



Press Clips

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FROM THE OC REGISTER**Shohei Ohtani returns to Angels lineup, but they still lose to Mariners**

By Jeff Fletcher

SEATTLE — As much as the Angels were thrilled to get Shohei Ohtani back in their lineup on Tuesday night, his performance was further proof of something that should be obvious.

Simulated games aren't real games.

Ohtani, who had only had two days worth of simulated game at-bats in his preparation to return to the lineup for the first time in nearly a month, struck out three times in four hitless at-bats.

He was one of many Angels who had a disappointing offensive game in a 4-1 loss to the Seattle Mariners.

By managing only an Andrelton Simmons homer in seven innings against the soft-throwing Wade LeBlanc, the Angels lost the first of nine games they will play against the Mariners in July. They now trail the Mariners by a dozen games in the race for the second American League wild card.

Injuries have led to the Angels plummeting in the standings – and they suffered another one, with Chris Young headed for the disabled list after straining his left hamstring in the first inning – but at least they got back one of their key players when Ohtani was activated.

Ohtani had been out with a damaged ulnar collateral ligament that still prevents him from pitching, but he can hit.

“Prior to this injury, he was a really good hitter,” Simmons said before Tuesday’s game. “He did really well with a limited amount of at-bats. He was still a big asset for us. Hopefully, he can come back and get his rhythm quick and help us out.”

Simmons, however, has recent first-hand experience of how difficult that is. He missed only 11 days after spraining his ankle last month. He then came back without a minor league rehab assignment and had two hits in his first 23 at-bats.

Ohtani was hitting .289 with six homers and a .907 OPS when he went on the disabled list, but when he returned after just 20 simulated game at-bats against Angels minor league pitchers over two days, he clearly wasn't the same.

Ohtani struck out twice and hit a flyout against LeBlanc. He then struck out to end the game against Mariners closer Edwin Diaz.

“It doesn't feel like it's spring training all over,” Ohtani said through his interpreter. “It doesn't feel like that, but it's a different atmosphere up here facing big league pitchers in a big league stadium. I still might need a little more time to adjust to that.”

Manager Mike Scioscia agreed.

“Shohei just needs to see some pitches,” he said. “He’s going to be fine. His bat speed is there. He looked great in batting practice.”

Simply getting Ohtani back begs a couple more questions.

First, how often is he going to be in the lineup? When he was splitting his time between hitting and pitching, he was the DH three or four times a week. That provided about three days a week that Albert Pujols could get off his feet and move back to DH. Now Ohtani would presumably be available to DH almost every day, but Pujols, 38, might not be able to move to first base that often.

“We’ll balance it,” Scioscia said, without elaborating.

Also, is Ohtani going to be able to pitch this season?

So far his ligament has had almost four weeks of healing from the platelet-rich plasma injection and stem-cell therapy. He’ll be evaluated again in about two weeks, but the history of players who have had PRP or stem-cell treatments is that it takes months to be able to throw again.

Ohtani, who hadn’t been available to the media since before he was injured, answered one question about the circumstances of his pitching injury. He said it was “surprising” when he learned the extent of the injury.

“But the team took every step and checked out my elbow and asked what the doctor said,” he said. “I have to listen to them now. Now I just have to work hard and try to get back to where I was before the injury.”

Ohtani was asked if he felt he would pitch again this season, but an Angels media relations official then interrupted the session and said Ohtani would not answer any more questions about pitching until after he’s re-evaluated.

Without Ohtani pitching, it’s important for the Angels to get quality work out of starters like Andrew Heaney, whose bad first inning proved too much to overcome on Tuesday.

He gave up a one-out double to Jean Segura, then back-to-back walks to Mitch Haniger and Nelson Cruz. Two runs scored on Kyle Seager’s double – the play on which Young was hurt – and a third scored after a wild pitch on the third strike to Ryon Healy.

“It’s been the same old story for a while, big innings where I let it build, a couple walks, a double and then one hit kind of opens it up,” he said. “It’s something where I need to come out and sort of establish earlier and get ahead and all the same stuff we always talk about.”

Heaney also implied that there might have been an early pitch-calling issue with catcher Martín Maldonado.

“Me and Maldy were on the same page after that (first inning),” Heaney said. “We were on the same page at the beginning, but I wasn’t really executing pitches. We kind of talked about it, got a few things straightened out and we were good from there.”

Heaney settled down and did not allow another run through his seven innings, but the Angels’ offense couldn’t make up the early deficit.

“He pitched a great game,” Scioscia said. “he gave us a chance to win. We just couldn’t get any pressure offensively.”

Angels give David Fletcher a try at leadoff spot

By Jeff Fletcher

SEATTLE — David Fletcher got his shot at leadoff on Tuesday night.

Whether it becomes a regular thing going forward remains to be seen.

The rookie infielder from Cypress High and Loyola Marymount was hitting first for the first time in his month-long major league career, a testament to his .324 average and .375 on-base percentage through his first 40 plate appearances. He’d also struck out just four times.

“I think he’s seeing pitches and putting the ball in play,” Manager Mike Scioscia said before Fletcher went 1 for 4 against the Seattle Mariners. “If he can continue to do that, we feel the on-base will follow.”

Scioscia was noncommittal when asked if this could be a regular plan.

“Right now we think it’s a good spot for Fletch to lead off, and we’ll see how we progress from there,” Scioscia said.

With Shohei Ohtani back, and likely starting most games at designated hitter, that means Albert Pujols would start at first and either Luis Valbuena or Fletcher at third. The Angels faced a lefty on Tuesday night, so neither Valbuena nor Kole Calhoun – who hit leadoff over the weekend – were in the starting lineup. The Angels face a righty on Wednesday, followed by another lefty Thursday.

ROSTER MOVES

In addition to activating Ohtani on Tuesday, the Angels sent down pitchers Deck McGuire and Eduardo Paredes and brought up reliever Miguel Almonte.

Almonte was claimed on waivers from the Kansas City Royals in April, but then was out with a shoulder injury for most of the past three months. He gave up two runs in 5-1/3 innings at Triple-A Salt Lake City.

Almonte, 25, had appeared in 11 games in 2015 and 2017 with the Royals.

“He’s got a nice power arm,” Scioscia said. “He hasn’t had a real long look in the major leagues, but we’re all excited to see how his arm is going to play.”

Almonte would be the 29th pitcher to appear this season for the Angels after his first game. Last year the team used a club-record 31.

ALSO

Scioscia said Garrett Richards was “good” after his bullpen session on Monday, and the Angels announced him as the starter for Wednesday’s game following Tuesday’s 4-1 loss. ...

Tyler Skaggs threw a bullpen session on Tuesday without issue. Skaggs, who left his last start after five innings because of exhaustion in the extreme heat, is scheduled to start on Thursday. ...

