed.

Ohtani actually hit better against left-handers in Japan (.309) than he did against right-handers (.279), the Register noted. He batted several times against lefties during spring training, when he struggled against righties and lefties.

However, in five games covering 19 at-bats since opening day, facing exclusively right-handers, Ohtani has slashed .368/.400/.842 with three homers and seven RBIs. He was named the AL Player of the Week on Monday.

Because Ohtani, who was out the lineup Tuesday, is now penciled in to pitch Sunday, he'll be available to bat not just Wednesday in Arlington but also Thursday and Friday in Kansas City.

The ripple effect: Albert Pujols, who DH'd Tuesday, would have to play first base three straight days.

Scioscia said there was no physical reason Pujols, 38, was the DH Tuesday but added, "I think we're trying to keep a lot of guys fresh."

Meantime, ahead of Sunday's start against the Royals, Ohtani was shown by television cameras to have a finger bandaged on his pitching hand, the Register reported. In response, pitching coach Charlie Nagy said, "All's good," though since spring training Ohtani has been dealing with blister problems caused by throwing his split-fingered fastball.

### ***FROM THE SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE***

## **Is Shohei Ohtani the new Freak? Like Tim Lincecum, he's must-see theater**

By John Shea

The swings and misses remind me of another time. The feebleness of the batters takes me back to an era of dominance and wonderment. When Shohei Ohtani made darned capable A's hitters look as if they're swinging a bat for the first time, one other pitcher came to mind.

A pitcher whose pitches dived, whose opponents crumbled and whose fans howled.

Tim Lincecum doesn't have Ohtani's velocity or stature or hitting ability. But when Lincecum walked off the mound, at least at his peak, he left batters and fans thinking they hadn't seen anyone quite like this. Just like Ohtani, a decade later.

To confirm I wasn't on the wrong track, like seemingly everyone facing the 6-foot-4 marvel from Japan, I checked with a pro scout who was in Anaheim on Sunday for Ohtani's seven-inning masterpiece for the Angels, the first six of which were perfect.

"Yeah, you can compare them as far as the level of deception and consistency with their arm speed, both top shelf," the scout said. "Plus, Lincecum threw in the mid-90s then, so he kept them honest like with this guy."

First, Timmy the Kid. Now, the Sho Hey Kid.

Lincecum, who's attempting a comeback with the Rangers, took the game by storm when winning Cy Young Awards in 2008 and 2009 and leading the Giants to their first World Series championship in San Francisco in 2010 — all three years, he topped the National League in strikeouts.

He was a tiny man with an unusual windup and lovable persona, and his repertoire of pitches that made hitters look silly added to The Freak's mythical qualities.

Now along comes Ohtani, who's taking the game by storm at another level. This modern-day Lincecum hits tape-measure home runs — three in three games in between two starts on the mound, both against the A's.

Back in the day, Lincecum's changeup was a thing of beauty, used in two-strike counts to end at-bats. The pitch was harder than the average changeup — 10 mph quicker than Hall of Famer Trevor Hoffman's — and perplexed batters. At the last moment, as the ball sailed from the batters' sight, they were swinging at air.

Just like Ohtani's split-fingered fastball. A's hitters saw it on consecutive Sundays, and they'd be fine not seeing again it for a long, long time.

Ohtani struck out 12 batters Sunday, dazzling them with a fastball in the high 90s (that touched 100) and splitter in the high 80s (that sometimes topped 90). Of his 91 pitches, 59 were strikes. Of the 59 strikes, 44 were swings. Of the 44 swings, 24 were misses — the most by any pitcher this season. Of the 24 misses, 16 were splitters.

In the two games, Ohtani threw 56 splitters. Six were put in play. None for hits.

"The best split I've ever seen," the scout said. "It's harder, there's more movement, it's just different."

On the other hand ...

"He's going to have to get a better slider for these major-league hitters. They'll figure it out. They always do. It needs work at the major-league level."

Certainly, Ohtani can evolve. Lincecum did.

In college, Lincecum was a two-pitch pitcher (fastball, curve), which is all he needed to be. By his rookie year, he had a changeup — a pitch with which he only experimented in college — but didn't use it consistently. He eventually made it a major part of his repertoire and added a slider that he threw a bunch in the first championship season.

He was able to throw any pitch in any count, with a similar release point, and get outs.

The changeup put Lincecum at another level, the ultimate complement to his fastball and often confused with his slider.

"Even in the dugout, you might not be able to tell the difference. Even guys on your own team," Lincecum once told me. "The pitches have the same kind of speed, maybe just a different look as they get closer to the plate."

