



Press Clips

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CLIPS CONTENT

FROM THE LOS ANGELES TIMES (PAGE 3)

- **Shohei Ohtani could still be in the swing of things next season**
- **With Ohtani injury, it's three strikes and out for the stem cell scam**

FROM ANGELS.COM (PAGE 7)

- **5 pressing questions in the AL West**

FROM THE ATHLETIC (PAGE 7)

- **Rosenthal: The Angels don't want to trade Mike Trout – so they need to make him an offer**

FROM MLB.COM (PAGE 10)

- **An excited Mike Trout took in the Eagles' season opener and met up with Carson Wentz and Zach Ertz**
- **The votes are in: The Mobile BayBears will become the Rocket City Trash Pandas**

FROM SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (PAGE 11)

- **Whatever the Future Holds for Shohei Ohtani, He Should Win AL Rookie of the Year**

FROM BLEACHER REPORT (PAGE 13)

- **'Japanese Babe Ruth' Shohei Ohtani Should Ditch Pitching for 40-HR Power**

FROM THE NEW YORK POST (PAGE 15)

- **Angels should stay the course with Shohei Ohtani**
- **What would it take to trade for Mike Trout? Not enough**

FROM THE SCORE (PAGE 17)

- **Report: Angels plan to offer contract extension to Trout**

FROM THE LOS ANGELES TIMES**Shohei Ohtani could still be in the swing of things next season**

By Mike DiGiovanna

A damaged ulnar collateral ligament in his right elbow did nothing to slow Shohei Ohtani in the batter's box this week. The Angels' erstwhile two-way star slugged three homers in two games after sustaining an injury Sunday that will probably require surgery.

The Angels should expect significant, if not similar, plate production from Ohtani next season, even as the 24-year-old right-hander recovers from the ligament replacement procedure that, assuming he has it, will prevent him from pitching until 2020.

"I don't see any reason why he shouldn't be able to hit next season," said Dr. Luga Podesta, 62, a sports medicine and rehabilitation specialist from Naples, Fla., and a former Dodgers and Angels team physician. "It all depends on how he heals and how he progresses through the rehabilitation for his elbow.

"If he has problems reestablishing his range of motion and his strength, or if there's any complications with his ulnar nerve, which can become inflamed, there could be setbacks. But if he's not going to throw and he's just going to be a designated hitter, he could be back in about six months."

The chance of a complete recovery from Tommy John surgery is estimated at 80%-90%. The rehabilitation process takes 12 to 18 months for a pitcher, six to 12 months for a position player and as little as six months for a DH like Ohtani.

The first three months of Tommy John rehab are devoted to healing, with a splint or brace protecting the ligament. Players begin range-of-motion, stretching and strengthening exercises in the fourth month, at which point position players can usually begin swinging a bat.

Ohtani, who enters Friday night's game against the Chicago White Sox with a .287 average, .946 on-base-plus-slugging percentage, 18 homers and 47 RBIs in 279 plate appearances, is scheduled to meet with general manager Billy Eppler on Monday to determine a course of action.

If he has surgery this month, Ohtani would reach the six-month point of his rehabilitation next March, as spring training is winding down, giving him ample time to start the 2019 season as a DH. He would probably begin a throwing program next June.

Podesta said hitting should not hinder or pose any risk to Ohtani's rehabilitation as a pitcher. The fact that Ohtani bats from the left side could provide further protection for his pitching elbow.

"Because he bats left-handed, that's his pulling arm coming through on a swing, and he really shouldn't have much stress on his ligament other than flexing his elbow," said Podesta, who spent 16 years with the Dodgers under Dr. Frank Jobe and three years with the Angels under Dr. Lewis Yocum.

“As he swings through the ball, he’s not going into full extension as he would with his top hand. When you go down for an inside pitch, you have to bend that top elbow a little earlier to get to it, and that can stress the elbow a bit. But because it’s his opposite arm from throwing, he’s not putting as much torque on it.”

Ohtani, who went 4-2 with a 3.31 ERA in 10 starts as a pitcher this season, wears a protective pad on his right elbow when he’s hitting. The ligament replaced in Tommy John surgery is on the inside of the elbow, so getting hit by a pitch should not pose a threat.

“Anything can happen with a pitched ball — you could break a bone, things like that,” Podesta said. “But damage to a ligament? That’s not very common.”

The biggest risk, Podesta said, could come on the basepaths.

“If he puts that right arm down on a feet-first slide and catches that hand, it can cause some stress on the inside part of the elbow,” Podesta said. “Or if he slides head-first, he could jar the elbow when he hits the bag or a defender’s glove or foot.”

