



Press Clips

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FROM THE OC REGISTER**Mike Trout on a mission to improve his defense, and maybe win a Gold Glove**

By Jeff Fletcher

ANAHEIM — Mike Trout has won two MVPs, a Rookie of the Year, two All-Star Game MVPs and five Silver Sluggers.

He is not satisfied, though.

For all his accomplishments and accolades, Trout has spent six years watching other players win the Gold Glove.

“I think every outfielder that plays this game wants to win a Gold Glove,” he said. “We take pride in our defense. It’s definitely (a goal) that’s out there.”

Trout said at the beginning of spring training that one of his missions for the season was to improve his defense. It’s not only because he wants to win a Gold Glove, but also because he’s heard about the “defensive metrics” that have dogged him in recent years.

While Trout may be universally accepted as the best overall player in the world, one slice of his statistical profile has consistently been a source of mystery to Trout and anyone who watches him.

Most of the advanced defense metrics rate Trout as average, or worse, as a center fielder.

“I don’t know how they come up with that,” Trout shrugs.

Dino Ebel, who coaches the Angels outfielders: “I don’t know. He’s very good.”

Manager Mike Scioscia: “Mike is a terrific center fielder.”

A veteran major league scout who has been watching Trout for years: “There is no way in the world I would even attempt to say Mike Trout is not a great center fielder.”

The picture painted by defensive metrics is quite different, though.

Outs above average (OAA), which comes from MLB Advanced Media’s Statcast, is calculated by factoring in the time the ball is in the air and the distance the fielder has to run to determine the percent chance of each play being made.

Last season, Trout’s OAA ranked him 55th of 71 outfielders — not just center fielders — who had at least 200 opportunities. In 2016, he was 52 of 73.

Defensive Runs Saved (DRS) and Ultimate Zone Rating (UZR) are both manually calculated, using the spot on the field rather than the distance from the fielder’s starting position. Also, both have variables

added to account for an outfielder's arm, in terms of both assists and preventing runners from attempting to take extra bases.

DRS further takes into account the number of bases, and by extension runs, that are taken from the offensive team by a defensive play being made. An outfielder robbing a hitter of a homer counts for more than an infielder robbing a single.

Last year, Trout finished 25th in DRS and 26th in UZR among the 31 players who had at least 500 innings in center field. In 2016, he ranked 12th and 19th of 32.

Both DRS and UZR are among the metrics baked into the Society of American Baseball Research's Defensive Index (SDI), which accounts for about 25 percent of the Gold Glove selection process. Trout finished 7th of 11 qualified center fielders in the American League in the SDI in 2017, and sixth of 12 in 2016.

Of course, all of that is viewed by some as being an indictment of the metrics, not Trout.

"Anyone that goes to analytics to question his greatness, that just shows what a millennial-istic society we live in," the scout said.

To Mark Simon, an analyst with Baseball Information Solutions, and Mike Petriello, a stats analyst from MLB.com, there are other explanations for why the numbers don't rate Trout's defense as highly as those doing the "eyeball test."

First, Trout plays deep, and this year that's been even more pronounced. So far this season, Trout's average starting positioning has been 333 feet from home plate, which is the deepest of any center fielder in the majors, according to Statcast. Last year he averaged 324 feet, which was 16th deepest among the 69 outfielders who were in center field for at least 2,000 pitches.

"Coming in on a ball is a lot easier for me," Trout said. "It's my personal preference vs. going back on a ball."

By playing so deep, though, Trout is allowing more singles to fall in front of him than most outfielders, Simon said. To people watching, those may not even register as catchable balls because Trout started so deep, but DRS and UZR penalizes Trout when balls drop in shallow center field.

Trout also rarely dives. According to Simon, Trout dove for just one ball all season last year, compared with 14 for Gold Glove winner Byron Buxton. Cincinnati's Billy Hamilton led the majors with 20.

Trout nonetheless said he is "trying to be aggressive" and "trying to catch everything."

Truth be told, the Angels don't "encourage" Trout or any of their outfielders to dive, Ebel said.

Because of his bat, Trout is far more valuable to his team than Buxton or Hamilton or Tampa Bay's Kevin Kiermaier, who throw their bodies around with reckless abandon.

Trout jammed his wrist on a dive in the outfield in July 2015. Although he only missed two games and said subsequently it didn't affect him at the plate, he nonetheless hit .241 over his next 47 games.

Trout's preference for playing deep may also be protecting him, even though he says it's simply because he's more comfortable coming in. The farther Trout has to run to the wall, the less time he'll have to look or brace himself for a collision.

"The last thing we want to do is put him shallow, and then he's running full speed into the wall," Ebel said.

So the trick is to find ways that Trout can improve his defense without putting himself at risk. One of them is improving his arm, which scouts agree he's been doing for a few years. He spends extra time long-tossing with Kole Calhoun, and throws to bases once a series.

Trout had only six assists his first two full years in the majors, but he had seven apiece in 2015 and 2016, and five in an injury-shortened 2017.

For this season, the biggest point of emphasis is getting quick jumps, which is the key to him covering more ground.

"A guy who has a great first step, but is not as fast as Mike Trout will get to balls that he doesn't get," Ebel said. "A lot of guys have a better first step than Mike's, but he's working on it ... Anytime you say 'Mike, this is what we need to work on,' this is what he thrives on."

Every day in batting practice, Trout stands in center field and reads balls off the bat, taking an immediate step to go get them. Even if he doesn't chase down every ball, the point of the drill is simply getting moving an instant quicker.

Trout said he's always done it, but now he's doing it with more intensity, "instead of going out there and going through the motions."

Whatever Trout does to improve, he is still likely to be at the mercy of factors beyond his control.

For starters, he is 240 pounds, so he's never going to be able to move the same way as the 190-pound Buxton. The scout said Trout is like a linebacker, while Buxton is like a safety.

Also, when it comes to the Gold Glove, Trout is not going to be able to do anything about the number of outstanding center fielders on other teams.

"I do think we have the best defensive center fielders in the history of baseball right now," Petriello said. "I don't think it's a demerit to him to say he's the 15th-best center fielder."

Trout is also unfortunate to have come along at a time when the Gold Glove process changed. Besides adding the metrics, which don't favor him as much as the "eyeball" test, the award used to be given to the top three outfielders. Often, three center fielders won. Now, it's position specific, so there's only one award available for a center fielder.

This is also an era when outfielders are simply getting fewer opportunities, because there are more home runs, walks and strikeouts. As the sample size of balls in the outfield shrink, it's more likely for an outfielder to be victimized over a whole season by too many chances that are too hard or too easy.

There is also the viewpoint that all of this is mere quibbling.

Certainly, no one doubts that Trout is the best overall player in the majors, so arguing where he stands from a pure defensive standpoint is perhaps splitting hairs unnecessarily.

"If you have 30 of the best golfers in the world," Scioscia said, "and one of them is No. 30 and one is No. 1 and one is No. 15, they are all great golfers. Mike is a great center fielder."

FROM THE LOS ANGELES TIMES

Parker Bridwell provides Angels with pitching insurance

By Mike Digiovanna

If Parker Bridwell has any kind of ego, be it healthy or inflated, he hides it well. The Angels pitcher refused to allow his breakout 2017 season to fuel expectations for 2018 or germinate seeds of complacency or entitlement.

"I try to stay humble," he said after an exhibition start last month, "because this game will humble you as fast as anything. I try to think like I'm a 'JIC,' a just-in-case guy who kind of got here by accident."

Bridwell was referring to the acronym used by managers on spring-training lineup cards for minor leaguers who are available "just in case" the big-league starter gets shelled early and can't complete his stint.

Bridwell, 26, had a record of 10-3 with a 3.64 earned-run average in 21 games as a rookie. His emergence as an effective and reliable starter during a season in which the Angels rotation was ravaged by injuries removed him from the JIC list in Arizona this spring.

But when he was demoted to triple-A Salt Lake at the end of camp, Bridwell joined a pool of minor leaguers whose job is to stay sharp and be ready just in case one of the Angels starters struggled or was injured.

Sure enough, Matt Shoemaker was placed on the disabled list because of a forearm strain Tuesday, and Bridwell was recalled.

Bridwell, a 6-foot-4, 185-pound right-hander, spent all of about 30 hours in Utah's capital city, long enough to sign a lease on a four-bedroom house to share with triple-A teammates Nick Tropeano, John Lamb and Jabari Blash, but not long enough to procure the keys to the place.

The triple-A trio may have to find another roommate. Instead of pitching in Salt Lake's season-opening series against the Albuquerque Isotopes, Bridwell will start against the Oakland Athletics in Angel Stadium on Friday night.

"I was surprised it happened this quick," he said Wednesday. "The circumstances stink, but it's why I'm here. I'm ready to compete. I have to make pitches like I did last year. If I can do that and pound the zone and be efficient, I'm gonna hopefully give my team a chance to win."

By that measure, Bridwell was a star after coming over from the Baltimore Orioles for cash last April 17, helping the short-handed Angels stay in the American League wild-card race until the final week of the season.

The Angels had a record of 17-3 in Bridwell's 20 starts, the best team record in a rookie's starts since 1944, when the St. Louis Cardinals went 18-3 in Ted Wilks' starts.

"Individual stats, I don't really care about," Bridwell said. "They're nice to have at the end of the day, but 17 wins to me is a lot more important than whatever my ERA is or however many strikeouts I have."

Bridwell, who grew up in the tiny West Texas town of Hereford, was a ninth-round pick of the Orioles in 2010. He reached the big leagues in August 2016 after grinding through six minor league seasons marked by inconsistency and one low point in which he nearly quit baseball to give college football a try.

Bridwell made two relief appearances for the Orioles. In the second, against the Washington Nationals, he gave up a grand slam to Daniel Murphy. The next day, Bridwell was demoted to triple-A. He wasn't called up when rosters expanded in September and was sold to the Angels last April.

"We just saw an assortment of pitches, an ability to command the strike zone, and we're always trying to collect starting pitching depth," Angels general manager Billy Eppler said. "My assistant GM, Steve Martone, had been kind of pounding the table for this guy for over a year."

Bridwell's fastball averaged 92.4 mph last season. The Angels, more impressed with his secondary stuff, suggested that Bridwell throw fewer fastballs and more sliders, sinkers and cut-fastballs, the latter pitch particularly effective against left-handed hitters.

After nine minor league appearances, Bridwell was called up by the Angels in late May. He wasn't dominant, striking out 73 batters in 121 innings, an average of only 5.4 strikeouts per nine innings. But he was more effective pitching to contact than he was trying to blow his fastball by hitters.

"My mentality was to throw as many fastballs as I could," he said, "but you get to the reality that your fastball is not good enough to do that at this level. You have to show other pitches.

"I think it made me a better pitcher, just kind of picking up a different style and getting past the ego part of it, you know what I mean? Becoming a pitcher and not trying to overpower people with 90 mph."

Bridwell said he is still motivated by his Baltimore chop but is not bitter toward the Orioles.

"I was inconsistent — I never put together multiple good years there — and that's all on me," he said. "It had nothing to do with them. They did what they had to do. I know it's a business. It opened another door, and I'm thankful for that."

How long that door remains open depends on the severity of Shoemaker's injury or if another starter is injured. Bridwell is insurance, and there will be little drop-off in the rotation if he pitches like he did last season. But the fact that he now has a track record won't add any pressure or change his approach.

"If I have to prepare for somebody else's expectations, I'm doing all the wrong things," he said. "All I expect of myself is to compete and give my team a chance to win. All those other people who expect something from me, they can keep looking or expecting. I'm just gonna come out and do me every day."

FROM ANGELS.COM

AL Best? Strong first week for champ's division

By Brian McTaggart

The Astros are rolling, the Angels and Mariners are holding their own despite some injury issues, the young A's are battling and the Rangers are struggling. A week into the season, the American League West is playing out the way many people figured it would.

The defending World Series champion Astros have blasted their way to a 6-1 record, taking three of four games from the Rangers and sweeping the Orioles. Their starting pitching has been as good as advertised and they're scoring runs in bunches.

The Angels, with Shohei Ohtani living up to expectations, and Mariners figured to be in the playoff chase and have gotten off to solid starts. Sean Manaea has been the bright spot in a thin A's rotation. As for the Rangers? A suspect starting pitching rotation could use the offense finding a way to score some runs.

Astros

What we know now: Coming off a World Series title, the Astros have shown no signs of complacency. The Astros, who a year ago were wondering if they could beat the Rangers, ran roughshod over them in Arlington last week. Even without Yuli Gurriel (disabled list), the offense is averaging six runs per game and they're giving up only 3.3 behind the best rotation in baseball. The bullpen has even been solid early on.

What we still don't know: Lefty Dallas Keuchel hasn't pitched poorly in his two starts, but he's certainly not as sharp as he was to begin last season. In two starts, he's allowed 12 hits, five walks and four earned runs in 11 innings. It will be interesting to see how manager AJ Hinch handles his bullpen going forward. Brad Peacock pitched the final three innings Wednesday to get the win, with Hinch sticking with the hot hand instead of using closer Ken Giles in the ninth. We saw in the postseason last year how unconventional Hinch can be with his relievers, but how will his bullpen usage evolve?