Kenta Maeda is lined up to start for the Dodgers on Friday at Angel Stadium, setting a matchup with Ohtani that will certainly be watched closely by fans in Japan. Ohtani struck out twice and walked against Masahiro Tanaka in May.

UP NEXT

Angels (Garrett Richards, 4-4, 3.42) at Mariners (Mike Leake, 8-4, 4.01), Wednesday, 1 p.m., Fox Sports West, KLAA (830 AM)

Angels activate Shohei Ohtani, the hitter

By Jeff Fletcher

SEATTLE — Shohei Ohtani, the Angels’ two-way star who is still unable to throw while waiting for his damaged ulnar collateral ligament to heal, was activated on Tuesday to join the lineup as a designated hitter. Ohtani will bat sixth Tuesday night against the Mariners.

Ohtani, who was hitting .289 with six homers and a .907 OPS, could give a boost to an Angels lineup that has struggled to consistently produce.

Ohtani was cleared to hit on Thursday, after doctors determined that enough healing had occurred with his elbow that swinging was not a risk. He will be re-evaluated in just over two weeks to see how he’s progressing towards being able to pitch.

The Angels also recalled right-hander Miguel Almonte, who had been claimed on waivers in April. They optioned pitchers Deck McGuire and Eduardo Paredes.

FROM THE LOS ANGELES TIMES**Shohei Ohtani returns to lineup but Angels offense does little in 4-1 loss**

By Jeff Miller

He had appeared in two simulated games, in an empty ballpark, against pitchers whose names remain unknown.

That Shohei Ohtani went hitless in four at-bats in his return to the Angels on Tuesday was no more surprising than the fact he struck out three times while doing so.

"It's a different atmosphere up here, facing big league pitchers in a big league stadium," Ohtani said through an interpreter after he and the Angels lost to Seattle 4-1. "I still need a little more time."

The rookie was activated following five days of batting practice, a rehabilitation process that included those two simulated games in Anaheim over the weekend.

Rather than use a more traditional assignment in the minor leagues, the Angels opted to have Ohtani work out in private and then resume playing in games with them.

"Shohei just needs to see some pitches," manager Mike Scioscia said. "He's going to be fine. His bat speed is there."

Ohtani had been out since June 6, when he left a pitching start against Kansas City after four innings.

The next day, he was diagnosed with a grade 2 sprain of his right ulnar collateral ligament and treated with injections of platelet-rich plasma and stem cells.

In his first public comments since being hurt, Ohtani called the severity of the injury "surprising."

"But the team took every [necessary] step," he said. "They checked out my elbow and that's what the doctor said so I have to listen to them. I just have to work hard and try to get back to where I was before the injury."

A follow-up exam last week showed healing, Dr. Steve Yoon clearing Ohtani to resume hitting.

He is scheduled to be re-evaluated again during the third week of July, at which time the Angels hope to have a better understanding of his future availability as a pitcher.

He hadn't batted in a game since June 4, when he singled as a pinch-hitter against the Royals. In his return Tuesday, he batted sixth, one spot below where he has hit for the majority of his starts this season.

"Just trying to get him acclimated," Scioscia said. "You don't want to put too much pressure where he's saying 'I've got to do so much' if he's hitting higher in the lineup."

Ohtani struck out twice and fouled out against Mariners starter Wade LeBlanc and struck out against closer Edwin Diaz, whose fastball hit 99 mph Tuesday.

LeBlanc, a former Angel with a fastball that barely reaches the upper 80s, gave up a solo homer to Andrelton Simmons and little else through seven innings.

The Angels' only real uprising came after LeBlanc departed. With one out in the eighth, Kole Calhoun doubled and advanced to third on a fly out. The Mariners then opted to intentionally walk Mike Trout, choosing to put the potential tying run on base and face Justin Upton, who flied out to center.

Coupled with a first-inning strikeout with David Fletcher on second, Upton, the Angels' No. 3 hitter, is now 13 for 81 (.160) with runners in scoring position. No player in baseball with at least 57 at-bats in such situations is worse.

While regaining Ohtani, the Angels lost Chris Young, who started in right field but left after five batters because of a hamstring injury that appeared to be significant.

"I'm disappointed that we lost today," Ohtani said. "I wish I could have done something better early in the game."

Angels try David Fletcher in the leadoff spot

By Jeff Miller

The Angels' No. 6 hitter rightly received the attention Tuesday, **Shohei Ohtani's** return being one noticed by all of baseball.

But their No. 1 hitter also deserved a little recognition, **David Fletcher** promoted to the top of the order for the second time this season.

"He's seeing pitches and putting the ball in play," manager **Mike Scioscia** said. "If he can continue to do that, we feel the on-base [percentage] will follow."

With Seattle starting left-hander **Wade LeBlanc**, **Kole Calhoun** wasn't in the lineup. Calhoun had hit first in each of the past three games.

Fletcher led off the game with a single but was hitless in his last three at-bats as LeBlanc held them to three hits in seven innings of a 4-1 win.

Fletcher, one of five Angels to bat leadoff in 2018, entered the game with a .324 average and .375 on-base percentage, both numbers significantly better than what the Angels have received from their No. 1 hitters.

Scioscia explained that he will continue to look at a variety of lineup possibilities, particularly with Ohtani now rejoining the team.

Ohtani was reinstated from the disabled list and went 0 for 4 as designated hitter.

More moves

Along with adding Ohtani, the Angels promoted reliever **Miguel Almonte** from triple-A Salt Lake. Pitchers **Eduardo Paredes** and **Deck McGuire** were optioned down.

Paredes already has eight stints with the Angels this season, the right-hander ping-ponging between Anaheim and Salt Lake City.

“If you’re ever not going to get mad traveling as much as he has, it would be to go up to the big leagues,” fellow reliever **Taylor Cole** said. “Any other experience, he would not want to do this.”

Almonte, 25, was acquired in April from Kansas City. He pitched in 11 games for the Royals in parts of two seasons.

He is in line to become the 50th player and 29th pitcher to be used by the Angels this season.

“He’s got a power arm,” Scioscia said. “He hasn’t had a real long look in the major leagues, but I think we’re all excited to see how his arm is going to play.”

Richards returns

Garrett Richards (hamstring) is expected to come off the disabled list Wednesday and start against Seattle. It would be his first game since being injured here June 13.

After winning his first start in May, Richards was 4-1 with a 3.93 ERA. He is 0-3 in seven starts since then, though his ERA during that time is 2.91.

Short hops

Entering Tuesday, No. 3 hitter Justin Upton was batting .165 with runners in scoring position, eight of Luis Valbuena’s nine homers were solo shots and the Angels bullpen had given up 49 homers, the most in baseball...Scioscia began this week needing seven victories to pass **Ralph Houk** for 18th on the all-time list of managerial wins.