These are risks the Angels are willing to take to get Ohtani’s lethal bat in the lineup next season. No player in baseball has hit as many homers in as few at-bats this season as Ohtani.

After re-injuring his elbow in Sunday night’s 2 1/3-inning start at Houston, Ohtani hit his first homer off a left-handed pitcher in Texas on Tuesday night.

Then, after being gut-punched with Wednesday’s news that he would need Tommy John surgery, Ohtani had four hits, including two homers, in that night’s 9-3 win over the Rangers.

“Shohei has demonstrated the ability to be impactful on both sides of the baseball,” Eppler said, “and that is something that we, and I would think every team, would want.”

With Ohtani injury, it’s three strikes and out for the stem cell scam

By Michael Hiltzik

As one of the increasingly demoralized fans of the Los Angeles Angels, I took the latest news about Shohei Ohtani almost in stride. The Angels, you may have heard, announced Thursday that their star pitching prospect from Japan had suffered a major injury in his pitching elbow and would have to undergo Tommy John surgery if he was to pitch again. That meant he probably would be out of the rotation for most of the next season.

Of more relevance to the baseball world — indeed, to athletes at all levels, whether pro, semi-pro, school or youth sports — the announcement was an acknowledgment that Ohtani’s stem cell therapy was a failure.

If you're umpiring, that makes the count three strikes and out for stem cell treatment on the Angels pitching roster. Strike one was Andrew Heaney, who tried stem cell injections in 2016 to try healing his aching ulnar collateral ligament, then opted for Tommy John surgery before July 1 that year. Strike two was Garrett Richards, who undertook the therapy around the same time, stayed with it into this year, but mostly stank when he returned to the rotation, and finally opted for surgery in July.

Ohtani chose stem-cell treatment in June after suffering a ligament injury after nine starts, with four wins. He didn't pitch again until Sunday, when he lasted only 2 1/3 innings. The UCL, which is the key ligament for pitchers, tethers the upper arm to the forearm on the inside of the elbow.

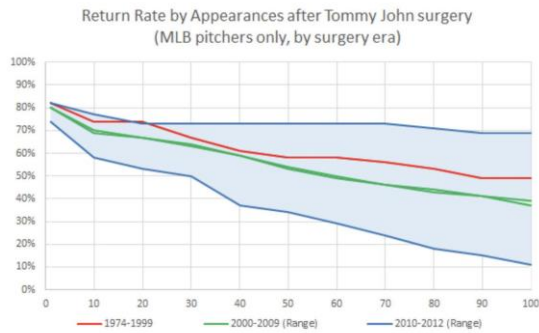
We observed in July that if there was a silver lining in Richards' announcement, it was that the news might help dispel the hype about stem cell treatment for muscular injuries, many of which are sports-related. Stories of high-profile sports figures experiencing "miracle" cures of muscle and ligament damage were all too common, prompting athletes and laypersons alike to pay thousands of dollars for the unproven treatments.

Ohtani's experience only reinforces the need for caution. Yet among the dispiriting aspects of his injury is that Angels General Manager Billy Eppler, speaking at a hastily-called news conference Wednesday, was still describing Ohtani's stem cell treatment as a "conservative" option. The treatment involves extracting stem cells from a patient's bone marrow or fat deposits and injecting them directly into the injured tissue, with the expectation that the cells speed the healing process along, ostensibly by transforming into muscle or ligament cells themselves.

Here's a pro tip for Eppler: A treatment that is scientifically unproven, unapproved by the Food and Drug Administration, regarded by medical experts as experimental, and for which your own team refuses to cover the cost, isn't "conservative." It's radical and potentially dangerous. Advocates of these treatments tend to cite anecdotal evidence that they work, but it's wise to remember that the plural of "anecdote" is not "data." We'll repeat what Paul Knoepfler, a stem cell expert at UC Davis, told us soon after Richards' announcement: "The state of the medical science of stem cells for musculoskeletal conditions is still relatively primitive. It just isn't ready for prime time."

Even Steve Yoon, the Angels team physician who performed the stem cell therapies on Richards and Ohtani, acknowledged to me in July that "there are no high-level studies that have shown that using stem cells can help ulnar collateral ligaments heal any better than just rest and therapy and time." He said pitchers could be especially difficult candidates for the treatment, because their motion places a unique strain on the UCL. That means the ligaments need not merely to heal, but heal in a way that leaves them strong enough to withstand the strain.