The bottom line: Things couldn't have gone much better for the Astros in the first seven games. Yes, they could have won the only game they lost -- a 5-1 defeat to Doug Fister and the Rangers last Friday -- but they'll take six of out seven every time. It's hard to imagine this team, if it stays healthy, not running away with the division once again.

Mariners

What we know now: Dee Gordon is indeed going to be a spark at the top of a potent lineup that has seen Gordon, Robinson Cano, Jean Segura and Mitch Haniger all come out swinging well. The Mariners have hit .271 in going 3-3 to start the year, but injuries have already chipped away at their bullpen and lineup and this is a team that will need to hit on all cylinders to win consistently. The Mariners dropped their last two while going 3-for-29 with runners in scoring position.

What we still don't know: Felix Hernandez remains a big question as the long-time ace looked very good with 5 1/3 scoreless innings in his debut vs. Cleveland, then gave up eight runs in four innings in a bad loss to the Giants. The Mariners need starting pitching to step up and while James Paxton, Mike Leake and Marco Gonzales have been solid, Hernandez could be a difference-maker one way or the other.

The bottom line: The Mariners have the potential to compete for a playoff spot if all goes well, but they don't have the depth to survive another wave of injuries. Having three starters -- designated hitter Nelson Cruz, catcher Mike Zunino and left fielder Ben Gamel -- on the disabled list to start the year has already put pressure on the lineup, and the bullpen has lost some key members as well. This club needs to get healthy and stay healthy to stay in it.

Angels

What we know now: Ohtani is the real deal. The Japanese star, whose disappointing spring made some wonder if he was ready for the big leagues, is hitting .429 with two homers and five RBIs in three games

at designated hitter. He even has a quality start on the mound. Not a bad week for the Japanese Babe Ruth. The Angels are carefully monitoring Ohtani's workload to make sure he doesn't overextend himself this season.

What we still don't know: It will be interesting to see what kind of workload Ohtani will handle going forward. He didn't play the day before or after he started on the mound. Of course, health remains an issue for the Angels. Pitchers Andrew Heaney and Matt Shoemaker are on the shelf, testing the pitching depth. Manager Mike Scioscia hasn't named a closer, but that was a revolving door last season.

The bottom line: Considering the injuries they have -- that includes newcomer Ian Kinsler -- the Angels have to like where they're at. Ohtani looks like an impact player and figures to only get better. The schedule remains favorable for the next couple of weeks, which could allow them to get healthy.

Rangers

What we know now: The Rangers are going with Keone Kela as their closer and their bullpen roles are starting to fall into place. They have a set rotation, but their starters are not yet giving at least six innings and taking some pressure off the bullpen. The Rangers are without center fielder Delino DeShields for four to six weeks because of surgery on his left hand and that's going to hurt their offense. It forces them to move Shin-Soo Choo to the top of the lineup instead of the middle of the order, where he could protect the hitters in front of him and set up the bottom of the order as a second leadoff hitter.

What we still don't know: What is exactly in store for Bartolo Colon. The Rangers want to keep him to protect their depth, but it's unclear how they will do that and what his role will be. Also unknown is how Drew Robinson and Carlos Tocci will handle the daily offensive and defensive demands in center field. The Rangers' outfield defense is still an area of concern, and the club is still waiting for Rougned Odor to figure things out offensively.

The bottom line: The Rangers had the unenviable task of starting the season against the Astros and lost three of four. But they also stumbled in two of their first three games against the Athletics as their offense has yet to break out. The Rangers are working overtime to sort out their pitching, but they need more offense. After seven games, they rank in the bottom five in the American League in batting average, on-base percentage and slugging percentage. To be a contender, this team needs to be an offensive powerhouse.

Athletics

What we know now: A revamped bullpen has been fantastic. So has Manaia, who yielded just one run in each of his first two starts across 15 2/3 innings. The defense, though dreadful in a four-game series against the Angels, has been better of late, while the offense is learning to get by when the long ball isn't there.

What we still don't know: How the A's rotation will fare over time -- or even how it will look by month's end. The A's will do some roster shuffling in the coming weeks while working around three off-days in an 11-day span, and veteran right-hander Trevor Cahill -- building his innings at Triple-A -- could be in the mix when they need a fifth starter again.

The bottom line: The offense needs to kick it up a notch to keep these A's afloat. Questions still remain within the rotation, and the bullpen will quickly tire if continually asked to pick up so many innings.

Inbox: Will Cozart lead off when Kinsler returns?

Beat reporter Maria Guardado fields questions from fans

By Maria Guardado

Do you see Cozart remaining in the leadoff spot when Kinsler returns?

My guess is that Ian Kinsler will return to the leadoff spot once he comes off the disabled list, with Zack Cozart slotting back in the middle of the order. Cozart has undoubtedly been productive in Kinsler's stead, going 9-for-29 (.310) with two home runs in six games as the leadoff man, but I think Kinsler remains the Angels' preferred option at the spot due to his mix of on-base skills and savviness as a baserunner.

Has there been any indication that Scioscia plans to designate a true closer as the season goes along; perhaps Middleton? Gabe, Costa Mesa

Not really. Manager Mike Scioscia didn't label anyone the official closer last year, either, though his preferences emerged as the season wore on. Cam Bedrosian got most of the save opportunities at the beginning of the year before landing on the DL. Bud Norris then stepped into the role and held it until he hit a rough patch in late July. Blake Parker took over after that and ended the season as the Angels' preferred ninth-inning option.

I think it will be more of the same in 2018. Parker was summoned to pitch in the Angels' first two save opportunities of the year, but he struggled in both appearances and had to be bailed out by Keynan Middleton on Sunday against the A's. Parker has strung together two scoreless outings since, but if he regresses, it could open the door for someone like Middleton to start getting looks in the ninth.

Do you believe the Angels would give Richards a contract extension with a great 2018 season? Considering his injury history.

Garrett Richards, who is eligible for free agency at the end of the year, has said that he would be open to discussing an extension with the Angels, though the club has not yet approached him about one. Given his injury history and this offseason's glacial free-agent market, it's tricky to assess his value, but Richards clearly has the talent to be a No. 1 starter. If he pitches like he did in 2014, he could get paid like one.

Is there any chance we could see Ohtani having less off-days as the season progresses during key situations/a playoff push (eventually)?

-- Nolen L., Las Vegas, NV

Scioscia said during Spring Training that the Angels could compress their projected six-man rotation and have their starters go on a traditional five-day schedule toward the end of the season, but it's unclear how Shohei Ohtani would fit into that picture since he's currently pitching once a week. The Angels are carefully monitoring Ohtani's workload to make sure he doesn't overextend himself this season, so they tend to map things out based on how he's feeling on any given day. I don't think the Angels would ever put Ohtani at risk by not giving him adequate time to recover in between hitting and pitching, so it'll be interesting to see how they balance that down the stretch, assuming they're in the mix for a playoff spot.

Could we be seeing Ohtani hitting and pitching on the same day?

Not unless Ohtani is pitching in a National League park. Scioscia explained that it's too much of a disadvantage to lose the designated hitter when Ohtani faces American League clubs. Since Ohtani would be in the lineup as a pitcher, the Angels would not be able to replace him with a DH later in the game, which would be problematic if Ohtani were knocked out early.

Is it too early to talk about Ohtani participating in the HR Derby

Yes.

Angels to watch Ohtani's usage closely

Two-way player to maintain schedule of six days' rest between starts

By Avery Yang

ANAHEIM -- As Shohei Ohtani adjusts to the rhythms of Major League Baseball, Angels manager Mike Scioscia will tread lightly with his two-way player.

This is part of a new initiative the Angels' coaching and medical staffs have undertaken to avoid the pitfalls the team has experienced in the past. Four members of the Angels' Opening Day rotation - Garrett Richards, Tyler Skaggs, Andrew Heaney and Matt Shoemaker -- have struggled with injuries the past two seasons. Richards, the ace, missed almost all of 2016 and '17. Heaney and Skaggs missed the majority of those seasons, as well. Seven games into 2018, Heaney and Shoemaker are already on the disabled list.

When Heaney and Shoemaker return, Scioscia's Spring Training plan of a six-man rotation should come to fruition, affording starters the luxury of elongated rest times and more opportunity for strength training. It will also enable Ohtani to stick with the six days of rest that he grew accustomed to in Japan.

Ohtani appears poised to continue with those six days of rest, even as the Angels soldier on with a five-man rotation. That means that he will pitch every seven days for the foreseeable future, and be in the lineup as DH two to three games between starts.

Ohtani's regimen requires him to train both at the plate and on the mound, no matter what he's doing in the next game. That's normal for him and he believes it helps him prepare.

"So even when I play as a hitter, I still pitch, and that's part of my rhythm, that's something I've been doing the past five years in Japan," Ohtani said Tuesday, through an interpreter. "I think each at-bat -- one at-bat at a time, one game at a time -- and try to create a good rhythm."

Scioscia said that general manager Billy Eppler has a concrete plan about what the structure of Ohtani's hitting and pitching timetable will look like as the season goes on (it was made before Ohtani was even an Angel, during the recruiting process), but did not go into further detail. Scioscia said that anything could change, and that they're taking everything day by day.

"We're going to be very diligent in checking in with our medical department to see what [Ohtani's] availability will be on a day-to-day basis, and to make sure that he has the best chance to contribute with the bat and on the mound," Scioscia said.

Scioscia has, however, also stressed that Ohtani is well-equipped for the task, and that his maturity level is far beyond his years. The skipper trusts in the routine that Ohtani has created for himself.

"I think he knows what he's doing out there, he knows what he needs to prepare for a season," Scioscia said.

Ohtani has a first-degree sprain in the ulnar collateral ligament in his right elbow, something that Scioscia said he's not worried about, but will keep an eye on. Ohtani received platelet-rich plasma injections over the offseason as a preventative measure. The treatment is something pitchers, including Chris Sale and Ohtani's countryman, Masahiro Tanaka, have done while continuing to pitch at a high level.

A first-degree sprain indicates that the tissue has been stretched out, but is not torn. It's the most minor grade level of injury to the UCL, and Ohtani has said in the past that he has no discomfort in his elbow.

According to a study published by the Rockies that collected data on 72 players with elbow injuries, 93 percent of those who had a Grade One or lesser Grade Two sprains and did not opt for surgery returned to their previous rate of production the season after injury.

An asset of Ohtani's magnitude, especially one in the middle of a massive adjustment period, must be handled carefully, and all indications point toward Scioscia erring on the conservative side.

Ohtani will pitch again Sunday against the Athletics, the team he faced in his season debut.

Ohtani's dynamic week captivates the sport

By Richard Justice

Shohei Ohtani is doing what hasn't been done in baseball in almost a century, and he's making it look ridiculously easy. There you go. *That's* the really amazing thing -- the almost unbelievable thing -- Ohtani has done in his first week in the Major Leagues.

If you showed up to watch the Angels play at Angel Stadium this week, you would have been excited to watch this new kid, the 23-year-old designated hitter with the sweet left-handed swing.

You had read that he's one of baseball's best hitting prospects, that he has superstar written all over him. You would not have been disappointed after watching him launch a couple of balls over the fence.

You would have watched him fly out of the batter's box as well, and at some point, you knew you were seeing something special.

Maybe it was a single on Tuesday night that Statcast™ clocked at 112.8 mph, the hardest-hit ball by an Angels player since August. Overall, Ohtani is hitting .429 with a pair of home runs.

Ohtani hit two against the Indians this week, one off a Josh Tomlin curveball on Tuesday and another on a 93-mph Corey Kluber fastball on Wednesday. As you watched all of this unfold, you might have forgotten that hitting a baseball isn't even the thing Ohtani does best.

Yes, he pitches, too. In his first start for the Angels on Sunday, he went six innings, allowed three runs and got the win in a 7-4 victory over the A's. He did it with a fastball that averaged 98 mph and with a split-finger pitch that was pretty much untouchable.

That one comes in hard on right-handed hitters, challenging their eyes and guts before dipping wickedly at home plate. That pitch is going to generate consistent swings-and-misses, and when Ohtani gets it up in the strike zone, it's going to shatter bats and buckle knees.

Ohtani the pitcher was labeled a can't-miss prospect and was the No. 1 reason almost every team sought to sign him in the offseason. They were less certain about the hitting. They were even less certain about any player having the time to hone two completely separate crafts.

And that's what made this first week so impressive. Fans in the ballpark know that they're seeing something baseball fans haven't seen before. MLB Pipeline rates Ohtani the top overall prospect (he's No. 1 among right-handed pitchers and No. 4 among outfielders). Fantasy leagues are listing him as two players, a hitter and a pitcher.

Because of that, his games are about to become can't-miss television. There was an electricity in the park every time he stepped into the batter's box this week.

These players don't come along very often, and this may be about to become what it was when Fernando Valenzuela pitched for the Dodgers or Mark Fidrych for the Tigers. Games suddenly become events, even for casual fans.

Sometimes, a player comes along who is just different, who is capable of doing things even other big leaguers don't dream of doing.