FROM ANGELS.COM

Halos drop Seattle opener in Ohtani’s return

DH goes 0-for-4 with 3 strikeouts in first game off DL

By Maria Guardado

SEATTLE – The Angels had hoped that Shohei Ohtani’s return from the disabled list would help boost their lineup, but he didn’t deliver the immediate jolt they had been hoping for. Ohtani went 0-for-4 with three strikeouts in his first game since June 6, though the rest of his teammates didn’t fare much better, mustering only four hits in a 4-1 loss to the Mariners on Tuesday night at Safeco Field.

The Mariners scored three runs in the first inning off left-hander Andrew Heaney, and the Angels never recovered, as Ohtani, Mike Trout, Justin Upton and Albert Pujols combined to go 0-for-11 against Seattle left-hander Wade LeBlanc, who allowed one run over seven innings to lead Seattle to its eighth consecutive win.

“It’s a different atmosphere up here facing big league pitchers in a big league stadium,” Ohtani said through interpreter Ipppei Mizuhara. “I still might need a little more time to adjust, but it shouldn’t take long.”

Andrelton Simmons homered off LeBlanc in the fourth to supply the Angels’ lone run of the evening. With the loss, the Angels dropped to 43-43 on the season, slipping 12 games behind the Mariners for the second Wild Card spot in the American League.

Heaney settled in after his uneven start, but he was charged with the tough-luck loss after giving up three runs on five hits over seven innings. He matched his career high with 10 strikeouts and walked two in the 106-pitch outing.

“Andrew was terrific,” manager Mike Scioscia said. “He pitched a great game, gave us a chance to win. We just couldn’t get any kind of pressure offensively.”

The Mariners jumped on Heaney early, loading the bases with one out in the first inning after Jean Segura doubled and Mitch Haniger and Nelson Cruz drew back-to-back walks. Kyle Seager then lined a two-run double to right field to put Seattle on the board. The Angels also suffered another injury on the play, as right fielder Chris Young slipped awkwardly while attempting to field the ball and was forced to depart the game with a left hamstring strain.

Heaney then appeared to strike out Ryon Healy for the second out of the inning, but the ball got away from catcher Martin Maldonado, allowing Healy to reach first and Cruz to score from third to give the Mariners a 3-0 lead. Still, Heaney avoided further damage by striking out Denard Span and Mike Zunino swinging to end the inning.

“Just kind of was falling behind, not making good pitches,” Heaney said. “It’s sort of been the same old story for a little while, just sort of the big innings where I let it kind of build. A couple walks, a double and the one hit kind of opens it up. It’s something where I need to come out and establish earlier, kind of get ahead and all the other same stuff we always talk about.”

Heaney held the Mariners scoreless the rest of the way, retiring 16 of the next 17 batters he faced after Healy reached on the wild pitch in the first. The Mariners put runners on first and second in the sixth after Healy reached on a two-out error by Ian Kinsler and Span singled, but Heaney coaxed a groundout from Zunino to escape the jam. He now leads all Angels starters with nine quality starts this season.

“At that point, it sucks that you’re just trying to put up zeroes to kind of salvage a good outing and give us a chance to win,” Heaney said. “Because sometimes that momentum is hard to gain back.”

Noe Ramirez replaced Heaney in the eighth, but he yielded a leadoff home run to Cruz that extended the Mariners’ lead to 4-1.

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

After LeBlanc departed the game, the Angels threatened in the eighth against Mariners reliever Alex Colome. Kole Calhoun, who entered the game to replace Young in the first inning, delivered a one-out double to left field before advancing to third on a flyout from David Fletcher. The Mariners then intentionally walked Trout to bring up Upton with runners on the corners and two outs. Upton lifted a fly ball to deep center field, but it died at the warning track, allowing Colome to escape the inning unscathed.

“Justin just missed that fastball that he flew out to center field on,” Scioscia said. “That could have been a game-changer. Unfortunately, we just couldn’t get enough done offensively.”

SOUND SMART

The Angels are now 6-15 against left-handed starters this season.

UP NEXT

Right-hander Garrett Richards (4-4, 3.42 ERA) will return from the disabled list and start for the Angels on Wednesday in their Fourth of July matinee against the Mariners at 1:10 p.m. PT at Safeco Field. Seattle will counter with right-hander Mike Leake (8-4, 4.01 ERA). Richards has been sidelined since June 15 with a left hamstring strain, but he made a rehab start with Class A Advanced Inland Empire on Friday and threw a bullpen session on Monday. Richards is 6-4 with a 3.05 ERA in 20 career appearances against the Mariners.

Young strains hamstring on play; DL stint likely

By Maria Guardado

SEATTLE – The Angels got a bit healthier after activating Shohei Ohtani from the disabled list on Tuesday, but their injury woes surfaced once again in their 4-1 loss to the Mariners at Safeco Field, as right fielder Chris Young was forced to depart in the first inning after sustaining a left hamstring strain.

Young fell awkwardly while attempting to field Kyle Seager’s two-run double off left-hander Andrew Heaney, prompting team trainer Adam Nevala and manager Mike Scioscia to come out to right field to check on him. Young subsequently left the game and was replaced by Kole Calhoun.

Scioscia indicated afterward that Young’s injury will likely lead to a stint on the disabled list. “He’s sore,” Scioscia said. “Looks like it’s his hamstring. We’ll evaluate it the next day or two, but it’s going to be a while.”

Young, 34, was batting .168 with six home runs and 13 RBIs as the Angels' fourth outfielder this season. Jabari Blash was pulled from Triple-A Salt Lake's game on Tuesday, a sign that he could potentially be recalled to replace Young on the Angels' roster on Wednesday.

Ohtani off DL, goes hitless as DH in return

By Maria Guardado

SEATTLE – Shohei Ohtani is back.

The Angels activated Ohtani off the 10-day disabled list on Tuesday ahead of their 4-1 loss to the Mariners at Safeco Field. Ohtani started at designated hitter and batted sixth against Seattle left-hander Wade LeBlanc in his first game since June 6, though he showed some rust in his return, going 0-for-4 with three strikeouts.

“Shohei just needs to see some pitches,” manager Mike Scioscia said. “He’s going to be fine. His bat speed is there. He looked great in batting practice.”

Ohtani landed on the disabled list on June 8 with a Grade 2 sprain of the ulnar collateral ligament in his right elbow, but he’ll return exclusively as a hitter for now, giving the Angels a top left-handed bat to help boost their lineup during a key series against the Mariners.

The Angels, who went 8-14 while Ohtani was sidelined, entered Tuesday 11 games behind the Mariners for the second Wild Card spot in the American League, but they’re scheduled to face their division rivals nine times this month, giving them a chance to gain some ground in the race ahead of the July 31 non-waiver Trade Deadline.

Prior to the injury, Ohtani was batting .289 with a .907 OPS and six home runs in 129 plate appearances. The Angels have averaged five runs per game with Ohtani’s bat in their lineup this season and 4.2 runs per game without him, according to ESPN Stats & Information.