As we write, Ohtani hasn't confirmed that he'll undergo Tommy John surgery. It's not hard to understand why pitchers and their teams would wish to avoid the procedure if at all possible. Named after the Dodgers pitcher who pioneered the procedure in 1974 and went on to a successful post-surgery career, it involves transplanting a tendon from elsewhere in the body to replace the damaged UCL. According to statistics compiled by Jon Roegele of the Hardball Times, pitchers can need more than a year to recover to the point where they can face hitters off the mound, and a year and a half before they can pitch in a game at their pre-surgery level. If Ohtani goes through with the surgery now, he won't be expected to throw another pitch until 2020.



Many pitchers undergoing Tommy John surgery never throw another major league pitch (Hardball Times)

It's also true that Tommy John surgery has been somewhat oversold as a panacea for injured pitchers. Roegele's assiduous number-crunching reveals that the median pitcher who underwent the surgery in 2000-2009 "appeared in about 60 games or logging about 100 innings pitched *over the rest of his major league career.*"

That's what a healthy relief pitcher would notch in a single season and a starter would have in a half-season, Roegele observes: "That's not the sort of post-surgery career one might envision."

The sterling reputation of Tommy John surgery may owe much to a sort of cognitive bias: We judge it by the subset of pitchers who have had successful post-surgery careers, including John himself. But Roegele cautions that more than 80% of the major league pitchers who have had the surgery never throw another pitch at that level.

That leaves the question of what the Angels should do about Ohtani. Eppler maintained on Wednesday that the team still sees him as a two-way player—pitching in the rotation and batting at all other times. But that's treating him as a circus act, not a long-term mainstay of the team. There's a reason why great-hitting pitchers have been erased from baseball over the decades—if a player can hit, you want him in the lineup every day, not once or twice a week.

Ohtani reminded us what he's capable of during Wednesday's game, after the news about his possible surgery came out: He went 4-for-4 at the plate with two home runs. That suggests that the proper course is to make Ohtani a full-time batter. Pitchers, except for truly outstanding pitchers, are always more common than good hitters — the Angels, like most American League major league teams, currently maintains a roster of six outfielders to fill three spots, six infielders to fill four spots, three catchers for one spot, and 18 pitchers.

As Ohtani showed, he can consistently hit a ton even with an injury that could end his pitching career. The Angels should pay attention, for Ohtani's career thus far carries two important lessons: He'll have much more long-term value as a batter, not a pitcher; and it's time for the Angels to wean themselves and their players from the stem cell Kool-Aid.

FROM ANGELS.COM**5 pressing questions in the AL West**

By T.R. Sullivan

The biggest question in the American League West is which of the three teams in contention -- the Astros, Athletics or Mariners -- will advance to the postseason.

That's always the overriding issue in September. But whether they are in contention or not, each of the five teams has at least one remaining question that must be answered this month.

Here's a look at each of the five teams:

Angels

The question: Will Taylor Ward do enough to show that he's a viable starting option at third base?

Ward, a former first-round Draft pick, enjoyed a breakout season in the Minors after making the transition from catcher to third base this season, prompting the Angels to give him his first extended look in the big leagues. Though he got off to a hot start, Ward has cooled off and is now batting .211 with a .629 OPS and three home runs over his first 20 games with the club.

The Angels will have vacancies at second and third base in 2019, though **Zack Cozart** is expected to fill one of them. Ward will have the final month of the season to continue to make his case for the other.

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

FROM THE ATHLETIC**Rosenthal: The Angels don't want to trade Mike Trout – so they need to make him an offer**

By Ken Rosenthal

The Angels need to find out: Can they keep Mike Trout beyond the expiration of his contract after the 2020 season? Or do they need to start preparing for life without Trout and explore the previously unthinkable, a potential trade of an all-time great?

Only after a decision from Trout, 27, can the Angels determine the direction of their franchise. It probably would *not* include a trade of Trout as long as Arte Moreno is owner, and Moreno gives no indication of wanting to sell the club. But the consensus from conversations with six major-league executives Thursday is that the Angels must get an answer on Trout's future — and that as distasteful as a trade might be, it would be a better outcome than receiving a draft pick after the second round if Trout departed as a free agent in two years.

The issue bubbled to the surface Thursday after the Angels announced two-way phenom Shohei Ohtani had suffered new damage to the ulnar collateral ligament in his pitching elbow, and that Tommy John surgery was the recommended plan of care. Ohtani, 24, would not pitch in 2019 if he underwent the surgery, and likely would be limited to say, 160 innings in 2020 even if his recovery progressed smoothly. He might return as a designated hitter next season, but even then, the Angels would face complications — Albert Pujols, coming off left-knee surgery and turning 39 on Jan. 16, seems unlikely to carry a significant load at first base.