No player in 99 years -- think Babe Ruth in 1919, his final season with the Red Sox -- has done what Ohtani did in his first week: Win a game as a starting pitcher and hit a home run as a hitter.

This is the coolest thing in baseball in a long time. Just when we thought the game simply could not get any better, what with the captivating postseason contests and the tidal wave of young talent, along comes something that almost no one thought possible.

Baseball in recent years has become more and more interested in the possibility of having a true two-way player. With benches shorter and bullpens deeper, every team is looking for a way to save a roster spot.

The Rays are using Brendan McKay, a 2017 first-round pick from the University of Louisville, as both a pitcher and hitter. The Dodgers would like outfielder Brett Eibner, who did both at the University of Arkansas, to try it later this summer when he returns from Tommy John surgery. The Reds, meanwhile, are going to have their own two-way star, Hunter Greene, focus exclusively on pitching -- for now.

But most baseball people see the role as one of super utility player, a sort of Ben Zobrist hybrid who can also throw an inning now and then.

They can't get their minds around someone with two off-the-chart skillsets, a player gifted enough to start 25 games on the mound and maybe also get 300 plate appearances.

To do something like that would require a superman. There simply won't be enough time to put in the work require to do both, so he will have to rely on his raw skills.

In one week, Ohtani has done just that. When he comes to your city, you may be compelled to go out and see for yourself.

So in the very first week of this new season, we are captivated by something we never expected to see again. Don't you love it?

Mike Trout surprised a young Angels fan, and it will leave a permanent smile on your face

By Jessica Kleinschmidt

Mike Trout has a presence not many can duplicate. When he is around, you stop what you are doing and give your full attention to him. Sometimes, however, his appearance is unexpected, and the result is something wonderful.

A young kid was recently sitting in the Angels dugout when the two-time American League MVP walked casually towards him and gave him a high-five. Sure, we all *knew* Trout would be at Angel Stadium, but this was something extra special. Just look at the fan's reaction

Trout signed a ball for Ethan Machaell, who won the experience through a social media contest, and it's obvious he was still in shock. The outfielder also threw in a photo opportunity and a bat -- the disbelief and happiness from a fan who will never forget this moment were the cherries on top.

Talk about making someone's day.

The hype is real: Ohtani has been outstanding

Throws 99.6 mph as pitcher, hits 112.8 mph as batter

By Mike Petriello

The Angels have an off-day Thursday. That might be the only thing that can stop Shohei Ohtani from doing something spectacular.

Hyperbolic? Well, sure. It's April 5. We can't exactly look at his stat line of .429/.429/.857 this early in the season as anything more than a flashy set of unsustainable numbers, but what we can do is to look at the underlying skills that have brought him to that point -- they're very real -- and to point out that in three games over the last four days, Ohtani has done something spectacular each time.

Sunday: In his Major League pitching debut, Ohtani threw six innings in a 7-4 Angels win, flashing elite-level velocity, averaging 97.8 mph on his fastball, and getting so many swings and misses on his splitter that it was the third-best swing-and-miss splitter game of any pitcher in the past two seasons.

Monday: Ohtani rested. The Angels lost 6-0.

Tuesday: You'll remember the first-inning home run off Josh Tomlin as the first of Ohtani's career, but that's not really all he did, is it? Ohtani had three hits, and as Statcast™ will tell you, they were all *mashed*:

That final one, the 112.8-mph single off of Zach McAllister, is the hardest-hit ball by a pitcher (which we consider Ohtani as, even if he wasn't one at the time) since Statcast™ began tracking in 2015. He's the first pitcher to have three batted balls in a game of at least 100 mph; remember, he's been in the big leagues for a *week*.

Wednesday: Facing reigning American League Cy Young Award winner Corey Kluber, Ohtani struck out in his first at-bat, as many do. In the fifth inning, though, he got his revenge, 400 feet worth of it. After a groundout against Andrew Miller in the eighth, Ohtani singled with an exit velocity of 104 mph off Cody Allen in the 10th, before grounding out again against Tyler Olson in the 12th. The Angels won, 3-2, on Zack Cozart's walk-off homer in the 13th inning.

Again, it's only a few games, perhaps best illustrated by the fact that he's single-handedly outperformed the Tigers and Royals (and tied the Rays and Marlins), but he hasn't drawn a walk yet. He's only pitched against one team, and that's not going to change soon, since he faces the same A's again on Sunday in Anaheim. There are going to be ups and downs. The 4.50 ERA doesn't matter, just like the .429 batting average doesn't matter.

We know that, so far at least, the excitement has been real -- and we know the skills that have come along with it are real, too.

What that means is that while you might need months to know if a batting average is "real," you don't need all that long to know if *skills* are "real." It takes about two pitches to know that Noah Syndergaard throws hard and R.A. Dickey does not. You know pretty much right away that Aaron

Judge can crush a baseball in ways that Billy Hamilton cannot, and that Hamilton can run in ways that Albert Pujols cannot.

So in that sense, let's not look at averages or rates that we know are going to change considerably. Let's look at skills. Let's look at *maximums*. Let's show that Ohtani has proven that the hype in that department is warranted, even if he's got a lot of work to do to prove the performance will follow it.

Exit velocity: 112.8 mph

For all the homers and crushed liners, his hardest-hit ball so far this year was the single up the middle on Tuesday night. That gets rounded up to 113 for leaderboard purposes, so we'll do the same here. Last year, in the Majors, exactly 0.24 percent of batted balls touched 113 mph. Seventy-five players did it once. That may sound like a lot, but "once" is a pretty low bar, and even a stud like Anthony Rizzo did it exactly once in 486 plate appearances.

If we really want to get into it, 658 players had 20 plate appearances last year. Seventy-five of 658 is about 11 percent. So in three games as a designated hitter, Ohtani has shown a skill that 90 percent of hitters last season did not. That's a good start.

Pitch velocity: 99.6 mph

We dug into Ohtani's pitching start in depth the other day, so there's plenty more detail there, but there's one pertinent takeaway for right now, based on Ohtani touching 99 mph a dozen times against the A's on Sunday.

Only six starters hit 99 mph a dozen or more times in all of 2017. Ohtani just did that in six innings. It's not hyperbole to say that he's got velocity unlike nearly any non-Syndergaard starting pitcher.

This actually works out in a similar way. Last year, only 0.51 percent of pitches got up to 99 mph. Only 85 pitchers touched 99 mph at least once, which again includes one-time-only guys like Michael Wacha, who did it once in 2,700 pitches. There were 673 pitchers who threw at least 100 pitches last year, so about 13 percent of pitchers can get to 99. Again, elite.

Sprint Speed: 29.9 ft/sec

Here's the part you either forgot about or didn't know in the first place: Ohtani is really, really fast. It's easy to overlook this with all the pitching and hitting exploits, but when you go back and look at some of last winter's scouting reports, like this one from MLB.com's Jonathan Mayo, it's in there:

The first scouting director said... [Ohtani] also had recorded home-to-first times at 3.9 seconds, which is well above average and a part of his game not often discussed.

Fortunately for us, we've seen Ohtani have to run all-out, giving us a chance to measure his speed. (We use Statcast™'s Sprint Speed, which is measured as "feet per second, in a player's fastest one-second window." The Major League average is 27 ft/sec, and the leaderboards are here.)

It came on Wednesday, when Miller got Ohtani to ground out to second. On the play, Ohtani's Sprint Speed was 29.8 ft/sec, which is just this side of elite. So far in 2018, there have been 46 players who have had at least one baserunning play of 29.8 ft/sec, and the names are mostly who you'd expect. Trea Turner has eight of them. Byron Buxton has five. Jose Altuve has four. Pujols has *never* had one, dating back to 2015.

There have been 290 hitters so far this year with 10 plate appearances. It's a little harder to put this one in context, since it's not as easy to say if they had any opportunities to run their hardest. (No one is going all out on a homer or a strikeout, for example.) And yet ... 45 of 290 is about 16 percent. It fits with the scouting report.

It's still April 5, obviously. So, plenty can go wrong. At some point teams will adjust, on both sides of the ball, and Ohtani will need to adjust back. Maybe he won't. What we know so far, however, is that the skills are real. The excitement is, too. So far, the hype has been justified. A week into the season, after a rough spring, that's about as much as the Angels could have possibly asked for.

Ohtani to pitch every 7 days? That's the plan

Two-way player to maintain schedule of six days' rest between starts

By Avery Yang

ANAHEIM -- As Shohei Ohtani adjusts to the rhythms of Major League Baseball, Angels manager Mike Scioscia will tread lightly with his two-way player.

This is part of a new initiative the Angels' coaching and medical staffs have undertaken to avoid the pitfalls the team has experienced in the past. Four members of the Angels' Opening Day rotation - Garrett Richards, Tyler Skaggs, Andrew Heaney and Matt Shoemaker -- have struggled with injuries the past two seasons. Richards, the ace, missed almost all of 2016 and '17. Heaney and Skaggs missed the majority of those seasons, as well. Seven games into 2018, Heaney and Shoemaker are already on the disabled list.

When Heaney and Shoemaker return, Scioscia's Spring Training plan of a six-man rotation should come to fruition, affording starters the luxury of elongated rest times and more opportunity for strength training. It will also enable Ohtani to stick with the six days of rest that he grew accustomed to in Japan.

Ohtani appears poised to continue with those six days of rest, even as the Angels soldier on with a five-man rotation. That means that he will pitch every seven days for the foreseeable future, and be in the lineup as DH two to three games between starts.

Ohtani's regimen requires him to train both at the plate and on the mound, no matter what he's doing in the next game. That's normal for him and he believes it helps him prepare.

"So even when I play as a hitter, I still pitch, and that's part of my rhythm, that's something I've been doing the past five years in Japan," Ohtani said Tuesday, through an interpreter. "I think each at-bat -- one at-bat at a time, one game at a time -- and try to create a good rhythm."

Scioscia said that general manager Billy Eppler has a concrete plan about what the structure of Ohtani's hitting and pitching timetable will look like as the season goes on (it was made before Ohtani was even an Angel, during the recruiting process), but did not go into further detail. Scioscia said that anything could change, and that they're taking everything day by day.

"We're going to be very diligent in checking in with our medical department to see what [Ohtani's] availability will be on a day-to-day basis, and to make sure that he has the best chance to contribute with the bat and on the mound," Scioscia said.

Scioscia has, however, also stressed that Ohtani is well-equipped for the task, and that his maturity level is far beyond his years. The skipper trusts in the routine that Ohtani has created for himself.

"I think he knows what he's doing out there, he knows what he needs to prepare for a season," Scioscia said.

Ohtani has a first-degree sprain in the ulnar collateral ligament in his right elbow, something that Scioscia said he's not worried about, but will keep an eye on. Ohtani received platelet-rich plasma injections over the offseason as a preventative measure. The treatment is something pitchers, including Chris Sale and Ohtani's countryman, Masahiro Tanaka, have done while continuing to pitch at a high level.

A first-degree sprain indicates that the tissue has been stretched out, but is not torn. It's the most minor grade level of injury to the UCL, and Ohtani has said in the past that he has no discomfort in his elbow.

According to a study published by the Rockies that collected data on 72 players with elbow injuries, 93 percent of those who had a Grade One or lesser Grade Two sprains and did not opt for surgery returned to their previous rate of production the season after injury.

An asset of Ohtani's magnitude, especially one in the middle of a massive adjustment period, must be handled carefully, and all indications point toward Scioscia erring on the conservative side.

Ohtani will pitch again Sunday against the Athletics, the team he faced in his season debut.

FROM MLB.COM

10 former Major Leaguers on Triple-A OD rosters

By Will Leitch

Today, April 5, marks our second Opening Day of the 2018 baseball season. Last Thursday was MLB's Opening Day, but today might hit a little closer to home, literally, for many of you: It is Opening Day for Minor League Baseball.

If I want to see the best baseball players in the world, I'll go to a Major League Baseball game. But if I just want baseball, any baseball -- and I think we can all understand this specific state of being -- nothing beats the Minors. The tickets are cheaper, the seats are closer to the field, the beer is just as cold as it is in the big league parks (and also cheaper) and the mascots are flat-out horrifying.

Minor League Baseball is truly wonderful and, unless you live in a city with an MLB team already, it's probably just around the corner from you.

And the season begins tonight. You can look for the game nearest you right here.

The primary draw of any Minor League game is to see future big league stars -- maybe even your team's future big league stars. I remember catching Gary Sanchez at a Staten Island Yankees game back in 2010 and ... well, honestly, not noticing much of anything special about him at all. (I am a bad scout.) But I'd argue it's just as much fun to see the opposite of that: Past Major League players, still hanging on, trying to get back to the bigs one last time.

In the past, you had to pay Major League prices to watch these guys. Now, you can see them plying their trade down there with the kids, the way they did years before. You always have to make the climb to the Majors; sometimes, at the end of your career, you just have to do it again.

So I thought, today, I'd look the 10 most fascinating former Major League players who will open tonight's Opening Day on Triple-A rosters. These are all names you will recognize, players who had legitimate Major League careers and are still plunging forward, fighting tooth and nail to reach the bigs again.