How so?

"A slider is always going to do one of two things: go across or down. A changeup, who knows? It's going away to lefties, in to lefties as well. It's doing a number of things. Sometimes even batters can't tell. Is that a slider? A changeup?"

That's what the scout recalled of Lincecum's changeup. You just didn't know where it would go. The grip always was the same, the different release points determined the location.

"It's just not possible for Lincecum's changeup to be in the zone that often," the scout said. "It was like a Nerf ball or Wiffle ball into the wind. It comes out hard but doesn't do what you expect."

"Same thing with Ohtani's split. The arm speed is no different than the fastball. You can't see rotation, apparently, from what I see of the hitters. I mean, it's big-time movement."

Ohtani's 10-mph difference between his fastball and splitter is similar to the difference between Lincecum's pitches: mid-90s fastball and mid-80s change.

Batters will begin to adjust to Ohtani's pitching, just as pitchers will begin to adjust to Ohtani's hitting. He'll need to adjust accordingly as well.

But make no mistake: Ohtani is capturing the imagination of the baseball world, just as Lincecum did a decade ago.

Now if only Lincecum could hit.

**FROM THE NEW YORK POST**

## **'Never seen anything like it': Shohei Ohtani card sales soar**

By Hanna Withiam

Shohei Ohtani is raising eyebrows and the memorabilia market after just two weeks into his first MLB season with the Angels.

The pitcher/sluggger's autographed Topps rookie card sold for \$6,725 on Monday night, meaning its worth shot up by nearly \$5,000 since the end of spring training, when they were going for between \$1,500 and \$2,000, according to ESPN. Ohtani has begun convincing people he's worth all the preseason hype with his breakout performances on the mound and at the plate in the past week.

"The fact that he is excelling at both hitting and pitching has created somewhat of a frenzy," the owner of the company that sold Ohtani's card on eBay, Rick Probststein, told ESPN.

In his second start on Sunday, Ohtani took a perfect game into the seventh inning and Los Angeles went on to beat the A's 6-1. He is 2-0 with a 2.08 ERA and 18 strikeouts so far.

In between starts, the 23-year-old Ohtani hasn't shown any fatigue, scattering seven hits and seven RBIs over four games in the DH role. He also gave a glimpse into his potential for power, hitting home runs in three consecutive games last week.

The results are translating into a big win for the card companies, especially with Ohtani's international appeal. The Angels won the offseason bidding war for Ohtani, paying \$20 million to his Japanese club, the Nippon-Ham Fighters, for his rights.

"When Major League Baseball players are flipping a card for a profit, you know it's big," Topps vice president of product development Clay Luraschi said.

"We've seen things that look like this — Ichiro and [Albert] Pujols in 2001 and obviously what we saw with Aaron Judge last year," he added. "But nothing I've seen in the past has matched what we've seen the last couple weeks with Ohtani."

Topps has itself to thank for inking Ohtani to an exclusive autograph and memorabilia deal in January. As of Tuesday evening, the company had sold over 102,501 Ohtani cards on its website — over the course of 32 hours.

**FROM FANGRAPHS****The Playoff Picture Has Already Shifted**

By Jeff Sullivan

The baseball season, as people will often tell you, is a marathon, not a sprint. It might be even more like an ultra-marathon, one of those races that lasts a hundred miles in the middle of the desert. Once it gets going, the regular season feels like it goes on forever. The idea here is to downplay the significance of any short spurt. There's an awful lot of time for the standings to normalize. At some point, every team will look very good, and every team will look very bad.

Now, I've never run a marathon, myself, but I do know that, among competitors, the splits are critical. When you're trying to keep up with champion runners, it can be incredibly difficult to make up for a substandard start. That is, even in a marathon, a slow first mile is a problem. A *fast* first mile can be good or bad — this is where the comparison breaks down. It's harder for a baseball team to over-tax itself in the first handful of games. But anyway, starts matter. The baseball season has started, and as a consequence of the results, we've already seen some numbers shift around.

This is a post I like to get to early in every season. I always get a kick out of it, but at the same time, I also always know it causes people to roll their eyes. It's way too soon to think about how the season's going to finish. The season only just began. Games are getting called because it's too cold, or there's too much snow. The current leader in position-player WAR is Didi Gregorius. It takes a while for the season to get into a routine, as players are still ramping up to full speed. Mike Trout isn't yet slugging .550. We all have to be patient.