General manager Billy Eppler, in a conference call with reporters Wednesday, stated flatly, “We are not going to trade Mike Trout.” No one would expect Eppler to say anything different, particularly with Trout holding a full no-trade clause. The Angels can keep Trout with the expectation of pairing him with Ohtani, shortstop Andrelton Simmons and maybe even top outfield prospect Jo Adell in 2020. Such a core would be wildly entertaining, if perhaps only for one season — Simmons’ deal also expires after 2020. The problem is, the Angels almost certainly will not be as good as the Astros in either 2019 or 2020, and also might not be as good as the Oakland Athletics or Seattle Mariners.

One rival executive, in assessing the Angels, said the team has a “ton of holes,” specifically identifying catcher, first base due to Pujols, second or third depending upon which position Zack Cozart plays and arguably one outfield position, given Kole Calhoun’s decline. And that is before even getting to the pitching, which is by far the team’s bigger concern. The Angels probably need to add at least two starting pitchers and address their bullpen as well.

Eppler drew generally positive reviews last offseason for extending left fielder Justin Upton, signing Cozart, trading for second baseman Ian Kinsler and wooing Ohtani. But the Angels, 68-72, still might be headed for their third straight losing season, due in part to their usual large number of injuries. Trout, who joined the club in 2011, has yet to win a postseason game.

A free-agent spending spree is unlikely to elevate the Angels from their current state of mediocrity, not when too many of their veterans already are on the wrong side of 30 and the team’s improving farm system is not yet ready to spit out significant major-league ready talent. On the other hand, it would be difficult for the Angels to get even near-equivalent value for Trout, who is owed \$33.25 million in each of the next two seasons, and even more difficult for them to justify trading the best player in the world. Unless, of course, they determined Trout was a goner when his deal expires.

The way to make that determination is by offering Trout an extension, and that is something the Angels plan to do, according to a source with knowledge of the club’s thinking. The idea would not be to force Trout into a corner — *Take this or we’re trading you*. But if Trout rejected a proposal of, say, eight years at \$40 million per season, the Angels would know where they stood. At that point, they could at least consider the possibility of a trade.

Not one executive contacted by *The Athletic* believes Moreno actually would approve of such a move. Moreno is deeply fond of not only Trout the player but also Trout the person, as evidenced by the Angels’ resounding statement in response to commissioner Rob Manfred’s comments during the All-Star break about Trout potentially becoming a bigger star if he marketed himself more vigorously. “We applaud him for prioritizing his personal values over commercial self-promotion,” the Angels said. “That is rare in today’s society and stands out as much as his extraordinary talent.”

Moreno's affection for Trout is understandable, but executives try to strip emotion from their decisions. One said the "textbook" move, if Trout is unwilling to sign an extension, would be to trade him for perhaps the biggest package ever and move forward with a better future. Another seemed downright intrigued by the possibility, saying, "One of the best talents in the history of the game is rarely explored in the market. A team might be willing to do something absolutely insane to acquire him. We just don't know."

The Angels, the executive said, could identify a prospect-rich team that wants to "condense talent" by trading a slew of youngsters for two years of a future Hall of Famer. The Phillies, Braves and Padres are three such organizations, and the Yankees never can be ruled out of such pursuits. But consider: The Rays drew widespread praise within the industry for extracting outfielder Austin Meadows, right-hander Tyler Glasnow and minor league right-hander Shane Baz from the Pirates for right-hander Chris Archer at the non-waiver deadline. Trout would be worth considerably more.

Wins Above Replacement — while an imprecise metric, particularly when comparing pitchers to hitters — at least offers a starting point for a discussion. Trout's career WAR, according to Fangraphs is 62.8, while Archer's is 19.9. WAR is cumulative, and Trout began his career one year earlier than Archer. But it hardly seems unreasonable to suggest Trout's trade value might be at least three times greater than Archer's, if not more.

The exec proposed the following package from the Braves: Outfielder Ender Inciarte and left-hander Sean Newcomb plus the Nos. 2, 3, 4 and 7 prospects, according to MLB Pipeline.com, from a talent-rich system: right-handers Kyle Wright and Ian Anderson, third baseman Austin Riley and righty Touki Toussaint. Sounds like a lot? Of course it's a lot — the Braves would be getting Mike Trout.