Ohtani was cleared to begin a formal hitting progression on Thursday after an MRI showed healing in his damaged elbow ligament. He took batting practice for two days and then faced live pitching in two simulated games over the weekend in preparation for his return to the Angels’ lineup.

“I think it was huge that I got all those at-bats in a simulated game,” Ohtani said through interpreter Ippei Mizuhara. “That really helped a lot, but it’s a different game up here in the big leagues. I think it’s still not quite there yet, but I’ll just keep on working hard and come back tomorrow.”

General manager Billy Eppler said last week that Ohtani, who received platelet-rich plasma and stem-cell injections to treat his ailing elbow on June 7, would be re-evaluated in another three weeks to determine whether he will also be able to return as a pitcher this year. The 23-year-old right-hander logged a 3.10 ERA with 61 strikeouts over 49 1/3 innings in nine outings this season.

“I’m just going to focus on hitting until I’m cleared to throw again,” Ohtani said. “I just want to try my best and help the team win every single day. That’s all I can do right now.”

Ohtani’s return as a full-time DH does create a bit of conundrum for the Angels, however. With Ohtani limited to hitting, the Angels will now be forced to play Albert Pujols at first base more often if they want to keep both of their bats in the lineup. Pujols, 38, has started 44 games at first this season – more than his previous two years combined – and it remains to be seen how his lower body will handle the heavier workload as the season unfolds.

“We’ll balance it,” Scioscia said without elaborating.

The Angels also recalled right-hander Miguel Almonte from Triple-A Salt Lake and optioned right-handers Deck McGuire and Eduardo Paredes on Tuesday. Almonte, 25, is 1-0 with a 3.38 ERA and four strikeouts in six appearances for Salt Lake this season. He was acquired from the Royals in exchange for cash considerations in April.

FROM THE ATHLETIC

Stark: Twelve things we learned in the first half of the season

By Jayson Stark

It’s the 4th of July, and you know what that means.

We’ve made it through the snow, and we’ve made it through the rain. We’ve made it through 103 degrees and we’ve made it through 23 degrees.

We’ve made it through all the strikeouts. We’ve made it through all the shifts. We’ve made it through dozens of no-hit-alert vibrations on our phones. And above all, we’ve made it halfway through another baseball season, now that every team has finally played at least 81 games.

So what should we take away from the last three months? Thanks for asking. Now here they come – 12 Things We Learned from the First Half.

1. Whatever happened to the greatest free-agent class ever?

Our first inclination, when we began working on this story, was to do some sort of mini-power rankings of the World’s Most Amazing, Colossal, Star-Studded, Franchise-Altering, Gazillion-Dollar Free Agent Class of 2018-19. And then reality set in.

Outside of Manny Machado, which of these Amazing, Colossal, Star-Studded, Franchise-Altering, Gazillion-Dollar Free Agents has actually helped his marketability over these last few months? Not Bryce Harper. Not Clayton Kershaw. Not Josh Donaldson. Not Dallas Keuchel.

Oh, there are Craig Kimbrel and Nelson Cruz, in their own select categories. And Nick Markakis, Michael Brantley and Patrick Corbin, in the not-quite-so-star-laden tier of this class. But those megastars who were supposed to drive this market? They've mostly been driving it into the repair shop.

"We don't really start our free-agent work until August," said an executive of one club. "But when we do get to work on it, it could be so hard to value these guys – because when we look at most of these players, there's a good chance we're going to have to say, 'Can he return to form?' And the problem with that is, you know he'll be asking for money as if he already has."

2. The American League has turned into the NBA

Has there ever been a league quite like the American League in 2018? Why, of course there has. It's called the NBA.

You've got your official Super Teams – the Astros (on pace to win 104 games), the Yankees (on pace to win 107) and the Red Sox (on pace to win 108). You've got a fourth team – the Indians – that looks as if it might win its division by 20 games. And you've got the Mariners, A's, Rays and Angels, who are good enough, or at least respectable enough, to fill out your playoff field. But then ...

There's baseball's dark hole, which is already ugly, with a chance to get uglier. You've got three teams – the Orioles, Royals and White Sox – plummeting toward minus-200 run differentials (or worse). And you've got at least three others – the Rangers, Blue Jays and Tigers – getting set to trade away a bunch of veteran players, which could set them on a course to lose 95 to 100 games.

"I can't ever remember a situation in any league like this," said one AL exec. "Can you?"

Of course not – because it's never happened. Not in any sport LeBron James doesn't play, anyway.

3. The AL superpowers could be historically great

The Yankees are built to mash. And they're mashing. They're on pace to hit more home runs in a season (275) than any team ever. And Giancarlo Stanton hasn't even locked into his Bambino blue-heat phase yet. The record they're chasing is 264, by Junior Griffey's 1997 Mariners. That Mariners team had six players who thumped 20 or more. These Yankees could have six dudes who hit *30-plus*. They're a force of modern baseball.

The Astros, meanwhile, just blow you out. Their plus-172 run differential is by far the largest we've seen on the 4th of July in the last 75 years. Only the '98 Yankees (plus-155) are even within 20 of them, and if the 'Stros keep this up, they're heading for the biggest plus-minus by any team since Red Rolfe's legendary 1939 Yankees put up a staggering plus-411. Yikes.

Meanwhile, the Red Sox merely have a shot at the winningest season in the history of their franchise, complete with the greatest run differential in the history of their franchise. Both of those records are held by Tris Speaker's 1912 Red Sox (105 wins, plus-255 differential). And this team is on pace to challenge them both.

There has never been any league – ever – with three 100-win teams. But let's remind you again that the reward for one of these three is probably going to be a fun-filled date with James Paxton in the Wild Card game, with nothing riding on it except their beautiful 106-win season. And that plot line is going to hover over the entire American League for the next three months.

4. The Cubs, Nationals and Dodgers didn't get the memo

Would you please remind us next spring never to make another prediction for the rest of our lives? Playing all-knowing psychic is just a messy line of work. And nothing proves that better than the current state of the National League.

The only thing us know-it-all prediction geniuses knew for sure three months ago was that the Cubs, Nationals and Dodgers were pretty much locks to win their divisions. So naturally, they've spent a grand total of 16 days in first place *combined*. And almost half of them were by the Nationals, in the first week of the season.

At least the Cubs (13 over, with a plus-101 run differential) and Dodgers (30-13, with a plus-76 run differential, since May 16) are trending in the right direction. But the Nationals are turning into our planet's biggest mystery since the Bermuda Triangle.

Here's how they've fared since June 6: A 6-17 record (worst in their league) ... zero streaks in which they've even won two games in a row ... shut out six times ... a 5.43 staff ERA, worst in the NL ... and no wins by a starting pitcher other than (wait for it) Eric Fedde – who earned a “win” in a 17-7 game.