One caveat: We're not counting players who are on an injury assignment, or were signed late in the season and are working themselves back into playing shape, virtually assured of a roster spot when they're ready. (Those are, of course, common, and have, in fact, included some Hall of Famers.) This is just guys whose names you will know but may have forgotten about, guys who haven't given up yet. Who can blame them? We wouldn't give up, either.

Chris Carter, Salt Lake Bees

Two years ago -- two years ago! -- Carter led the National League in home runs. And now here he is, presumably launching bombs deep into the Utah night and waiting for the Angels to be in need of a right-handed power bat. Carter leaned into the Three True Outcomes revolution maybe a little too hard: The year he hit 41 homers for Milwaukee, he struck out 206 times and walked 76. Counting his nine HBP, this means that 52 percent of his plate appearances didn't require a fielder to move a muscle.

Carter is only 31; if, say, Albert Pujols has to go on the DL anytime this season, Carter can fill in without anybody even noticing, really.

Allen Craig, El Paso Chihuahuas

Craig was a borderline star for the Cardinals from 2011-13, and St. Louisans will never forget him catching the final out of the immortal 2011 World Series. But after 2013, when he missed the last month with a foot injury -- one that he might have reinjured on the infamous obstruction play in the 2013 World Series -- Craig fell off a cliff. He hit only nine more big league homers after that, and once he was traded (for John Lackey), the Red Sox lost patience with him quickly.

Craig hasn't appeared in an MLB game since 2015, and his power for Pawtucket was completely gone last year (one homer in 182 plate appearances). The Padres are giving him another shot, but he'll be 34 in July.

Jumbo Diaz, New Orleans Baby Cakes

Diaz has always been listed at 312 pounds in the majors, but ... come on. Actually, he was 300 pounds when the Marlins signed him to a Minor League deal this spring, an improvement from the 342 he says he weighed at the end of last season.

Nevertheless, Diaz is the heaviest pitcher in MLB history. I assume he and the mascot will be best friends by midseason.

Edwin Jackson, Syracuse Chiefs

Jackson is the most well-traveled starting pitcher of all time, pitching for 12 different teams in his 15-year career. He needs just one more team -- well, one team he hasn't already pitched for -- to tie Octavio Dotel for most different teams in MLB history. The Chiefs are a Nationals affiliate, which is no fun, as Jackson has already pitched for the Nationals twice, in 2012 and last year.

Jackson, despite all these travels, is still somehow only 34 years old.

Pete Kozma, Toledo Mud Hens

Speaking of Nationals fans, here's the guy whose name they still curse in their sleep, nearly six years later. You might remember why.

Kozma never was much of a hitter, that game aside, but he could play shortstop like a dream, which is why he still has a place in the Tigers' organization, waiting for someone to get desperate.

Erik Kratz, Scranton Wilkes-Barre Railriders

The platonic ideal of the backup catcher, Kratz didn't break into the Majors until after his 30th birthday, so it's tough to blame him for not getting too worked up about a little time in the Minor Leagues. He's 37 now and still rattling around the Yankees' organization.

Kratz had two plate appearances for the Yanks in 2017 and got hits both times. He has never appeared in a postseason game before, poor guy.

Kris Medlen, Reno Aces

Medlen factoid! He finished 20th in MVP voting in 2012. Quite reasonably so, for that matter: He was 10-1 with a 1.57 ERA for the Braves that year, starting 12 games, finishing seven and generally doing whatever Atlanta need him to do.

Medlen wasn't half bad for the Royals in 2015, but hasn't been back to the bigs since he had a 7.77 ERA in six starts back in 2016. He has a World Series ring and a lifetime 3.25 ERA, and there are tens of thousands of pitchers who would give up an appendage or a distant relative to have either.

Oliver Perez, Scranton/Wilkes-Barre RailRiders

Never forget how amazing Perez was in 2004 for the Pirates. The tall, lanky lefty looked like the next coming of Randy Johnson, striking out 239 batters with a 2.98 ERA at the age of 22. That potential is why the Mets signed Perez to such a massive contract, but it ended up being one of the worst contracts in team history and the reason his name is still mud in New York City.

But when Perez left New York, he transformed himself into a relief specialist -- and a good one -- rattling around Seattle, Arizona, Houston and Washington from 2012-17. The Reds released him in camp and the Yankees signed him for one final go-around. If this were a baseball novel, Perez would earn redemption in New York by striking out the last batter of the World Series; for now, Scranton will have to do.

Ruben Tejada, Norfolk Tides

Speaking of former Mets, the fine-fielding, zero-hit, look-out-for-Chase-Utley! shortstop is only 28 years old and basically impersonating a younger Kozma. He hasn't hit a homer since 2015, but he reeks of a guy who is going to be starting in Game 162 for the Orioles this year.

Pat Venditte, Oklahoma City Dodgers

The only player in more than 100 years to inspire his own baseball rule, Venditte is still around and still ambidextrous. He was stuck in Phillies' Triple-A Lehigh Valley last year, but now he's with the Dodgers. (Of course Venditte is with the Dodgers.)

With a 1.59 ERA and 14 strikeouts and three walks in 11 1/3 Cactus League innings, the Dodgers see Venditte as a potential multi-inning reliever. If there's any justice in the world, Los Angeles will return to the World Series and we'll get to see him there. For now: Oklahoma City, he's your gift.

Here are 5 storylines to watch right now

Arrieta to make Phils debut; Yo, Harper to showcase power; Ohtani makes second start this weekend

By Anthony Castrovino

We've got some closing openers on tap in the next few days. The Indians (Friday), Rockies (Friday) and Cubs (Monday) will be the last three clubs to make their 2018 home debuts, and then we can all settle into the Major League season.

But even though baseball still hasn't even opened for business in some ballparks, we're already not short on intrigue. Here are five key storylines to track this weekend.

Arrieta's entrance: Jake Arrieta made his intentions clear when he signed a three-year, \$75 million deal with the Phillies deep into Spring Training.

"I intend to come in here and win right away, even though we are technically in a rebuild," Arrieta said. "And I think the other players agree with me. We intend to win -- rebuild or not."

The Phillies have found the wins a bit harder to come by than expected in this very early going, with rookie skipper Gabe Kapler taking plenty of heat for his ultra-progressive bullpen usage. But Arrieta's arrival Sunday in the conclusion of a weekend set with the Marlins (1:35 p.m. ET) could make for a potentially big boost at Citizens Bank Park. Arrieta suffered statistical regression across the board with the Cubs in 2017, but he did post a 2.28 ERA after the All-Star break.

Beasts of the East: What if the National League East becomes not just a legit division battle, but an NL MVP Award battle? It's way too soon to know, but Bryce Harper and Yoenis Cespedes have both played like MVPs so far, and they'll both be back in action when the rival Nationals and Mets resume their three-game series at Nationals Park on Saturday (1:05 p.m.).

Cespedes says his timing is off, but you wouldn't know it from the three home runs he's hit in his past six games, including the game-tying solo shot off Stephen Strasburg in the Mets' 8-2 win in the series opener Thursday. That homer had a 112.1-mph exit velocity, Cespedes' second-hardest-hit homer since Statcast™ began tracking data in 2015.

Harper struck out twice Thursday, but he's still wielding a 1.342 OPS with four homers.

Oh my: Simply as a product of trying to do what has not been done since Babe Ruth's Boston days, Shohei Ohtani was going to be must-see at the start of this season no matter the early results. But the early results -- a solid start against the A's and two home runs, including one off reigning American League Cy Young Award winner Corey Kluber -- have only added to the urgency of tuning in to see Ohtani's every appearance on the mound or at the plate.

Ohtani's second start Sunday at Angel Stadium (4:07 p.m.) will once again pit him against the A's club that he limited to three runs on three hits over six innings last week. Ohtani served up a three-run home run to Matt Chapman in the second inning of that start, then retired 14 of the last 15 batters he faced, showcasing the high-90s heat and sick splitter that make him such a prized pickup for the Halos even if the hitting thing doesn't work out (and by all early indications, the hitting is working out just fine).

Cole Train: This just in -- the Astros are good. The defending champs enter their three-game home set against the Padres this weekend with a 6-1 record in which just about everything has gone to plan -- most prominently, perhaps, the impact of offseason acquisition Gerrit Cole.

In his Astros debut in Texas last week, Cole threw seven magnificent innings in which he allowed just a run on two hits with three walks and induced a career-high 21 swings and misses. If Cole, who makes his Minute Maid Park debut Saturday (7:10 p.m.), can reclaim the dominance that made him a Cy Young Award candidate with the Pirates in 2015 -- and do so as the Astros' *fourth* starter -- that's a pretty scary thought. The thinking was that the Astros could help Cole untap his potential with proper sequencing, so it was interesting to note that he used his slider 26 percent of the time against the Rangers after using the pitch 25 percent of the time or more in just three total starts from '16-17.

An ace in the hole: Clayton Kershaw is 0-2. If that sentence sounds strange, that's because it is. Kershaw has not begun a season this way since 2009. And he hasn't begun a season 0-3 since '08 -- his rookie year.

Though Kershaw's velocity is a tick or two below his norm, he can't be blamed for the rare record he takes into Sunday's start in San Francisco (4:05 p.m.). He's given up just three runs in 12 innings of work so far this season, but he's gotten a grand total of one run of support. While the Astros are roaring out the gate, the Dodgers, at 2-5, have been proof that the "World Series hangover" notion can actually apply to the World Series loser. They go into this weekend's set against the rival Giants facing questions about their offense, which is averaging just 3.14 runs per game, and their closer Kenley Jansen, who surrendered a three-run lead earlier this week and hasn't had his usual sizzling stuff.

The Dodgers are a team in dire need of normalcy, and for them there is nothing more normal than winning with Kershaw on the hill.

FROM MiLB.COM

The Minors' most intriguing teams in 2018**

MiLB.com staff selects one key ballclub in each farm system

AL West

Los Angeles Angels: Class A Burlington Bees

Jo Adell, the top-ranked Angels prospect whose name doesn't rhyme with Mopay Fopani, will start his first full season with the Bees and figures to be one of the most athletic players in the Midwest League. The No. 62 overall prospect has 65-grade speed and above-average power. Joining Adell in the Burlington outfield will be Brandon Marsh, who batted .350/.396/.548 with 10 steals over 39 games in the Pioneer League last year. Leonardo Rivas, a 20-year-old middle infielder who got into 26 games with the Bees in 2018, will return. He has a stellar sense of the strike zone and -- like both Adell and Marsh -- a great set of wheels. Brett Hanewich, a ninth-round pick in last year's Draft, headlines the pitching staff.

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

66ers' Canning lights-out in pro debut

Angels No. 8 prospect yields one hit, hurls four shutout innings

By Gerard Gilberto

The Angels' decision to be cautious with Griffin Canning following last year's Draft prevented him from making his professional debut in 2017. When he finally got the opportunity Thursday night, it came devoid of any butterflies.

"It's just baseball," the club's eighth-ranked prospect said. "Once you get out there, it's just baseball."

Canning allowed one hit and a pair of walks while striking out six over four scoreless innings in Class A Advanced Inland Empire's 3-2 Opening Night victory over San Jose at San Manuel Stadium.

"Me and Jack Kruger, our catcher, were just really in sync all night," the 21-year-old said. "Really, it was just us working together and sequencing well against these guys."

The only hit the right-hander gave up was a ground single through the right side by Bryce Johnson, the first batter of the game.

"Base hits are going to happen," Canning said. "But it's important to start that first inning off well and not let that guy score."

He rebounded by striking out the side to begin a run of 10 consecutive San Jose batters retired before Frandy De La Rosa and Heath Quinn drew back-to-back walks in the fourth. Canning finished his outing by fanning Giants No. 6 prospect Sandro Fabian.

The Angels selected Canning with the 47th overall pick in the second round of last year's Draft. He was a Golden Spikes Award semifinalist as a junior at UCLA after compiling a 2.34 ERA and 140 strikeouts while holding opponents to a .213 average over 119 innings.

In three years with the Bruins, Canning amassed a 2.99 ERA, eight complete games, four shutouts and 301 punchouts over 292 innings. Although he was anxious to prove himself after the Draft, Canning was understanding of the team's decision to shut him down last year.

"It's what I would have normally done if I was going back for my senior year," he said. "In high school, I had taken a few months off after I had pitched a full season, so I can't say that I wasn't kind of expecting that. I mean, obviously I wanted to go pitch ... but there's a bigger picture to it."

The Mission Viejo, California native debuted in front of a large contingent of friends and family. Canning graduated from Santa Margarita Catholic High School, which is less than an hour drive from San Miguel Stadium.

"It's been a lot of fun. It was a really good environment," he said. "It was really cool to be able to pitch in front of some friends and family. ... So I'm excited to go hang out with all them."

Fourth-ranked prospect Angels Jahmai Jones also made something of a professional debut. He started his first game at second base, recording three assists and committing one error. The 20-year-old walked and scored a run, but was hitless in three at-bats.