Again, the Angels cannot even begin to entertain such a possibility until they make an offer to Trout, which could be before or after Bryce Harper and Manny Machado sign their new free-agent deals; Trout is two years away from free agency, but he is better than both of those players, a market of one. Money might not be his sole motivator, however. Both Trout and his wife, Jessica, are from Millville, N.J., and he might simply want to use free agency as a means to play closer to home. Then again, the idea of spending his entire career with one team might carry its own appeal.

A long-term deal with Trout would give the Angels cost certainty on their most expensive player and the ability to build around him. If Trout balks, the Angels can continue gambling on an eventual agreement with him, and continue patching their flawed roster. At some point, though, they must decide which is worse: The thought of trading Trout, or the thought of never winning a postseason game with him, and getting only a draft pick when he departs.

FROM MLB.COM

An excited Mike Trout took in the Eagles' season opener and met up with Carson Wentz and Zach Ertz

By Adrian Garro

In addition to being one of the greatest baseball players around (and maybe of all-time, depending on whom you ask), Mike Trout is a gigantic Eagles fan.

On Thursday, the Eagles began their Super Bowl title defense with a season opener against the Falcons in Philly, and wouldn't you know it? Trout was there. He and his entourage (which included teammate Cam Bedrosian, a Falcons fan) sauntered to take their (very nice) seats before the rain began falling:

While the team was doing warmups on the field, quarterback Carson Wentz came over and the pair exchanged pleasantries:

As did tight end Zach Ertz:

Trout also had another meet-and-greet, and this one was no doubt a thrill for the outfielder:



This is just the latest instance of the Millville, N.J., product demonstrating his strong allegiance to Philadelphia's football team, whether from showing up at games to sending out tweet after tweet rooting on his guys.

As the Eagles advanced through the playoffs last season, Trout was so amped up he wore a rubber dog mask, which was all the rage in Philly at the time -- so you know he's a *truly* committed fan.

It's probably safe to expect more of this from Mike if his Eagles fly high once again this season ...

The votes are in: The Mobile BayBears will become the Rocket City Trash Pandas

By Michael Clair

Forget the visual arts, literature and music: The most fertile creative work is being done is in the realm of Minor League team names, and the newest one is a corker. When the Mobile BayBears -- the Double-A affiliate of the Angels -- move to Madison, Ala., in 2020, they will transform into ... the Rocket City Trash Pandas. Oh, would a raccoon by any other name smell as sweet?

The name beat out the ThunderSharks, Moon Possums, Space Chimps and Comet Jockeys as the preferred moniker for the club. If you're curious why all the space names, Madison is a short 15-minute drive from the U.S. Space and Rocket Center -- the largest space museum in the world and the place where the rockets that put man on the moon were originally developed.

With the voting just completed, we'll have to wait until Oct. 27 to see the new logo and merch. While we can't wait to pick up our Trash Panda gear, I suppose it's time to mourn for this horrifying creature of the night: The BayBears mascot, with his never-closing, all-seeing eyes:

FROM SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

Whatever the Future Holds for Shohei Ohtani, He Should Win AL Rookie of the Year

By Emma Baccellieri

Shohei Ohtani, the pitcher, may be in need of season-ending surgery with a lengthy recovery period. Shohei Ohtani, the hitter, remains one of baseball's most exciting threats at the plate. Exactly what these facts will mean for Ohtani, the player, isn't yet clear.

On Wednesday, news broke that the recommended course of action for his ligament damage was Tommy John. It had been obvious that *something* was wrong during Ohtani's most recent start, his first in nearly three months. On Sunday Night Baseball, his velocity had wavered and then crashed; he was pulled in the third inning. A few days later, the update confirmed that the *something* was, in fact, the worst-case scenario—a new injury to his ulnar collateral ligament. Yet just a few hours later, he was in the lineup as a designated hitter, 4-for-4 with two home runs. It underscored what should have already been evident: Ohtani's path to surgery and beyond will not be typical, because nothing about him is typical.

Ohtani is set to sit down with Los Angeles Angels general manager Billy Eppler on Monday, and that meeting should reportedly provide some clarity on what direction he takes. He could end his season now and undergo surgery immediately, with plans to be in the lineup as a hitter for much of next season. He could wait to make a decision until after the season has ended. He could have surgery, but not serve as a regular hitter during his recovery period. He could rule against having surgery at all.

Physically, Ohtani *should* be able to work just fine at the plate post-surgery, as Jeff Passan of Yahoo Sports explored here.