But this post is a reminder that it's never too early for the games to count. Every game in the books already has gone for a win or a loss. Every game in September will go for a win or a loss. Of *course*, the landscape has changed. We have new information. Last year's Blue Jays and Royals could never fully recover from slow starts. The Rockies took advantage of a hot start. Let's take a look at how our numbers have already changed.

You know we have projected standings. We have current projected standings, and we have projected standings from the day before the start of the regular season. Here are all the changes in expected final win total.

Based on our own math and depth charts, the Mets are already up 4.5 wins. The Angels are right behind them, at +4.2, and then we have the Diamondbacks at +4.0 and the Pirates at +3.6. To round out the top five, the Red Sox are at +2.8. At the other end, the Rays are already down 3.6 wins. The Padres, Dodgers, and Reds are all at -2.6, and then the Orioles are at -2.5. Many teams, of course, haven't shifted very much, because all the teams have barely played any baseball, but the strong starts and the bad starts all mean something.



It's arguably more important to look at the playoff odds instead. So here's the same plot, only this time looking at the changes in the playoff odds, rather than wins.

Viewed like this, no one has had a more encouraging or productive start than the 8-1 Mets. The Mets' chances of making the playoffs, according to us, have gone up 24 percentage points already. It's not just that Noah Syndergaard looks good and healthy. It's not just that Jacob deGrom looks good and healthy. The bullpen has been outstanding, Michael Conforto is back and hitting the crap out of the ball way ahead of schedule, and the club recently wrapped up a three-game road sweep of the Nationals. The Mets are 3.5 games ahead of the Nationals, today. They used to be projected 8.2 games worse. The gap has narrowed considerably. It's never too soon to sweep your main rival.

The Diamondbacks' odds are up about 19 percentage points. Similar to the Mets, they're 8-2, and they recently swept the Dodgers. They also won series against potential wild-card rivals Colorado and St. Louis, so the same ideas apply. The Diamondbacks are in better division *and* wild-card position, and they've already been weathering the absence of Steven Souza Jr. Patrick Corbin looks like a new pitcher. There's a lot to like down in the desert.

The other big odds jumper would be the Angels, up roughly 18 percentage points. In part, this is because the Angels are 8-3. And in part, this is because Shohei Ohtani has already improved both his hitting and his pitching projections. Ian Kinsler is about to come off the DL, which is further good news. And Andrew Heaney should be back soon. On the downside, the Angels have lost J.C. Ramirez for the year, and Matt Shoemaker is also having arm problems, so it's not as if everything has been sunshine and rainbows. There are very real questions about the Angels' pitching depth, but Ohtani has helped to fend them off. In our five-team projected AL playoff pool, the Angels have replaced the Blue Jays.

The biggest drop belongs to the Cardinals, whose odds are down about 11 points. At 4-6, the Cardinals haven't been dreadful. And now, they have Greg Holland on the roster. But, well, Holland was horrible just yesterday, in his season debut. And this is mostly about the wild-card competition. The Cardinals began as favorites for WC1, clear of the NL's sixth-best team by 6.3 games. Now the Cardinals project as favorites for WC2, clear of the NL's sixth-best team by only 1.5 games. The Mets' hot start matters to them. The Diamondbacks' hot start matters to them. Even the Pirates' hot start matters to them. The wild-card races are always tight, and a team can lose ground in a hurry.

A hot streak can erase a bad start very quickly. It works just the same in the other direction. But in any post like this, it's almost obligatory to mention the gambler's fallacy. An underachieving team shouldn't be expected to suddenly overachieve, in order to get back to its regular projection. And, vice versa. Even if you don't think that, say, the Mets have really improved at all, that doesn't mean you should now expect them to slump, to negate the eight wins in nine games. While it's true that baseball is hopelessly cyclical, this isn't how seasons are understood to work. If you thought the Mets might win 51% of their games before, you should expect them to win about 51% of their games the rest of the way. And then you add on the eight wins and one loss. Teams off to good starts won't suddenly find their opponents

tougher, and teams off to bad starts won't suddenly find their opponents easier. For most of you, this is old news, but it still always comes up. That's the thing about popular fallacies.

The purpose here is not to suggest that anything's been determined. And the purpose here is not to suggest that you should already be thinking about the playoffs, nearly six months ahead of time. The only purpose is to serve as an annual reminder that every game matters. For a team with hopes of contention, every early comeback counts, and every early meltdown stings. It's never too soon for a game to matter, so it's never too soon for a fan to emote. That's you! Consider yourself free to care. That's the whole point, anyway.