Giants No. 4 prospect Tyler Beede started for San Jose, allowing a run on one hit and three walks while striking out four over five innings. The 24-year-old right-hander will spend the bulk of the season with Triple-A Sacramento but pitched in the California League to avoid the ugly weather forecast for the River Cats opener in Tacoma.

Fireballer Melvin Adon, San Francisco's No. 19 prospect, was saddled with the loss after finishing the game for the Giants having allowed two runs on four hits and two walks with six strikeouts over three innings.

FROM ESPN MAGAZINE**The One Baseball's Been Waiting For**

So far, the two-way sensation is living up to Ruthian expectations. But how will he possibly keep this up? We trace his journey back to Japan in search of the surprising answer.

By Tim Keown

Luis Valbuena bears witness. The Angels third baseman watches Shohei Ohtani finish the first inning of his first start with a three-pitch strikeout that starts with a 100 mph fastball and ends with an 89 mph splitter that takes a late, cartoonish dive to avoid a bat held by Oakland's Matt Olson. Valbuena starts jogging toward the dugout with his eyes down and his head slowly shaking -- just a guy from Venezuela appreciating a guy from Japan as they play together in California. By the time he passes Ohtani near the first-base line, Valbuena's head is tilted up and he is staring at the sky, laughing at something only he finds funny, and the temptation on this Easter Sunday afternoon is to attribute his beatific look to a spontaneous religious experience. Which, in its own way, why not? It fit all of the categories: wonder and excitement and surprise.

After the game, and after Ohtani spends six innings making the wondrous look relatively routine, Valbuena says: "It just made me happy. I was watching him and thinking how much fun this is." Valbuena's reaction carries with it a statement --*that's what everybody's been talking about*-- and a question --*where the hell did that come from?*

To that point, hints were hard to find. Ohtani made just two spring pitching appearances against big league lineups, and both went poorly. He went 0-for-4 in a game against minor league pitching and hit just .125 through the spring. But as the days piled up, he exuded serenity when everything around him implied panic.

After each game, as questions turned to doubts, Ohtani stood in a blinding white events tent in a parking lot in Tempe, Arizona. Hands clasped behind his back, neck bowed, he stared out at a group of people who stared back with the vigor of a stakeout. His pose suggested a man awaiting a cigarette and a blindfold. The routine took on an ambient sameness. He was asked a question, it was reformulated into his language and he began to talk. His Adam's apple ascended and descended like a freight elevator. He made eye contact. He was clearly polite. He was meticulously humble. His words were reformulated back into the language of the questioner and relayed as the most banal of possible answers. The repetition made it feel like a concerted effort to extract all personality, like wiping clean a hard drive.

Through it all, Ohtani was so contained, so unerringly regulated that it became easy to forget the enormity of his quest. He has come here to hit three days a week and pitch once a week, at a level he has yet to experience, in front of a vast, impatient audience. The task is fascinating, difficult and so rare, the last person to do it was Babe Ruth 99 years ago.

Even as spring training gives way to the start of the season, there is no indication that Ohtani feels the burdens of pressure or expectation or -- honestly -- much of anything else. And so, dutifully, day after day, we stand and watch as he stands and watches. His mannerisms become a fascination: the way he touches the tip of his cap and bows slightly every time the umpire tosses him a new baseball; the way he flicks away whatever minor clods of dirt might have congealed in the batter's box; the way he responds to giving up a home run by dropping his glove and aggressively retying his already-tied shoelaces; the way that, in his pitching debut in Oakland, he repeatedly thanks a teammate who makes a good play behind him until he is sure the teammate knows he is being thanked. We search for an external sign of the unease that must be -- that simply has to be -- hiding deep inside.

And day after day, there is none.

THE INFIELD SKIN is rich, dark earth. The dormant grass in the outfield is bleach blond, broken only by three patches of bare dirt, like scuffs on a floor, where the fielders stand. This baseball stadium in Himeji, Japan, is up the road from a castle first built in 1333. The castle is a towering, wedding-cake structure perched above the town like an eagle's nest. It is the largest intact example of Japanese feudal architecture, largely untouched by the bombs of war, built during a time when the country was run by warriors whose name -- samurai -- translates roughly as "those who serve." That Bushido code endures up the road, in the ballpark where Ohtani's high school, Hanamaki Higashi, is playing an exhibition doubleheader in preparation for the spring Koshien tournament. Spring Koshien is a little brother to the Summer Koshien, which is Japan's version of March Madness.

On this wintry Sunday in late March, more than 600 miles from their home in the northern prefecture of Iwate, Hanamaki players wear their uniforms in the same styleless manner. Tight pants pulled up on the waist a few inches higher than cool, the elastic cuffs three inches below the knee, as if measured with a ruler. Their caps are pulled tight over teamwide buzz cuts, the brims curled slightly. After an intricate pregame infield-outfield, they line up from the mound to home plate, facing the home team's dugout. They take off their caps as one and bow toward their coach, thanking him for helping them improve. They turn toward their hosts, thanking Shikama Himeji Municipal High School for the opportunity to take infield. They turn and face the fans, bowing and thanking them for attending. And finally they turn toward the mound and bow to the field itself, thanking the earth for being there. Without it, the game would not be possible.

It is impossible to overstate the level of attentiveness required of the boys who wear these uniforms. Adults in Japanese high school baseball are not allowed on the field, so players coach the bases, and if a manager needs to instruct his fielders or calm his pitcher, he sends a player as messenger. If the manager were to do the unthinkable and leave the dugout to question a call by the umpire, he would be stripped of his spot in the federation; essentially, he would lose his license to coach. There are no sagged heads, no dirt-kicking or pouting. When the second baseman for Shikama High makes his second error in as many innings, his manager calls out, "Don't make a sad face. Keep on smiling."

It is a world of structure and obedience, camaraderie and respect. Much of what takes place in Japan is bound to the centuries-old code that built that hulking castle. You can see it in the dark-suited businessmen weaving their bicycles through Tokyo sidewalks late at night, their ties still smartly knotted. You can see it in the schools, where lunchtime is not a break from education but an extension of it. Students grow their own vegetables, serve one another and are responsible for everything from preparation to cleanup. And you can see it on the baseball field, where the remnants of the Bushido way have taken hold in the minds and bodies of teenage boys and the men who coach them.

Throughout most of Hanamaki's doubleheader, its coach, Hiroshi Sasaki, sits in the corner of the sunken dugout, a subterranean sage. When he speaks, even during play, his players remove their caps and form a semicircle around him, standing at attention. After six hours of baseball and two wins, the Hanamaki players head to a side field to practice for another 90 minutes. The players do this without complaint, picking up their bat bags and shoes and walking briskly from one field to the other, stopping only to bow in thanks to those who took time out of their weekend to watch them play.

All of which is to say: We've been looking for Shohei Ohtani in the wrong places. He cannot be found in a crowded clubhouse, where he sits at his locker with his translator and friend, Ippei Mizuhara, never more than three steps away. He can't be found working on his splitter on a too-hard mound with a too-slippery ball on a back field, and he definitely can't be found perfecting the art of the polite banality in a rented tent in a stadium parking lot.

EVERY BASEBALL PLAYER who chooses Hanamaki Higashi High School is given a complete physical and an MRI when he arrives on campus. It is considered one of Japan's better baseball schools, so the competition for a spot in the school, let alone on the team, is rigorous. The season is year-round, and each player must live in a team dormitory, regardless of how close to campus his family resides. The players are responsible for cleaning and maintaining the dorm. The coach, Sasaki, assigns the tasks. One of his rules is that pitchers must clean the toilets.

"The pitcher, especially in Shohei's case, is literally and figuratively at the highest point on the field," Sasaki says. "Once they get up there, they are at the pinnacle, so for the rest of the day I tell them, 'You have to do the lowest job.' Shohei never complained."

Ohtani's MRI showed growth plates so far apart it was obvious he was going to be tall, and therefore his potential far exceeded the already-developed 15-year-olds who entered Sasaki's program with hair under their arms and closed growth plates. Sasaki does not claim to have predicted what Ohtani would become -- by 19 a household name, by 21 the country's best hitter and pitcher, by 23 the most sought-after international free agent in baseball history. He had no idea that those growth plates would remain ajar until Ohtani reached 6-foot-4, or that a major league international scouting director would tell me last spring that "Ohtani could be the best pitcher in the history of baseball, and I don't say that lightly. He has equal if not better stuff than all of them." Sasaki didn't predict that Ohtani would quickly transform himself from a high school kid with an unreliable fastball and quick hands at the plate into an

international sensation whose name was attached to Babe Ruth's so reflexively that it seemed like a mandate. No, Sasaki knew only that Ohtani's best days would not take place within his jurisdiction.

"Because of what we were seeing in those images, we knew Shohei's goal was not to achieve success in high school but beyond," Sasaki says. "Ohtani was someone who would peak at the end of his 20s, so that had to be the way we approached his training."

The granular details of Ohtani's childhood remain unknown; his parents are as elusive and private as their son. In one of his few interviews, Shohei's father, Toru, emphasized his son's normal childhood and says he indulged Shohei's baseball dreams after long shifts at an auto assembly plant made it difficult for him to coach Shohei's brother. "I've got to give Shohei what I couldn't give his older brother," Toru told the Mainichi newspaper. Sasaki says Ohtani's parents are "nothing like the monster parents who are around these days. They are the most humble people you will meet in your life."

America is an ongoing subplot to Ohtani's career. With Sasaki's blessing, Ohtani wanted to sign with a major league team when he graduated from high school in 2012, but Nippon Professional Baseball's Nippon-Ham Fighters drafted him anyway, then put together a successful recruiting pitch that sought to enlighten the then-18-year-old and his family on the cultural rigors of the minor leagues. Last season the focus shifted: With MLB changing its rules regarding international players, Ohtani could have stayed in Japan and been a true free agent after two more seasons. Instead, he announced his decision to leave Japan in November 2017 and immediately became the most sought-after and cheapest arm and bat on the market. A frenzied and somewhat odd courtship ensued, with Ohtani and his agent narrowing the field to seven mostly West Coast teams before choosing the Angels.

"Shohei Ohtani outside the baseball uniform is a mystery."

- NIPPON-HAM FIGHTERS PITCHING COACH MASATO YOSHII

Asked for his opinion on Ohtani's decision to forgo potentially \$200 million by joining MLB this year, Angels second baseman Ian Kinsler asks back, "What is he, 23? What's he making, the minimum? Most everyone in here made the minimum at that age." Kinsler shrugs and sends his lower lip forward with a that-settles-that finality. Ohtani's new teammates keep their observations light, their words like stones skipping across a flat lake. The team has erected a fortress of positivity around Ohtani, and when he warms up in Oakland before his first start, the metaphor becomes literal: A total of eight teammates and coaches stand behind the bullpen mound.

General manager Billy Eppler recites a list of outings Ohtani embarked upon with teammates this spring -- golf with Mike Trout, H-O-R-S-E with Andrew Heaney, a hockey game with Garrett Richards and Tyler Skaggs -- as evidence that he is fitting in with his new teammates. "He is very simple," Eppler says. "Very focused, very meticulous in everything he does." Rangers reliever Chris Martin, Ohtani's teammate for two years in Japan, doesn't remember the two having a meaningful conversation. After Ohtani's celebrated high school career and five years as a star in NPB, even the aggressive Japanese media failed

to turn up anything worthy of headlines. "Yu Darvish and Ohtani are different personalities," one tells me. "Darvish always had groupies after him. Ohtani is boring."

Ohtani made several million dollars in Japan, and he lived in the team dormitory for all five years, which means this year is the first time he has ever lived outside of his family home or a team facility. He never bought a car or bothered to get a driver's license. His mother handled his money, doling out a meager monthly stipend that her son rarely spent.

"There were times when I would ask him, 'Don't you want to go out and have a few drinks and loosen up?'" says Hideki Kuriyama, manager of the Fighters. His voice rises, and he waves his arms in front of him as he mimics Ohtani's hurried response: "No, no, no. That's not me. I'd rather go to the gym and work out because the only joy I can find is on the field." The way Kuriyama tells it, with his arms wishing away the question, the thought itself embarrassed Ohtani.

I ask Masato Yoshii, a former major leaguer who was Ohtani's pitching coach with the Fighters, a simple question: What are Ohtani's interests outside of baseball?

Yoshii takes a deep breath followed by a long sigh. He tilts his head back as if he's pondering something deeper than what's been asked.

Finally, he says, "Shohei Ohtani outside of the baseball uniform is a mystery."

AFTER A LONG night game roughly halfway through the 2016 NPB season, Kuriyama called Ohtani into his office. Ohtani was scheduled to pitch and hit the next day, and his manager had a proposal to make. He'd noticed Ohtani's struggles in the first inning of road games, and he attributed it to his hitting third or fourth in the batting order. The inning would end with Ohtani either on the bases or on deck, leaving him to rush to the mound with scattered thoughts, so Kuriyama looked across his office desk and said, "I want you to lead off tomorrow."

Kuriyama stared and waited. This was as much a challenge as a strategy.

"He looked at me and nodded with fierce eyes," Kuriyama says. "After a while he said, 'I know what you're telling me.' It gave me goose bumps all over. Even for someone who has been in this game as long as I have, it was an awesome moment."