As a right-handed pitcher and left-handed hitter, he could theoretically start taking batting practice about three months after surgery, doctors say—which would make a spot in the lineup entirely possible for most, if not all, of next season, assuming that the procedure is scheduled for early in the offseason. The Angels and Ohtani will navigate that decision together, though, and one can imagine a reasonable scenario to fit each of the options above. Ohtani could be off the mound for more than a year, or he could be off *everything* for more than a year, or, most likely, something somewhere in between. The fact that the question is even on the table is just another reminder of how groundbreaking his talent is.

Ohtani's + elbow trouble kept him off the mound for roughly half the season, and his pitching schedule has meant that he gets less time in the lineup than a typical everyday hitter would. Yet he's still rightfully a top pick for AL Rookie of the Year. His case does not rely on historical context (*baseball hasn't seen anything like this in decades!*) or on lofty comparisons (*Babe Ruth!*) or on aesthetics (*just watch him!*) His appeal taps into each of those categories, of course, but there's an argument here that's simpler than any of that.

Just look at the numbers. There are 16 rookies who have been league-average hitters this year, if the minimum number of plate appearances is set at 200. Ohtani is one of them, and he's been further above average than all the rest. He leads all rookies in slugging percentage, and AL rookies in OBP. His 155 OPS+ tops everyone else, edging out phenoms Ronald Acuña, Jr. (147) and Juan Soto (142). The American League's closest competition is Gleyber Torres—who isn't so close at all, despite his excellent season, with a 125 OPS+. Since 2003, there have been just eight rookies to post a higher number here than Ohtani. (One of them? Fellow Angel Mike Trout, with a 168 OPS+, who was unanimously voted Rookie of the Year in 2012.)

Ohtani has been one of the best rookie hitters in recent memory, and the numbers say that he's undeniably been the best this year in the American League. If you were to evaluate him just at the plate—judging him as a designated hitter, taking the limited playing time into account—he would *still* have a remarkably solid case for Rookie of the Year. Think about that, and then throw in the fact that he's also been a legitimate top-of-the-rotation arm, with a 128 ERA+ and the highest strikeout rate of any rookie starting pitcher in the American League.

It's a brief sample, 51 2/3 innings across 10 starts, but it's enough to prove a point. Ohtani was the league's best rookie hitter, and one of its best rookie pitchers. He's a formidable talent when considered in either category, and a singular talent when considered in both. If he's just as a hitter for the next season, well, he could still be among the game's top tier. But that vision of the future feels like a loss, even if just a temporary one. That might sound like a ridiculous statement to make about an outlook for a player as *one of the game's elite young hitters*, and yet it seems warranted—a testament to the strength of what Ohtani did this season, and what he'll hopefully get the chance to do again.

In an era of increasing specialization—where value is carefully quantified and then maximized by assigning players to the most highly specific roles possible—a player like this shouldn't be able to exist. And yet, somehow, he does. He cracks open the mold that baseball has been pointing toward for decades now, and he builds one in its place that's utterly the opposite. This would be the case if Ohtani were a middle-of-the-rotation starter on the mound and a league-average designated hitter at the plate. Simply building a presence in both roles is enough to shift the paradigm here. But Ohtani hasn't just

been a presence, he's been a *phenom*, as both an ace and slugger. It wasn't that Ohtani suggested a different model of success in his few short months in the major leagues, but that he seemingly perfected it.

Even as just a partially operative version of himself, Ohtani is a force; at his healthy best, he's a small miracle. If he has surgery early in the offseason, he could likely be expected to return in that full two-way capacity for 2020. As for 2019? Well, a pitcher rehabbing from surgery by serving as a full-time designated hitter isn't any more drastic a paradigm shift than anything he's done yet.

FROM BLEACHER REPORT

'Japanese Babe Ruth' Shohei Ohtani Should Ditch Pitching for 40-HR Power

By Zachary D. Rymer

Shohei Ohtani last pitched on Sept. 2. In all likelihood, he won't pitch again until 2020.

Or ever, if he and the Los Angeles Angels are smart.

For the time being, Ohtani and the Angels merely need to decide whether he should have Tommy John surgery, which was formally recommended to the right-hander Wednesday:

Ohtani's official decision should come Friday. According to Jeff Fletcher of the *Orange County Register*, that's when the 24-year-old will address the press.

Meanwhile, there's time to ponder what's been lost. There's no ignoring the 3.31 ERA and 63 strikeouts that Ohtani racked up in his first 51.2 major league innings. Nor is there any forgetting all the 100 mph fastballs and physics-defying splitters and sliders that he threw.