“Everyone wants to get on board with that team because they've got this guy and that guy and this guy, and they're all stars,” said one NL exec. “But they're missing something. And they've been missing something for a while now. And it can't be the manager, because they've had five of them (since 2010).”

5. The race for the No. 1 pick could be epic

Somewhere in Texas, Bobby Witt Jr. knows all about this. But over the next three months, the furious battle for the right to choose him – or someone just like him – with the first pick in the June 2019 draft has the makings of an all-time scramble for the baseball dungeon.

The Orioles are on pace to lose 116 games. The Royals are on pace to lose 114.

The Orioles just went over five weeks without winning a single game against a team from their own league. That's 0-17 – including an incomprehensible 0-15 month of June – if your hard drive just exploded trying to calculate it. And not surprisingly, no team in the interleague era had ever done anything like that.

The Royals, meanwhile, just lost 18 games in a row when they didn't throw a shutout. No team had done something like that in 111 years.

So here they are, on the 4th of July, careening toward triple-digit losses at a rate that no living human has ever seen. Want to guess the last time *two* different teams had winning percentages below .300 on

Independence Day? That would be 1912 – when Hippo Vaughn’s pre-Ruthian Yankees started 19-46 (.292) and Curly Brown’s always-entertaining St. Louis Browns roared out of the gates at 19-47 (.288).

Don’t go scrambling through the draft records to see what awesome No. 1 pick those juggernauts got out of that, because baseball forgot to invent the draft for another half-century. But this year, while a bunch of teams appeared to be chasing the No. 1 pick by consciously trying *not* to win, the Orioles and Royals weren’t one of them.

“They weren’t tanking,” said one AL exec. “They were both semi-trying.”

And shouldn’t that be a lesson to tankers everywhere!

6. The Manny Machado Derby is about to consume us all

It’s the 4th of July, and Manny Machado has almost as many home runs (21) as the Orioles have wins (24). But we regret to announce there’s pretty much a zero-percent chance that Machado will become the first player in history with more homers than his team has wins. And that, obviously, is because a month from now, his jersey can’t possibly say “ORIOLES” on it. Can it?

Anything is possible, we suppose, in Baltimore, where Dan Duquette keeps reminding his trade partners what the Cubs gave up for Aroldis Chapman (i.e., premium rental property) just two years ago. And those trade partners, of course, keep reminding the Orioles of how little the Tigers got back for J.D. Martinez just 12 months ago.

But just as the Tigers decided eventually last July that they had no choice but to make the best deal they could for Martinez, the Orioles are in pretty much an identical position. So if they don’t get Machado moved – to (pick one) the Dodgers, Diamondbacks, Phillies, Braves, Indians, etc. – it “would be organizational malpractice,” said one rival exec.

7. It’s the year the hits disappeared

It’s only the first week of July. But this sport is about to break a record that nobody seems to have noticed except us.

MOST STARTS IN HISTORY ALLOWING 1 HIT OR NONE*

85 – 2015 (all season)

81 – 2018 (through July 2)

(* – starts of 5 IP or more)

Source: Baseball-reference.com

Now think about this for a moment. We’re about to see more starts of one hit or none *by the all-star break* than we’ve ever seen in any full season in the history of baseball? Um, is that good?

Well, it’s a sign that pitching is more unhittable than ever, for one thing. Check out the trend in how the league has hit against starting pitchers over the last couple of decades:

YEAR	AVG	OPS
2018	.248	.730
2017	.261	.767
2008	.269	.760
2000	.274	.790

But clearly, that's not all that's going on here. Starting pitchers also get the hook earlier now (5.48 innings per start) than at any point in history. So 40 years ago, if Tom Seaver had a one-hitter through five innings, guess what? There was a *nada*-percent chance he was coming out.

Nowadays, though, as you might have noticed, nobody thinks that way. Defenses are better deployed. Every reliever on earth throws about 98 miles an hour. So the plan – every night – is to get those starters out of the game before they start to fade. And the bottom line is, it's harder to hit than it has been in nearly 50 years.

Hits per game are at their lowest level (8.38) than at any point since 1972. So here comes that next no-hitter alert on your phone, in 3...2...1.

8. It's the end of the four-times-through-the-lineup era

In a related development, how many games do you think we've seen all season in which starting pitchers navigated their way through the lineup four times (meaning they faced at least 36 hitters)?

The correct answer would be (yep) *none*. And if that keeps up, this would be the first season ever in which not a single starter made it through the opposing order four times.

The closest anyone has come: 34 hitters, by the Padres' Clayton Richard just last Friday in Texas.

As recently as the 2000 season, 55 pitchers made it through the lineup four times. But that number has been steadily declining, and had shrunk to six or fewer in each of the last six seasons.

So who was the last big-league starter to pull this off? It was – who else? – America's favorite 44-year-old strike-throwing machine, Bartolo Colon! He did it in a 106-pitch complete game for the Twins last Aug. 4. That was nearly 4,000 games ago. But the question is, will any pitcher ever do it again?

"The only way," said one exec quoted earlier, "is maybe at the end of the year, if someone like a (Chris) Sale or (Justin) Verlander gets into a huge game and says to the manager, 'I'm not going home Oct. 1, so I'm not leaving this game.' But that's the only way it's going to happen."

9. It's the year of the boy band

Juan Soto is 19 years old. He has a .978 OPS for the Nationals. He has a chance to have the greatest season in history by a teenager.

Gleyber Torres is 21. He has a .913 OPS. He has a higher OPS than any player on the Yankees except Aaron Judge.

Ozzie Albies and Ronald Acuña Jr. are teammates on the Braves. Albies is 21 and leads the National League in extra-base hits. Acuña is 20 – with an .818 OPS.

So how many seasons in modern baseball history have given us four hitters this young who had an OPS of .800 or better (and 400 plate appearances or more)? That answer is *zilch*.

have been 15 seasons with two young stars that good – from Mike Trout/Bryce Harper to Hank Aaron/Al Kaline to Jimmie Foxx/Mel Ott. But the only season that even brought us three young hitters who fit that description was 1969 (Johnny Bench, Richie Hebner, Carlos May).

But this year, if this group stays healthy and keeps doing what it's done so far, they are going to make history – together.

“That’s where this game is going,” said an AL exec. “The young players in this game are really good – and they’re good sooner than they’ve ever been.”

10. Edwin Díaz could save 60 games

The closer for those Seattle Mariners might be baseball’s best-kept secret. The only kind of game his team ever seems to play is one-run games. There might be one reason, above all others, that the Mariners seem to win them all. That reason is named Edwin Díaz.

No one has ever saved 40 games before the all-star break. But don’t put it past him. He has 33 saves already. He’s on pace to save 62. Only one reliever has ever saved that many. That was Francisco Rodríguez (62) in 2008.

But don’t measure Díaz by his saves. This, said one AL exec, “feels like utter domination.”

Díaz’s numbers in those 33 saves: 0.27 ERA, 54 strikeouts, 11 hits. And the league is hitting an absurd .130 against him in save situations, with two extra-base hits.