The next night, in another chapter in the legend, Ohtani led off with a homer and pitched eight shutout innings in a 2-0 win. Martin pitched the ninth for the save, and as he stands in the Rangers' spring training clubhouse he can recall the game as if it's happening in front of him. "The first two months of the season his command was bad, and his off-speed was just OK," Martin says. "I was like, 'I've seen guys *way* better than this guy. Why is he such a big deal?' After that game, I was like, 'OK, *this* is why.'"

Kuriyama, like Sasaki, wanted Ohtani to leave for the States earlier. He felt he always had a good read on his best player, and even though his team would feel the loss, he believed Ohtani needed the challenge.

There was the game four years ago when Ohtani got hit all over the park and had to be pulled in the second inning. When Kuriyama got home and logged on to his computer, he found an email from Ohtani. "I always know when he wants something," Kuriyama says. "Everything is 'Mr. Manager' -- so polite." Ohtani wanted to hit the next day to rid himself of the metallic tang of the bad outing. "Please use me tomorrow because I can't sleep, Mr. Manager," he wrote. "I am so frustrated."

He has thrown 102 mph from the mound and hit home runs of 500-plus feet, two facts that go a long way toward creating a myth but don't guarantee success with the Angels. NPB is considered the world's second-best league, but the gap is wide and the peculiarities notable. His talent, it seems, has always provided a layer of protection. One example: Ohtani is a right-handed thrower and a left-handed hitter, and his importance to his country's baseball culture kept most pitchers from throwing inside and threatening his exposed pitching arm. Yoshii says one of the biggest adjustments between countries is the canyon that exists between the respective codes, a difference Martin describes by saying, "When you hit someone over there it's a big deal. The pitcher bows to the hitter to apologize and make sure everyone knows it wasn't intentional. Over here it's not like that. Over here it's: *We'll do it again.*"

(During a spring training game for the Mets in 1998, Yoshii drilled a hitter one at-bat after the guy had homered off him. Afterward, veteran starter Al Leiter asked, "Did you hit that guy on purpose?" Yoshii hadn't -- "a mere accident," he says --but he quickly told Leiter, "Oh, yeah." Now Yoshii laughs and says, "I noticed I got immediate respect from the pitchers.")

Ohtani is strong and broad, his physique at odds with his nearly prepubescent face, but his career in Japan was marked by injuries. Last season he pitched just 25 innings due to ankle and hamstring problems that lingered through August. "They babied him," Martin says. "We were wondering why he wasn't at least pitching. My ankle was blown up and they were trying to get me back in two weeks. You learn not to ask questions." After Ohtani was activated but before the team was comfortable allowing him to hit or pitch, he would emerge from the dugout late in games and swing a bat in the on-deck circle. "Never seen anything like it," Martin says. "Fifty thousand people cheering a guy standing in the on-deck circle like he's Michael Jackson or Justin Timberlake." There was never any intention of letting him pinch-hit, but Martin laughs and says, "I guarantee you the guy hitting got a few more pitches to hit because of it."

Kuriyama, who believes Ohtani's personality is better suited to hitting (the id) than pitching (the ego), fought forces within his organization who wanted Ohtani to concentrate solely on pitching. Arms like his are rare, and any risk is seen as too great. But the first thing Kuriyama told Ohtani after the Fighters signed him directly out of high school was, "Let's do something nobody's done before."

Through a meaningless spring training, Ohtani was halting and mechanical on the mound, jumpy and impatient at the plate. The Japanese baseball has higher seams and a velvety feel. Even straight out of the box it feels like it's been through a few rounds of batting practice. The mound feels less steep in Japan, the dirt is softer, and Ohtani's hesitance can be attributed to an inability to stride out and fully trust his body to follow. His spring training starts were broadcast live on national television at 5 a.m.,

and despite the language barrier, it was easy to detect the disappointment in the voices of the Japanese announcers when the Rockies scored seven runs in an inning.

But by his first regular-season start, with the ball jumping out of his hand and nearly 70 percent of his pitches thrown for strikes, nothing that came before mattered. It looked as if he'd arrived on the mound fully formed. In his first at-bat in Angel Stadium, he hit a three-run homer that cleared two walls: the one in right-center and the one that had been holding back Ohtani's emotions. He entered a dugout that gave him the silent treatment and tried to play along, high-fiving the air, before his joy overwhelmed him and he hugged Ian Kinsler from behind, setting off a wild celebration. It was a late-arriving echo from the words Chris Martin spoke about his time in Japan: OK, this is why.

"For his sake, I want him to struggle for at least two years," Sasaki says. "For his sake, as a person, for him to grow and further blossom, the struggles he will go through are something that is needed. That is why he is constantly smiling. He is definitely enjoying this struggle, and he will find the ability to overcome within himself."

He senses that this is not the expected answer. He laughs, clearly enjoying the disconnect. He holds up his right hand as if requesting time. He needs a moment to think as he tries to come up with the precise metaphor to explain what he's trying to say. "Right now, Shohei is crouched," he says. "He must go down before he rises up."

SASAKI HAD BEEN cut by his university's baseball team and thrown out of the school's dormitory, thinking life couldn't get much lower, when he walked through a bookstore with a friend and picked up a book written in 1937 by the American self-help guru/huckster Napoleon Hill: *Think and Grow Rich*. Sasaki held the book up to his friend, pointed to the title and deadpanned, "Yeah, this'll help me." He bought it, mostly as a joke, and more than 20 years later his cheeks color and he smiles bashfully as he tries to explain the book's impact on his life.

There's one chapter in particular -- "Auto-Suggestion: The Third Step Toward Riches," about putting thoughts into action -- that Sasaki has incorporated into his coaching philosophy. As one of their first tasks (presumably after the MRI), Sasaki's players are told to write down their goals. The idea is to force them to transfer their dreams from the ephemeral to the tangible. He made a point to keep and share Ohtani's list. Some of them are typically lofty musings of a teenager, but others reveal a self-awareness unusual in a high schooler.

Age 24: Throw a no-hitter and win 25 games.

Age 26: Win the World Series and get married.

Age 36: Break the strikeout record.

Age 37: First son starts baseball.

Age 38: Stats drop; start to think about retirement.

Age 40: Throw a no-hitter in my very last game.

Sasaki draws great significance from coincidence. In Japanese, the words "*vision*," "*target*" and "*achievement*" all start with the same symbol. He is not just teaching his players to cover a base -- he is teaching them to help one another, to care for one another, to not leave someone to fend for himself. He mentions the 2011 Japanese earthquake, which devastated Iwate and its neighboring cities, and wonders what Americans thought of the communal response by the Japanese people.

"I care about covering a base for your teammate and telling your teammate where the next play is going to happen," he says. "These things aren't just necessary in baseball but also in life and work. Salarymen have to care about each other. Families have to care about each other. I believe baseball is the perfect textbook to teach the ethics of society."

Sasaki has one more coincidence he would like to note: Inazo Nitobe, the first man to bring the concept of Bushido to the English-speaking world, was from Iwate Prefecture. Back when Ohtani was in his final year at Hanamaki and thinking seriously about going directly to the United States instead of playing professionally in Japan, Sasaki told him the story of Nitobe as a way of encouraging him to chart his own course. Doing something nobody else has done, bringing a new way of thinking to America -- Sasaki believes Ohtani is setting out to be a pioneer in much the same way. "I don't know if Shohei feels it," Sasaki says, "but there is a bond."

The first syllable of Ohtani's given name -- Sho -- is in honor of the Japanese military commander Minamoto no Yoshitsune, one of the most honored samurai from the area near Oshu, Ohtani's hometown, and Hiraizumi. "Hei" comes from the first kanji symbol in the written form of Hiraizumi. It's an indication of how intrinsic history is to the culture that Ohtani is named after a warrior who died in 1189.

Nitobe wrote, "Nurture men of character rather than mere talents."

Sasaki says, "I believe it is my duty to teach these kinds of Bushido lessons through baseball."

So take another look at Ohtani standing there, hands clasped behind his back, neck bowed, shoulders straight. Maybe it's a posture designed not only to invite attacks but to withstand them.

"I would like everyone to perceive his success in the longer term, to have patience and understanding in what he is trying to achieve," Sasaki says. "You must understand: He is searching for a way that does not yet exist."

Nobility in the pursuit, joy in the pain: Much of this is taking place at a frequency we no longer possess the capacity to hear. The struggle, as Bushido demands, is a gift that must be honored. It will clear a path for whatever comes next.

FROM THE ASSOCIATED PRESS**Japanese baseball fans thrilled with Ohtani's strong start**

By Jim Armstrong

Shohei Ohtani's electrifying start with the Los Angeles Angels certainly sent a jolt of excitement through his fans back home in Japan.

A slugger who can also pitch, Ohtani homered in his second straight home game Wednesday, blasting a two-run shot off AL Cy Young winner Corey Kluber in the fifth inning of the series finale against the Cleveland Indians.

That followed a three-run homer in his first home at-bat on Tuesday.

Ohtani had only four hits and no home runs in 32 at-bats during spring training with the Angels. That led to reports he may start the regular season in the minors.

"I think it is amazing. That's the only word that I can think of," Japanese businessman Toru Fujimori said. "He couldn't do well during the preseason and some newspapers said he may even be sent to the minor leagues. I think the team did very well to use him in the opening game despite that fact."

The rookie sensation was big news in Japan, where political scandals and fears of U.S.-imposed trade tariffs have dominated headlines for weeks.

"I knew that he could do well in the majors, but I'm surprised that he hit two home runs in two consecutive games," office worker Shuhei Abe said.

Japanese media also got into the act.

"Sensational Home Debut: First At-Bat, First Home Run," read a front-page headline in the Sports Nippon newspaper.

After hitting his first home run, Ohtani's teammates gave him the silent treatment by initially ignoring him when he came back to the dugout.

There are no such traditions in Japanese baseball so that also made headlines across the ocean.

"Ohtani Stunned by the Silent Treatment," read a headline in the Nikkan Sports newspaper.

Ohtani's former manager said the strong start was just the type of performance he has come to expect from the slugger.

"He came through with a big hit when everyone wanted him to, that's just like Shohei," said Hideki Kuriyama, Ohtani's manager with the Nippon Ham Fighters. "Starting off like this should make things easier for him. It's good to see him with a smile on his face."

Most Japanese fans expected Ohtani to excel as a pitcher, so many were taken aback by his early prowess at the plate.

He hit 22 home runs for the Nippon Ham Fighters in 2016 but there were concerns he couldn't handle major league pitching.

Those fears seem to have been put to rest.

"I want him to do well both at bat and as a pitcher," university student Nana Tokuzumi said.

FROM FOX SPORTS

Ohtani set to DH in Angels' series opener against A's

STATS

A week into his first major league season, Shohei Ohtani is drawing comparisons unlike anything seen.

Babe Ruth, Ken Griffey Jr. and Mike Trout have been mentioned in the same sentence as Ohtani, the Japanese rookie who's turning heads and winning games with his ability to pitch and hit at the highest level.

After belting two towering home runs that helped Los Angeles win the past two games, Ohtani will likely serve as the designated hitter again Friday night when the Angels host the Oakland A's in the opener of a three-game series at Angel Stadium.

Ohtani is scheduled to be the starting pitcher on Sunday. He made his first start on the mound last Sunday in Oakland and allowed three runs and three hits in six innings while striking out six and walking one in the 7-4 victory. The win propelled the Angels to their first 3-1 start in 10 years.

"I'm just pumped because he was getting killed in spring training, even though it was spring training," Angels second baseman Zack Cozart told the Los Angeles Times. "It's really impressive, if you think about it. All the pressure's on him. He's just kind of thrown that out of the way."

The Angels (5-2) can match their start from last season with a victory Friday night. They ended a 12-game losing streak to the Cleveland Indians on Tuesday thanks to a first-inning, three-run homer from

Ohtani, then beat Cleveland again Wednesday in extra innings after Ohtani tied the score with a two-run homer off two-time American League Cy Young winner Corey Kluber in the fifth inning.

The A's (3-5) are coming off a four-game split against the visiting Texas Rangers. They'll hand the ball to starting pitcher Daniel Gossett (0-1, 9.00 ERA) on Friday night.

Gossett faced Ohtani on Sunday and lasted six innings, allowing four runs and six hits in the loss. He fell to 0-2 in his career against the Angels with a 5.06 ERA.

"I've still got stuff to work on, obviously," Gossett told the San Jose Mercury News after his season debut. "I'm pretty frustrated that I couldn't go deeper in the game. ... Got to be more consistent in the zone."

Jefry Marte has faced Gossett twice in his career and doubled both times. Marte is another player who's off to a hot start for the Angels. He's 5-for-13 so far, including 5-for-11 when he's in the starting lineup.

Finding a spot in the lineup for Marte is a challenge, however. As long as Ohtani continues to hit well, he'll likely occupy the DH spot, except for the day before and the day after he pitches. Albert Pujols continues to hold down the starting job at first base, which is Marte's primary defensive position.