Under normal circumstances, it would be an utter tragedy that such a talented pitcher might be sidelined for over a year. But in this case, it's a mere bummer.

Ohtani can, after all, still do this:

Pictured here are the two home runs that he hit in a 9-3 win over the Texas Rangers on Wednesday night, mere hours after he was advised to have surgery to repair the ulnar collateral ligament in his right elbow. Those were part of a 4-for-4 night in which he also walked and stole a base.

It was the ultimate reminder that—oh yeah—this dude who came to Major League Baseball with a reputation as the Babe Ruth of Japan can pitch *and* hit.

Since one of those fates is now on thin ice, Ohtani and the Angels would be wise to lean into the other one.

It sucks that they've even found themselves at this fork in the road. And yet, how this might have been avoided is a question with no easy answers.

As Jeff Passan of Yahoo Sports reported, there was a red flag planted in Ohtani's UCL before the Angels even signed him away from Japan's Nippon Ham Fighters in December 2017. But that was never an excuse for them to back off. Ohtani's upside as a two-way star was made perfectly clear by the .859 OPS and 2.52 ERA that he put up in Japan. His cheap acquisition cost (about \$22.3 million) amounted to virtually zero downside to taking a shot on him.

Of course, the Angels could have put the kibosh on Ohtani's rookie season as soon as his troublesome UCL put him on the disabled list in June.

But nobody recommended Tommy John surgery at the time, and the Angels were very much in the American League playoff picture. If Tommy John would knock him off the mound for the rest of 2018 and all of 2019 either way, it made sense to give rest and rehabilitation a shot first.

So if anybody's planning on 1.21-gigawatting their way back to the past to fix this, they'd better bring some magic UCL-healing pixie dust. Otherwise, good luck influencing a different outcome.

All Ohtani and the Angels can do now is minimize the risk of his elbow going kablooey again. Unfortunately, that's all but impossible. As Russell A. Carleton of Baseball Prospectus found in 2013, nothing predicts future elbow injuries like past elbow injuries.

As it is, pitching has already been reduced from a full-time job to Ohtani's side hustle. After amassing 456 innings in Nippon Professional Baseball between 2014 and 2016, ankle and elbow injuries have limited him to 77 professional innings since then.

Meanwhile, his bat is flourishing.

Ohtani compiled a .981 OPS and slammed 30 homers in his final two seasons in Japan. Despite looking in over his head against major league pitching in spring training, he's carried that success over to the States to a remarkable degree.

Through 82 games and 279 plate appearances, Ohtani has a .946 OPS and 18 homers. The latter works out to a 36-homer pace over a 162-game season. The former equates to a 155 OPS+. That ranks 12th among rookies since integration in 1947, right between 2001 Albert Pujols and 2007 Ryan Braun.

The really scary part is that Ohtani is only *now* finding his groove. He had a .907 OPS when he went on the DL in June. He has a .979 OPS since returning on July 3.

This coincides with him being better at getting under the ball and generating a good launch angle:

- **Before:** 7.6-degree average
- **After:** 17.0-degree average

This means more balls in the air, and that's where Ohtani's raw power can do the rest. He averages 97.7 mph exit velocity on fly balls and line drives, which is higher than that of J.D. Martinez and Khris Davis.

Throw in good patience (see his 10.4 walk percentage), and you get an ideal slugger. If Ohtani were to be kept on the track he's on now full-time, there's little doubt that his future would contain one or more 40-homer seasons.

Tommy John or no, it would indeed be a damn shame to let his golden right arm to go completely to waste in the future. *Maybe*, just *maybe* he could stick to hitting except for when the Angels need him to moonlight as a late-inning fireman.

But since the logistics of that would be a nightmare—how and when would he warm up?—the best thing the Angels can do is groom Ohtani for right field.

Depending on what happens with Kole Calhoun's 2020 option, there might be an opening out there after 2019. Ohtani's arm is perfect for the job. And as the second-fastest Angels regular behind only Mike Trout, his speed would also make him a difference-maker on defense.

It would be a better story if Ohtani came back from his elbow woes and fulfilled his destiny as Major League Baseball's first two-way superstar since the Bambino himself. But he and the Angels will be pushing their luck if they keep insisting on a pitching career. Knowing that he could be one of the game's great sluggers and perhaps one of the game's great right fielders, why bother?

The bat works better than the arm. Take a hint.

FROM THE NEW YORK POST

Angels should stay the course with Shohei Ohtani

By Joel Sherman

We love black and white, yes or no. Give us a binary choice, remove ambiguity, don't make us think so much.