He leads all AL closers in WHIP and strikeouts. And if he sat down next to you on a bus, you’d probably have no idea who the heck he is. But this might just be the year when Díaz goes from anonymity to massive stardom.

11. Mike Trout has gotten downright Ruthian

One AL exec we interviewed for this piece objected strenuously when we tried comparing the greatness of Mike Trout with the legend of Babe Ruth.

“He’s the best player in baseball,” the exec said. “And he’s the best player ever.”

Ever? The logic here is actually tough to dispute. There’s no way we should ever find ourselves comparing baseball in the 1920s to baseball in the 21st century. In the Bambino’s day, there were no African-Americans playing baseball and no Latinos playing baseball. There were no airplanes and no light bulbs. And there was no science behind anything. So the athletes are indisputably better now. And the game is way more difficult to excel in now.

So with that as context, let's remind you that Trout is on pace for 45 homers, 24 steals, 141 walks, 324 times on base and an OPS close to 1.100. He's also on pace to rack up nearly 13 Wins Above Replacement. That's a number reached by just one position player since 1900. Right you are. That would be the Babe, in 1923.

But if Trout doesn't get to 13 Wins Above Replacement this year, just give him a few months.

"This is his best year ever, and that's the scary thing," the same exec said. "He's still making adjustments. He got wise to us. He figured out that we'd found some holes and occasionally we exploited them. And now those holes are closed. And that's what he does every year. He figures out what he's not great at, and then he gets better."

Best. Player. Ever. Who wants to argue?

12. Jacob deGrom is the unluckiest pitcher ever

Baseball seasons just don't get any more bizarre than Jacob deGrom's season. Do they?

In 10 of his 17 starts, he has allowed one run or none. He has been the winning pitcher in two of those starts. But that's not even the bizarre part.

The bizarre part is that his team has only been the winner in three of those starts.

We keep re-reading those stats over and over, but they don't change. The Mets are 3-7 when their best pitcher allows one run or no runs.

The Elias Sports Bureau checked back all the way to 1893, the year the mound was set at 60 feet, 6 inches from home plate. They found that *no pitcher in the last 126 seasons* has been through more games like that in any of those seasons – meaning no pitcher's team has ever lost more than seven starts in which he gave up no more than one run.

There are others who are tied with deGrom at seven. But remember, this guy still has half a season left to go. No telling how many more great starts his team might lose.

This is not a commentary on "pitcher wins," by the way, because this isn't even about pitcher wins. This is about team wins. Or lack thereof. And nothing explains that, except, possibly, for this: They're the Mets.

"All this is," said one of the execs quoted earlier, "is just an interesting, Jayson Stark-type tidbit. But no one in baseball is judging him any different because of it. Every five days, I'll look at his latest game, and I'll shake my head and say, 'That poor bastard.' And then I'll move on, because what else can I say? It's crazy."

Shohei Ohtani the hitter returns as Ohtani the pitcher remains in the dark

By Fabian Ardaya

SEATTLE — Tyler Skaggs couldn't help but notice the added attention.

"The circus is back in town," said the Angels left-hander, as the crowd of Japanese reporters walked into the visitor's clubhouse at Safeco Field on Tuesday.

It was hard to describe the scene any other way. Albert Pujols removed his headphones as he walked by, turning around to the group and greeting them as if they were old pals. It had been a month since their undivided attention was given to the 25-plus men in the clubhouse, so it was a chance to catch up on things.

"Good to see you, my Japanese friends," Pujols quipped.

They shared the same focus as the Angels: Shohei Ohtani was back — well, at least half of him.

Out since June 4 with a sprained right elbow, the Japanese two-way sensation returned to the diamond, batting sixth and serving as a designated hitter in a 4-1 loss to the Mariners. Once again, Angels fans got a glimpse of what they hoped their 2018 season could be, with Ohtani, the game's most unique player, together with Mike Trout, the game's best. It had been exactly a month since the two were in the same starting lineup.

The 23-year-old Ohtani went 0-for-4, striking out three times and looking every bit like a player who had not played for the better part of a month. It's not a concern for the club or manager Mike Scioscia, who simply was relieved having Ohtani back in the lineup.

"Shohei just needs to see some pitches," Scioscia said. "He's going to be fine. The bat speed's there, was great in batting practice. He'll be fine."

Ohtani was officially cleared by Angels medical officials to re-start a hitting program last Thursday. He took a weekend's worth of batting practice and got 20 at-bats spread over a pair of simulated games at Angel Stadium before being reinstated off the disabled list. Against Seattle, the prodigious slugger looked overmatched, with the high-90s fastball of Mariners closer Edwin Díaz starkly differing from a random arm in a low-leverage situation.

"It's a different game up here in the big leagues," Ohtani said through translator Ipppei Mizuhara. "It's not all quite there yet, but just keep on working hard at it tomorrow."

"It doesn't feel like spring training all over again, but it's a different atmosphere here, facing big-league pitching in a big-league city. I still might need a little more time to get adjusted, but it shouldn't take long."

The allure of Ohtani is shrouded in mystery. It always has, from the legendary tales and YouTube clips of his majestic home runs and 100-mph fastball in Japan to the first moment he was introduced to American fans outside of Angel Stadium this past offseason.

And the mystery has remained, even as his talents have gone mainstream in America. Sure, Ohtani can hit and pitch and do both well, but each start brought with it a guessing game. Sometimes, he would be on the mound once a week. Other times, he would have starts pushed back due to “workload management.”

And then, he was gone altogether. A June start forced the right-hander to leave the mound with a blister. As the fluid was being drained from the blister, Angels general manager Billy Eppler said Ohtani complained of stiffness in his right elbow. Ohtani, whose physical had revealed a Grade 1 sprain of the ulnar collateral ligament in his right elbow, had worsened the damage with an MRI revealing a Grade 2 sprain. A platelet-rich plasma and stem-cell injection in the elbow showed healing after three weeks, precipitating his return to the plate. His return to the mound remains unknown, but at least Tommy John surgery has been avoided. For now.

Asked directly if he believes he will pitch again this season, Ohtani and the Angels defaulted to the same answer given following last Thursday’s evaluation — give it three weeks. If there’s more healing, maybe he could start a throwing program. Nothing is concrete, though.

“I’m just going to focus on hitting until I’m cleared to throw again,” Ohtani said. “I just want to try my best to help the team win every single day. That’s all I can do right now.”

Tuesday marked the first time Ohtani had been made available to the media in almost a month. He expressed shock at the severity of his injury but provided little else in terms of detail.

His progress at the plate hasn’t been outlined in detail, either. Plans for how much he will play, how time will be split at DH with Pujols (“We’ll balance it” remains Scioscia’s lone comment) and how he will rehab as a pitcher while playing as a hitter, remain unknown. As a result, so too is the impact Ohtani could really have.