Angels starting pitcher Parker Bridwell will make his season debut after he was recalled from Triple-A Salt Lake on Tuesday to replace Matt Shoemaker, who went on the 10-day disabled list with a strained right forearm.

Bridwell has made two starts against the A's in his career. Both were five days apart last summer and represented the two poorest outings among his 20 starts in an overall strong season.

He lasted just three innings and allowed seven runs and six hits in a 10-8 win on Aug. 30 in Anaheim and went just three innings again on Sept. 4 in Oakland, allowing six runs and seven hits in the 11-9 win.

A's first baseman Matt Olson has two home runs in four career at-bats against Bridwell.

FROM THE COMEBACK

These were the coolest moments from the first week of baseball season

Shohei Ohtani got most of the headlines, but he was only one of many incredible storylines from Opening Week

By Alex Putterman

Baseball season is only a week old, but it has already featured some incredible moments. New stars showing out. Old ones showing life. Current ones showing off. Great games, incredible finishes, top plays and on and on.

We asked out writers to choose their favorite moment of Opening Week. Here are the ones they chose:

What is the coolest thing that happened during the first week of the MLB season?

Joe Lucia: Everything involving **Shohei Ohtani** was incredible.

In his first MLB plate appearance, he lashes a single to right field.

In his first MLB start on the mound, he *strikes out six in six innings and gets the win and a quality start.*

And then to top everything off, in his first home game at Angel Stadium, he *launches a three-run homer in his first plate appearance*, the night after his team was shut out and looked generally terrible on offense, and eventually added two **more** hits in an Angels rout. [Editor's note: He *followed up* with an opposite-field home run off Corey Kulber.]

Yeah, I can deal with all of this. I don't think it would have been possible for his debut in America to go any better.

Andrew Bucholtz: *Kevin Pillar stealing second, third and home in the same inning* struck me as the coolest part of the first week of the MLB season.

It's so rare to see any steal of home, and a standing-up steal is even more impressive, but when you combine that with steals of second and third as well, that's just insane. As a dedicated stats fan, I'm not always in favor of stolen-base attempts, but they're great when you have someone who can pull them off at an efficient rate, and Pillar has often been pretty good at that (he *posted* 25 steals to four caught stealing outs in 2015, 14 to six in 2016 and 15 to six last year).

And getting on base with a single, then promptly stealing second, third and home is just amazing, illustrating how useful speed can be in certain circumstances.

Ian Casselberry: Granted, it's early (and we'll probably be able to use that qualifier for the next month, at least), but it's cool to see a player and storyline live up to the hype. Shohei Ohtani certainly qualifies, especially because of the uncertainty over his major-league debut. Giancarlo Stanton's two home runs on Opening Day were also impressive.

But how about **Charlie Blackmon's** start thus far? After six games, the Rockies outfielder has four home runs and a 1.324 OPS. And for anyone dismissing Blackmon's numbers because he plays his home games at Coors Field, all of the Rockies' games have been played on the road thus far. He appears to be picking

up from right where he left off in 2017, when he was an NL MVP candidate with a .331 average, 1.000 OPS, 35 doubles, 37 homers, 104 RBI and 14 stolen bases, ranking fifth in the league with a 6.5 WAR.

The Rockies certainly think Blackmon can keep up that production, signing him to a reported six-year deal worth \$108 million. (That could increase to \$116 million with incentives and options.) He now doesn't have to worry about a new contract, nor a free agent market that was particularly treacherous this past offseason. Blackmon got his before having to slot in somewhere behind what Bryce Harper and Manny Machado get this winter. Not bad at all for a guy who will turn 32 during this season.

Alex Putterman: Ohtani got the most attention this week, and rightfully so because he was absolutely scintillating. But I want to shout out some other awesome moments:

- Giancarlo Stanton mashing two homers *on Opening Day*
- The Brewers *walking off* with back-to-back homers
- Dee Gordon *imitating* Ken Griffey Jr.'s famous home-run bat drop
- Ian Happ homering on first pitch of the season
- Any one of the several super-long extra-inning games we've seen
- Kevin Pillar stealing second, third and home consecutively
- The Blue Jays' *emotional Roy Halladay ceremony*

And, I'm sure, many more that I'm forgetting.

But in the non-Ohtani division, my choice for coolest moment goes to 44-year-old **Ichiro Suzuki**, who returned to Seattle on what seemed like little more than a ceremonial contract, then robbed a freaking home run at SafeCo Field in his second game back in a Mariners uniform.

Few catches have better deserved a standing ovation.

FROM SB NATION

Shohei Ohtani has a Week of Wonderful: He's not done.

By Stuart G. Matthews

Shohei Ohtani homered again Wednesday. The haters and doubters have gone silent – temporarily.

Snap. Crackle. Pop. The snap of a thousand camera shutters, the crackle of Shohei Ohtani's pitches, and the pop in Ohtani's bat.

This is the soundtrack to baseball's happiest early season story.

And now, even those who suspected Ohtani's skills the most are sheepishly admitting that the Angels' two-way miracle kid really might be darn good at baseball, on both sides of the ball.

Boog Sciambi of ESPN doesn't like comparisons of Ohtani to Babe Ruth, and to be honest, I don't really like them either.

But Sciambi, whose real name is Jon, doesn't mind being called Boog because of his resemblance to Orioles' legend Boog Powell.

"Well, I mean, look. This guy is the guy," stammered Sciambi, on ESPN's Baseball Tonight podcast Wednesday morning with Buster Olney, as if stunned by Olney's lead-in mention of Ohtani and Ruth in the same sentence – before rallying somewhat.

"Uh, yeah, who is the point of comparison? The last time we've had anyone that's tried to start this off, and still hit, *is* Babe Ruth. I really don't ... I don't have beef with it.

"Just keep running him out there, and we'll see."

Then Boog doubled-down with almost a tone of negative menace: "We'll see."

Sciambi said no one really knew how good Ohtani might be because the Angels had hidden his talent behind a bushel – on the back fields in Tempe.

Hmmmmn. How many teams give away their secrets before the season?

"They're looking at stuff that we can't see," Sciambi walked it back. Really, Sherlock? Well, at least you had a media credential.

Hey, Boog: It wouldn't hurt to drop in a Babe Ohtani line next time.

Sciambi stepped in it again by trying to tone down the Ohtani Hype-O-Meter, saying: "A guy that's as young as he is ... remember what a special circumstance he was. Because he didn't want to wait and go through the posting process ... Again, he's 22 years old. ... There's still a lot of growth that can happen."

(He's not 22, Boog. Ohtani turns 24 on July 5. Just sayin' – accuracy is important in media)

Jeff Passan, national baseball writer for Yahoo Sports, emerged as Ohtani's most visible critic as the Angels broke camp from Tempe, suggesting that Ohtani may be damaged goods, and quoted a scout as saying that Ohtani belonged in Single-A ball.

Passan is an excellent writer – his book *The Arm* (about Tommy John surgery) is a must-read. But Passan's willingness to wear the black hat in such a fun baseball story is odd. Passan takes on tough topics. But perhaps he was feeling a bit guilty Tuesday night when he tweeted:

"Ohtani now 2 for 2 after a line-drive single ... There is medium-rare crow in my oven at the moment."

The Chorus of Doubts, after Ohtani's mostly forgettable Cactus League spring, sang loud and proud.

Ohtani's response was said without the trace of a snarl. Asked about his media critics by Bill Shaikin of the Los Angeles Times on Wednesday, Ohtani's response was as blunt as it gets: "I don't have anything to say to those guys."

I don't have anything to say to those guys. ~ Shohei Ohtani on his media critics.

Even Angels fans trended to the negative after Tempe. Comments even here on SB Nation recommended a visit to AAA for Shohei.

Khahn Bui, a supermarket manager in Moorpark and a huge Angels fan, remained skeptical about Ohtani's potential. Said Bui: "What would be impressive for me? If Ohtani wins the AL Rookie of the Year, and the Cy Young, and the AL MVP. And make the All-Star team. ... Otherwise, he's a bust."

Dang. Those are some high standards!

Ohtani is likely to pick up his first MLB honor Monday, when the American League Player of the Week (presented by W.B. Mason) is announced.

A W.B. Mason company spokesman told me yesterday: "Uhh. We can't say yet, obviously. But it looks like a no-brainer to me."

Yeah. And the week isn't even over, technically. Ohtani The Pitcher makes his second start of the season at the Big A on Sunday opposing Oakland Athletics' righty Kendall Graveman. The two will renew acquaintances, doing the same job on the same side of the ball.

Graveman happens to be the same pitcher that Ohtani The Batter faced on Thursday. It seems a long time ago now.

There's a delightful symmetry to all of this, which isn't lost on one of America's legendary baseball writers, or one of Japan's baseball media experts.

Ross Newhan has seen plenty in his days as a sportswriter.

Newhan could be considered the Angels' first representative in Cooperstown, considering he spent most of his legendary career with the Long Beach Press-Telegram and Los Angeles Times covering the Angels. He was elected to the Hall of Fame in 2000, winning the JG Taylor Spink Award for lifetime achievement.

Newhan, now in semi-retirement, chronicled the mania surrounding the Angels debuts of Wally Joyner (1986), Jim Abbott (1989), Tim Salmon (1992) and Mike Trout (2011).

So, I asked Ross what he thought about Ohtani's amazing bow.

"It's in a class by itself, simply by nature of the two-positions oddity. Now maybe if Babe Ruth had ever played for the Angels ..." Newhan said.

Over in Japan, John E. Gibson of Japan News Sports, and the *Japan Baseball Weekly English-language podcast*, picks up the ball.

"No one is going bonkers over here, because we've seen this kid do this for five years (for the Hokkaido Nippon-Ham Fighters)," Gibson said.

Gibson takes his morning run in Tokyo on streets generously strewn with the fallen pink petals of cherry blossoms. That's a sign of springtime in Japan, and Gibson scratched his head when he looked at Ohtani's spring stats.

The American expatriate admits that "Ohtani Fever" is in full flow in Japan, but nothing "beyond what it was before when he did this for the Fighters." He said Ohtani's MLB games are on TV in the morning hours, but people don't huddle in sports bars or online to watch their native son pitch in America.

"It's not like at night, when everyone is watching and can blow up Twitter," Gibson said. "Many people don't find out (what Ohtani has done) until they check their phones. They're at work.

"When he went to the bigs, the only thing I said was: 'Let him try.' He has the ability to do both (pitch and bat) – why make him do only one thing?"

"He's just showing he deserves the chance."

And Gibson hinted at another change in Japan other than the cherry blossoms, after he had watched Ohtani's two-run homer Wednesday tie a game against Cy Young candidate Corey Kluber, a game the Angels won in extras on Zack Cozart's walk-off.

Said Gibson: "Dramatic win for the Angels. We might see people wearing Angels garb in Japan soon. Yanks, M's, Dodgers stuff has been popular for years, but not so much with the Angels."

Ohtani has taken the ball running at full tilt. So, let's quickly recap what has made this first week so splendid for Sho-Time.

Thursday, March 29: Ohtani admitted to some natural jitters when the Angels opening the season in Oakland-Alameda Coliseum, and manager Mike Scioscia had Ohtani in the lineup as the No. 8 hitter and DH. Wisely, the majors' longest serving is protective of Ohtani – but his player is hell-bent for leather.

Ohtani didn't take long to settle his nerves. The first pitch from Graveman, Oakland's ace, was in the zone and the lefty-swinging Ohtani lashed it past diving first baseman Matt Olson for a single.

He would finish the day 1-for-5 with three sharply hit groundouts and striking out against A's reliever Chris Hatcher, as the Angels went on to lose 6-5 on an walk-off in 11 innings.

Easter Sunday, April 1: This was another first, as Ohtani made his debut as a starting pitcher. He pitched his team to a 7-4 win, striking out six Athletics batters in a commanding six-inning stint on the mound.

His strikeout victims were, in order: Marcus Semien, Olson, Khris Davis, Olson (again), Matt Chapman, Semien (again).

He made history as the first man since Ruth in 1919 with the Boston Red Sox to start as a non-pitcher on Opening Day, and then be a starting pitcher within his first 10 games (*courtesy Stats LLC*). His only

blemish was a three-run homer surrendered to A's third baseman Chapman. After allowing the homer, Ohtani retired 14 of the last 15 guys he faced.

Catcher Martin Maldonado was interviewed after calling the game. Maldy sounded like a Proud Papa.

Tuesday, April 3: This was the most exciting of Ohtani's feats so far – so much so that it roused a high-decibel home run call from the normally laid-back Terry Smith.

Again, the Japanese starlet wasn't wasting time again as an aggressive hitter. It was against the Cleveland Indians – one of baseball's "super-teams" – and Ohtani golfed a mistake pitch low and away from Josh Tomlin high over the Konica Minolta sign on the high wall in right. A three-run homer any day before the wall was shortened by 10 feet.

The celebrations and reactions were the best. Mike Trout, baseball's GOAT, thrust his hands in the air and clapped as Ohtani rounded the bases at speed (the batter thought it might be a triple).

And then baseball's unwritten rules kicked in as the Angels indoctrinated Ohtani into their home-run club. Ohtani got the customary handshakes from third-base coach Dino Ebel and on-deck hitter Rene Rivera, and trotted back into a silent dugout.