“We’re going to see how many looks we can give him as DH, and hopefully he’ll give us a lift there,” Scioscia said. “He’s still going to be re-evaluated and we’ll see when he’s ready to start picking up a baseball.”

The Angels, now 43-43, are limping to the All-Star break. Chris Young became the latest casualty on Tuesday, suffering a left hamstring strain that will likely land him on the disabled list. The list of injured players spans double-digits, and the Angels look far from the same bunch that started the season 24-11.

Ohtani’s return to the lineup is a positive, but it also serves as a reminder of just how badly the Angels need him. He is essentially the club’s second-best hitter behind Trout, with an .878 OPS through Tuesday, and is especially valuable for a club devoid of production from its left-handed bats.

Prior to the game, a Japanese reporter asked Scioscia if Ohtani felt a level of depression away from the field. The manager quipped back.

“Managers also get depressed when players get hurt,” Scioscia said. “That’s an important part of it.”

Will the dark clouds remain even with Ohtani in the lineup? Or on the mound if he somehow gets back to pitching this year? No one knows.

Then again, that's true Ohtani form.

FROM ESPN.COM

Real or not? Ohtani is back too late to save the Angels

By David Schoenfield

Shohei Ohtani returned to the Los Angeles Angels lineup at a much-needed time, with the Angels scuffling at a game over .500 and beginning a must-win series against a team they have to chase down for a playoff spot. When Ohtani last pitched on June 6, the Angels were 35-28, four games behind Seattle and three games behind Houston. FanGraphs didn't give them much chance to win the division but tabbed their playoff odds at 35 percent.

It has been a long month since for Angels fans, however. While the Angels went 8-14 without Ohtani, the Astros went 17-6, and the Mariners went 16-8. The Angels had fallen to 11 games behind Seattle.

So Ohtani to the rescue -- well, half of him -- except he wasn't able to solve Wade LeBlanc or Edwin Diaz as he went 0-for-4 with three strikeouts in Seattle's 4-1 victory on Tuesday, and the Mariners ran their win streak to eight games. Ohtani struck out looking at a 1-2 slider in the second, swung at the first pitch in his second at-bat and fouled out to left field, struck out looking again at a 1-2 fastball on the outside corner in the seventh inning and struck out against Diaz for the final out, flailing at a slider at the knees.

Is it too late for the Angels to mount any kind of run? It feels like it. There's the simple matter of the vast ground they have to make up on Seattle. Even if the Mariners collapse, there are the A's to contend with. Oakland beat San Diego 6-2, and the A's have won 13 of their past 16 to climb eight games over .500. The Angels still have too many holes in the lineup, and the rotation continues to dig deep for healthy arms. The Angels have started 12 pitchers, five of those guys are currently on the DL, and that doesn't include Ohtani.

Ohtani remains a fascinating story, and his return indicates the urgency of the Angels to win now. It seems that they've basically decided to postpone surgery to let him hit -- which makes sense, since either way he might not return to pitching until 2020 -- and there was some criticism of how they handled him. That doesn't seem fair; heck, he averaged less than a start per week until he landed on the DL, and they gave him plenty of days off around his pitching assignments. For now, he'll hit. The Angels have five more games against Seattle before the All-Star break. They pretty much need to win all five.

And their playoff chances now? Down to 1.8 percent.

Angels' Shohei Ohtani activated from DL, goes 0-for-4 versus M's

The Los Angeles Angels' Shohei Ohtani was activated from the 10-day disabled list on Tuesday and went 0-for-4 with two strikeouts in his return. He had been sidelined since June 8 with a Grade 2 ulnar collateral ligament sprain.

Ohtani received stem cell therapy and a platelet-rich plasma injection to help heal the right elbow injury that he suffered more than three weeks ago. Ohtani was cleared for a hitting program on Friday and took part in two simulated games against minor league pitchers over the weekend.

Manager Mike Scioscia said before the Angels' 4-1 loss to the Mariners in Seattle that there's no plan in place in terms of Ohtani's usage and they'll monitor it daily.

"He's been cleared to swing and we will see how it all goes down," Scioscia said. "I check with my players all the time to make sure nothing is bothering them, but we don't anticipate anything as far as him swinging the bat."

Ohtani is hitting .289 with a .907 OPS and six homers in 114 at-bats in his rookie season. He batted sixth on Tuesday.

"I think it's a good spot for him," Scioscia said. "When you're talking about Mike (Trout), Albert (Pujols), Justin (Upton) and (Andrelton) Simmons, hitting sixth behind those guys will hopefully be a good spot for him to hit, but also just trying to get him acclimated. We don't want him to say, 'I have to do so much,' if he's hitting higher in the lineup. I think it's a good spot for him to see some pitches tonight."

It's still unclear if Ohtani is capable of returning on the mound this year, but Angels general manager Billy Eppler has expressed the club's desire to utilize his skills as a hitter as the Angels attempt to climb back into the playoff race.

Scioscia emphasized that Ohtani was not being rushed back into the lineup.

"He would not be playing here tonight if he wasn't cleared by our medical department," Scioscia said. "We were very comfortable that he was able to swing the bat."

Right-handed pitcher Miguel Almonte was also called up and right-handed pitchers Deck McGuire and Eduardo Paredes were optioned to Triple-A in corresponding moves.

FROM FORBES.COM

Shohei Ohtani Returns to the Los Angeles Angels as Their Designated Hitter

By Barry M. Bloom

Shohei Ohtani ended a nearly four-week stint on the disabled list Tuesday night when he returned as the designated hitter for the Los Angeles Angels against the Seattle Mariners at Safeco Field.

He batted sixth and went 0-for-4 with three strikeouts against veteran left-hander Wade LeBlanc and closer Edwin Diaz in a 4-1 Mariners victory.

"Hopefully it'll be a good spot for him to hit," Angels manager Mike Scioscia told reporters before the game about the first regular two-way player in the Majors in more than a century. "But we're also just trying to get him acclimated. You don't want to put too much pressure where he's to say, 'I've got to do so much,' because he's hitting higher in the lineup. I think it's a good spot for him to see some pitches today."

Ohtani was diagnosed with a Grade 2 sprain of the ulnar collateral ligament in his right elbow and went on the DL on June 8. It will be at least two more weeks before he's evaluated again by orthopedic doctors at the Kerlan-Jobe Clinic in Los Angeles.

There's no timetable for if and when he can pitch, Angels general manager Billy Eppler said last week during a conference call.

A right-handed pitcher and left-handed hitter, Ohtani was cleared again to swing this past Thursday after an MRI revealed some scabbing and scarring of the UCL, indicating that there was a healing process.

He took batting practice in simulated games over the weekend at Angel Stadium while the team was in Baltimore and made enough progress that he was activated again on Tuesday as the Angels opened a key three-game series against the Mariners.

The Angels trail the Mariners by 12 games for the American League's second Wild Card spot.