Ohtani skipped along behind the rows of seats in the dugout where his teammates were pretending to have not noticed. They had seen, though. Ohtani tossed imaginary high-fives before grabbing Ian Kinsler, and sparking a hopping dilly-dilly celebration with his teammates. Mike Trout tousled Shohei's hair like a big brother.

Wednesday, April 4: This time, Ohtani was facing Indians ace Kluber. No matter.

In his first at-bat, Kluber struck him out on a questionable third-strike call Mike DiMuro. Ohtani just got revenge for the punch-out in the fifth inning, with his team trailing 2-0, with Andrelton Simmons on base.

Home run, this time to straight-away center. Kluber knew he had seen real-deal power. Ohtani belted it and the game was tied. This time the celebration was real in the dugout.

Trout greeted Ohtani at the dugout steps in a sweet and strange ritual that is so Mike Trout. He "butlered" Ohtani's helmet, removing it from the slugger's head and placing it in the helmet rack.

Respect.

The game stayed knotted up until the bottom of the 13th inning. That's when the Angels raised their record to 5-2 on the strength of fellow newcomer Zack Cozart's walk-off homer.

David Adler, MLB.com's Statcast guru, broke down just the batting side of Sho-Time's lumber work in this Tweet:

"Shohei Ohtani yesterday:

104.5 mph home run

100.6 mph single

112.8 mph single

Shohei Ohtani today:

400-foot HR off Corey Kluber

29.8 ft/sec sprint speed

104.0 mph single off Cody Allen

Decent couple of days."

The pitching half of Sho-Time will be on display on Sunday afternoon as he takes the ball as the starting pitcher for an Angels team that doesn't just want him – it *needs* him.

The Angels' meant-to-be-deep rotation has been bitten again by a yearly early injury bug that has sidelined Andrew Heaney first, then Matt Shoemaker.

So, for the batting stat line: As a DH, Shohei Ohtani is 6-for-14 with two homers, five RBI, for a .429/.429/.857 line. That's a 1.286 OPS.

Guess what, AL Player of the Week Awards? This week isn't over yet.

FROM VICE

Shohei Ohtani, the impossible Ballplayer, is Here to Surprise You

The Angels free agent pickup has spent his entire baseball life surprising himself, and others. No matter how his career shakes out, it's going to be quite a ride.

By Rachael McDaniel

Shohei Ohtani was the biggest story of baseball's offseason. At 23 years old, already a megastar in Japan's Nippon Professional Baseball, Ohtani had decided to make his move to baseball's highest level of competition. And he was going to try to compete not just on one side of baseball's basic confrontation—the battle between pitcher and hitter—he was going to try to do both.

By its very nature, Major League Baseball trades in superlative talent. You have to be a superlative talent to even reach the major league level, let alone succeed. As a baseball fan, you know what an exceptional hitter looks like—you can tune in on any given Wednesday and watch Bryce Harper or Mike Trout. You could flip to a different game and see exceptional pitching in Clayton Kershaw or Noah Syndergaard. Superlative talent is the norm.

But to excel at both pitching *and* hitting at the major league level—being both an ace and a slugger — is something that's completely unprecedented for fans who weren't around to see Babe Ruth circa 1920. Apart from two seasons of Brooks Kieschnick, who was hardly an ace and only hit well in one of those

two seasons, and a few experiments here and there, no one in recent memory has even come close to succeeding as a two-way player. It's hard to visualize what such a player would look like, just how valuable they could be to a team, or how anyone could possibly sustain that level of mastery.

But in NPB, Ohtani was that player—playing baseball on the hardest mode possible, and playing it extraordinarily well. Through five full seasons, starting from the time he was 18 years old, Ohtani excelled on both sides of the ball. His NPB career batting line is .286/.358/.500; as a pitcher, he accrued a 2.52 ERA with a 1.076 WHIP, averaging over 10 strikeouts per nine innings. In 2016, when his Nippon-Ham Fighters won the Japan Series and he earned MVP honors, Ohtani batted .342/.416/.588 and pitched to a 1.86 ERA. That season was when international eyes began to turn to Ohtani in earnest: Here, live and in the flesh, was that impossible player, doing things on a baseball field that no one had ever seen done before.

Scouting reports gushed over the raw power, the movement on his pitches, the eye, the speed. Everyone began to speculate on when he would make his inevitable move to the major leagues. His injury during the 2017 World Baseball Classic, preventing North American audiences from getting an extended look at him, made his promise all the more tantalizing for its distance. When he made his intentions of signing with a major league team over the 2017-18 offseason clear, the frenzy of speculation began to swirl out of control.

Because it wasn't only the unparalleled physical reality of what Ohtani could do on a baseball diamond that made him so fascinating. In an era where we seem closer than ever to understanding baseball, to having it systematized and fully comprehended, Ohtani represented the promise of the unknown. A kind of baseball player for whom there is no real reference point, whose potential exists entirely in the realm of imagination.

But Ohtani has always been full of surprises. He surprised even himself—playing as a kid, he didn't see baseball success in his future, assuming with his lack of tournament experience that there were many others better than him. When it became clear that wasn't the case, when he could hit 99 mph at the age of 16, everyone—including him—assumed that he would be off to North America as soon as he was out of high school. But the Nippon-Ham Fighters picked him first overall, won him over with their organizational philosophy and their commitment to his development as a pitcher and a hitter, and convinced him to stay in Japan.

And for five seasons with the Fighters, Ohtani continued to surprise at every turn—with just how amazing he was. He disappeared baseballs into stadium roofs, and he pitched more aggressively and with greater skill than anyone could have anticipated. The whole time, he never acted like a superstar, never even used his money. He lived in the team dorm, said he liked his team's trip to Honolulu simply because no one looked at him and no one knew who he was. He doesn't own a car, because he doesn't even know how to drive.

If Ohtani had waited only two more seasons to make his move to the major leagues, he would have been looking at a nine-figure payday. Instead, he's earning less than Jordan Lyles. But it was Ohtani's time. He'd decided this was what he wanted, and he was going to stick to his plan. He was going to do

exactly what he wanted to do, just like he always had, no matter how unexpected it might seem. That uncertainty is why Ohtani is so thrilling. I can't think of any other player who represents such an extreme polarity of outcomes. Whose lack of success would be such a stunning disappointment, and whose full potential is so wonderfully hard to imagine.

As spring training began, and as all eyes turned to him, Ohtani struggled mightily on both sides of the ball. He allowed eight runs in two and a third innings pitched; he had four hits and 10 strikeouts in 36 plate appearances. The new scouting consensus was that his bat was far from major league ready. The tools were there, yes, but they were all too raw.

Fans began to worry. The extraordinary hype that had surrounded him to this point flipped on its head. Perhaps he was being rushed; perhaps he should start in Triple A; perhaps he would never be able to hit at all. Maybe the dream of a two-way player was foolhardy. Maybe a mistake had been made.

Ohtani recorded a hit on his first swing in the major leagues. He won his first start, allowing three earned runs in six innings, striking out six, his fastball averaging 97.8 mph—once again, turning expectations on their heads.

And on Tuesday, he stood at the plate for the first time at his new home field, facing Josh Tomlin, the Angels home crowd rumbling eagerly behind him. Bases loaded, two out, tie game, bottom of the first. He fouled off a cutter for strike one; he swung through another for strike two. A wild pitch in the dirt brought home a run. He fouled off one last cutter. Then he turned on a curveball, down and in, and launched it into the right-field seats.

It was a moment so shockingly perfect that anticipating it would have seemed foolish. It was exactly what you wanted to see and exactly what you could never have let yourself expect. He went and hit another home run the very next day, this time off reigning AL Cy Young winner Corey Kluber.

No matter what Shohei Ohtani ends up achieving in his major league career—whether he's a bust, or focuses on pitching, or does something else entirely—I am looking forward to being surprised.

FROM SAN BERNARDINO SUN

Inland Empire 66ers fans happy to have baseball back in San Bernardino

By Landon Negri

For more than 30 years, the first weekend in April has meant the annual return of California League baseball to the Inland area.

That time arrived again Thursday, April 5, for the Inland Empire 66ers. Since the San Bernardino Spirit debuted at old Fiscalini Field on Highland Avenue in 1987, minor league baseball has evolved in the region. And, as 66ers general manager Joe Hudson noted, it keeps evolving.

It has to.

“There’s a lot of competition out there, especially in Southern California for people to go out and see live sports,” Hudson said. “We’re just trying to stay up on the trends and provide a good experience.”

So while Inland Empire starter Griffin Canning threw the first pitch of the 2018 season — and the former UCLA standout’s first of his professional career — he did so with new “Garage” suites built in behind the dugout along the first-base side at San Manuel Stadium, complete with catering and a full bar.

That was the most noticeable cosmetic difference in the cozy stadium along E Street. The 66ers were the only area Cal League team at home Thursday for Opening Night — the Lake Elsinore Storm began their 25th season at Stockton, and the Rancho Cucamonga Quakes were at Visalia. Both of those teams’ home openers will be held April 12.

The 66ers had a strong walk-up crowd, and there were the usual festivities, with first pitches by dignitaries and Little Leaguers standing with minor leaguers during pregame player introductions. There was also the usual opening-day buzz for a new season, but perhaps a little more this year for the 66ers.

Inland Empire, the advanced Single-A affiliate of the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, has missed the playoffs for three consecutive seasons. There are plenty of new faces this year, as just four players on the roster finished last season in San Bernardino.

That starts with manager Ryan Barba, a Van Nuys native and the 66ers’ hitting coach two years ago, who made his professional managerial debut Thursday night.

“I’m excited to say the least,” Barba said before the game. “It’s different from being a player.”

One of those players is outfielder Kevin Williams, who batted fifth and played right field. Williams is the son of the former Cowboys receiver of the same name who played on Dallas’ Super Bowl teams of the mid-1990s.

He said he’s thankful his dad never pushed him into playing football. A 13th-round pick by the Angels last year, he’s looking forward to this season and perhaps a future up the minor-league ladder.

“I really just want to get better,” Williams said. “That’s the big thing (Angels general manager) Billy Eppler and all the guys up (with the parent club) talked about is just making sure we’re getting better every day, even if it’s not a specific stat, but just getting better.”

It’s what everyone in minor league baseball — from the manager, to the players, to the trainer, to the front-office personnel — is trying to do.

“I’m going to really enjoy this,” Williams said.

FROM SALT LAKE TRIBUNE**Small ball pays off in big way for Bees in 9-3 season-opening victory**

By Lynn Worthy

Chalk one up for small ball. While Salt Lake Bees manager Keith Johnson proclaimed earlier this week on media day that the three-run home run had returned to the team's lineup this season, it wasn't necessary on opening day.

The Bees proved speed still has a place on the baseball diamond, and it made all the difference in their 9-3 win over the Albuquerque Isotopes at Smith's Ballpark on Thursday night. Catcher Jose Briceno went 3 for 3, while Jabari Blash and David Fletcher collected two hits apiece. Blash, who scored three runs, also hit a solo home run.

Blash's home run in the sixth inning marked the only extra-base hit in the game for the Bees, while the Isotopes scored their three runs on three solo homers.

"As a group they went out there tonight and put our hitters in good situations by running the bases and getting themselves into scoring position," Johnson said. "So if guys put the ball in play, they were able to drive in runs even if they were making an out. It was a productive out. It was really good to see."

Last season marked the 10th consecutive year that Major League Baseball set a record for strikeouts in a season. The number climbed above 40,000. Meanwhile MLB also set a record for home runs in a season. At the highest level of baseball, the best hitters in the world have largely become feast or famine.

However, the Bees scored their first seven runs in without an extra-base hit. Angels prospect Michael Hermosillo almost single-handedly manufactured the first run. He reached on an infield single, stole second base, broke for third on a ground ball to shortstop that went for an infield single, and scored on a wild pitch.

"That has to be part of his game," Johnson said of Hermosillo. "That's a really good tool that he has — speed. He has to use it. It just shows the type of exciting player that he can be if he puts his mind to it."

In the next two innings, the Bees scored six runs on five hits — all singles. Along the way, they drove in runs via two sacrifice flies, one passed ball, a ground out to shortstop and a pair of RBI singles which scored runners from second base.

The Bees tacked on runs in the sixth and eighth innings.

"I think that we're going to play aggressive baseball, especially with taking the extra base and just hustling," said Blash, who hit 22 home runs last season between Triple-A and the majors. "That's what KJ expects and it's what [Mike] Scioscia expects up top, so don't expect anything less."

Bees starting pitcher John Lamb allowed two earned runs in 2 2/3 innings, while five relief pitchers combined to pitch 6 1/3 innings and allowed just one run. Former BYU pitcher Taylor Cole pitched two scoreless innings and struck out two.

Isotopes starting pitcher Yency Almonte left the game with an injury, leaving with one out and two runners on in the first inning after having thrown 16 pitches.

This early into the season, the starters weren't expected to go very deep into the game. Almonte's early exit put a heavier workload on the bullpen as six relievers, including former Bee Brooks Pounders, pitched.