"He's not being rushed," Scioscia said. "He had a very aggressive workout this weekend and was cleared by our medical department. He would not be playing here tonight if he wasn't cleared by our medical department. We're very comfortable that he's ready."

It has already been four weeks since Ohtani last pitched and received stem cell and platelet-rich plasma injections in the elbow.

The injury is usually a precursor to Tommy John ligament replacement surgery, which typically puts a pitcher on the shelf for from 12 to 18 months. But that's not currently under consideration.

"No doctor has told me he needs surgical intervention at this time," Eppler said.

Last season, in Japan, the Nippon Ham-Fighters lessened Ohtani's load as a pitcher when he dealt with ankle, hamstring and evidently the elbow injury. He was limited to 25 1/3 innings off the mound, but made 231 plate appearances.

After the season he had a PRP shot in the elbow and was diagnosed with a Grade 1 sprain of the UCL. The Angels were aware of this when they signed him to a contract this past December, paying him a \$2.31 million bonus, the minimum of \$540,000 and a \$20 million posting fee to the Fighters.

Because of the elbow, the Angels had been trying to manage Ohtani's pitching. His last start on June 6 was just his second in 17 days. He has thrown just nine innings since May 20.

Overall, he's made only the nine pitching starts and is 4-1 with a 3.10 ERA, 20 walks and 61 whiffs in 49 1/3 innings. He had a high-water mark of 7 2/3 innings and 110 pitches in a home win over the Tampa Bay Rays on March 20.

Prior to Tuesday night, he hadn't hit in a game since June 4 and is now batting .280 with six homers and 20 RBIs. After a run of three homers in three games as a DH the first week of the season, he hasn't hit another since May 17.

FROM KYODO NEWS

Baseball: Shohei Ohtani hitless with 3 strikeouts in return as Angels' DH

Shohei Ohtani returned to the lineup as the designated hitter Tuesday after being sidelined for a month but was hitless in the Los Angeles Angels' 4-1 loss to the Seattle Mariners.

The Japanese rookie, who was activated off the disabled list ahead of the series opener at Safeco Field, batted sixth and went 0-for-4 with three strikeouts as the only left-handed hitter in the Angels' lineup.

It was his first game since he was placed on the disabled list on June 8 with a Grade 2 sprained ulnar collateral ligament in his right pitching elbow.

"Surprisingly, I felt normal coming back to the game. There wasn't any change in terms of feelings," Ohtani said.

"Since I had wanted to come back as soon as possible, it was good to just be able to play an actual game. I wasn't expecting to be gone for so long."

Ohtani struck out looking twice and fouled out once against left-hander Wade LeBlanc (4-0). When he played for the Nippon Ham Fighters in Japan, Ohtani had hit a home run against the lefty during LeBlanc's stint with the Seibu Lions in 2015.

In his final at-bat, Ohtani was fanned by Mariners' closer Edwin Diaz for the last out of the game.

Angels' starter Andrew Heaney (4-6) struck out 10 but gave up three early runs, while Andrelton Simmons put the Angels on the board with a solo homer in the fourth.

It was Ohtani's second time in Seattle, home of his boyhood idol Ichiro Suzuki, now a special assistant adviser to the Mariners. Ohtani went 2-for-4 with an RBI on May 4 and earned his third win two days later in an 8-2 victory over the Mariners.

The 23-year-old received injections of platelet-rich plasma and stem cells on June 7 to regenerate tissue, and was cleared to bat last Thursday after an MRI revealed healing in his elbow.

He had last batted on June 4, when he entered the game as a pinch-hitter and scored a tying run that put the Angels on track to a 9-6 comeback victory over the Kansas City Royals.

Angels' general manager Billy Eppler confirmed that Ohtani will not require Tommy John surgery, and said he will be re-evaluated within three weeks to determine whether he can pitch again this year.

Ohtani is 4-1 with a 3.10 ERA in nine starts this season. He last pitched on June 6, when he exited the mound after four innings with a blister.

At Chase Field, Yoshihisa Hirano pitched his 26th straight scoreless outing as the National League West-leading Arizona Diamondbacks snapped a four-game skid with a 4-2 win over the St. Louis Cardinals.

Hirano, who broke the team record for consecutive scoreless games with 25 on Friday, took the mound in the seventh with two outs and the bases loaded, in danger of surrendering a two-run lead.

The Japanese reliever got his only batter to ground into a fielder's choice on a single pitch, escaping the jam and keeping his streak alive.

"It was a one-hit tie situation where you can't issue a walk either. My only thought was to put down the batter in front of me," Hirano said. "It was good to end it with one pitch. I want to keep going without letting (the pressure of extending the record) affect me."

The 34-year-old is now two shy of surpassing former Boston Red Sox closer Koji Uehara, who didn't give up an earned run in 27 straight games in 2013, as the Japanese pitcher with the most consecutive scoreless outings in the majors.

FROM THE NEW YORK POST

Shohei Ohtani is back but not as a pitcher yet

SEATTLE — The Angels activated two-way sensation Shohei Ohtani from the 10-day disabled list Tuesday and used him as the designated hitter in their game against the Mariners.

Ohtani and his injured right elbow are only cleared to hit for now, but Los Angeles said he will be re-evaluated as a pitcher in three weeks.

Ohtani received stem cell therapy and a platelet-rich plasma injection to help heal the Grade 2 sprain of his ulnar collateral ligament suffered more than three weeks ago. Ohtani was cleared for a hitting program Friday and took part in two simulated games against minor league pitchers over the weekend.

"We're going to see how many looks we can give him as a (designated hitter) and hopefully he'll give us a lift there," Angels manager Mike Scioscia said.

Ohtani went 0 for 4 in Los Angeles' 4-1 loss to the Mariners.

Scioscia said there's no plan in terms of Ohtani's usage, and they'll monitor it daily.

"He's been cleared to swing and we will see how it all goes down," Scioscia said. "I check with my players all the time to make sure nothing is bothering them, but we don't anticipate anything as far as him swinging the bat."

Ohtani is hitting .280 with an .878 OPS and six homers in 118 at-bats in his rookie season. He batted sixth on Tuesday.

"I think it's a good spot for him," Scioscia said. "When you're talking about Mike (Trout), Albert (Pujols), Justin (Upton) and (Andrelton) Simmons, hitting sixth behind those guys will hopefully be a good spot for him to hit, but also just trying to get him acclimated. We don't want him to say, 'I have to do so much,' if he's hitting higher in the lineup."

Scioscia emphasized that Ohtani was not being rushed back into the lineup.

"He would not be playing here tonight if he wasn't cleared by our medical department," Scioscia said. "We were very comfortable that he was able to swing the bat."

Right-handed pitcher Miguel Almonte was also called up and right-handed pitchers Deck McGuire and Eduardo Paredes were optioned to Triple-A in corresponding moves.