Thus, once it was revealed Shohei Ohtani needs Tommy John surgery to at least continue the pitching portion of his career, a renewed chorus of "told you so" arose, joined by louder calls that he needs to pick a lane — pitch or hit.

But why?

Ohtani just turned 24. Even if it were revealed in two years that he, indeed, cannot do both, fine, he will be just 26. Aaron Judge's first full Yankee season last year was at 25.

There are no indicators that the combination of being both a DH and starter for the Angels led to the torn elbow ligament. He is just another starter, 24 or younger, who needs Tommy John surgery. Like Jacob deGrom or Matt Harvey or Patrick Corbin or Alex Reyes or Danny Duffy or ...

Maybe it will turn out Ohtani can't do both. But that was not proven this year. In 2018, Ohtani translated spectacularly from Japan. He is not the best pitcher or hitter in the majors. But when he performed either role this year he was among the best.

In 10 starts, the righty's ERA was 28 percent better than MLB average factoring in league and parks. In 279 plate appearances, the lefty slugger's OPS was 55 percent better than league average.

If you want him to stop doing one or the other, it is because you are uncomfortable straying beyond black or white, yes or no. Because the coming attraction of what is possible with Ohtani was not a gimmick, it was a competitive advantage for the Angels. What was theory when he signed became evident in 2018: Ohtani is exceptional at both disciplines.

Which is why in a phone call when I asked Angels GM Billy Eppler if the plan is for Ohtani to continue to hit and start, he said, "Yes, correct." Why? "Because it is extremely impactful what he provides to a team. We watched him dominate a game on the mound a few times and we watched him carry us with offensive production in games."

After giving Ohtani a few days to fully absorb the prognosis of his elbow and for the Angels to gather more information of what a rehab for a pitcher/hitter might look like, Eppler is scheduled to meet Monday with Ohtani, who still has to decide if he wants the procedure. Should Ohtani have the surgery there is belief he could be well enough to serve as the Angels' DH for most, if not all, of the 2019 season.

Rather than send Ohtani to their minor league facility in Arizona as they did after Tyler Skaggs and Andrew Heaney had Tommy John surgery — at ages 23 and 25, by the way — the Angels would set up a pitching rehab situation mostly around the team for Ohtani, who would not pitch next year no matter if he hits or not. The hope would be that by late in the year Ohtani was throwing some simulated games or taking a quick hop to Arizona to appear in Instructional League games and that would position him to be a fully functioning starter by spring training 2020.

"We will have to take the advice of the physicians that treat him," Eppler said. "And we will pivot and adjust where appropriate based on the recommendations, but he will continue on the same path as coming out of spring training with us."

That was 10 starts and 279 plate appearances ago. That was when we still wondered if Ohtani could do both at a high level in the majors. The mystery is gone. Ohtani proved elite at both.

Will that continue? Who knows? But only the need to follow a familiar path would motivate the Angels and Ohtani off of the dual role because this unique route proved to be both fascinating and successful.

What would it take to trade for Mike Trout? Not enough

By Joel Sherman

The 2019 pitching loss of Shohei Ohtani and another lost season has renewed questions whether the Angels should trade Mike Trout, with the idea the team could be better with all they get for the game's

best player and the money saved, rather than just sticking with a player who can be a free agent after the 2020 season.

It shares similarities to the Mets' decision with Jacob deGrom, who also could be free after the 2020 campaign. The Mets have a win-now rotation, but are lacking in other areas, in part because their highest-ceiling position player (Yoenis Cespedes) will miss a good deal of next season.

The Angels have a win-now positional core with Trout, Ohtani (as a DH), Justin Upton, Andrelton Simmons and Kole Calhoun (.914 OPS since coming off the DL in mid-June). But they are lacking elsewhere, notably because their highest-ceiling starter (Ohtani) will not pitch next year. Just remember a position player's prime (Trout) is easier to predict in performance and health than that of a pitcher (deGrom).

"We have no interest in trading Mike Trout," Angels GM Billy Eppler said.

Though you can see the broad wisdom in trying this, it would be a unique trade in MLB history. Great players have been dealt in their primes, but almost always for financially motivated reasons. Think Babe Ruth, Jimmie Foxx, Rickey Henderson, Ken Griffey Jr., Alex Rodriguez and Giancarlo Stanton.

That would not be the case here. The Angels clearly have the finances and desire to retain Trout if he wants to stay. The worry is that the fanatical Eagles fan will want to return closer to his original home and, say, sign with the Phillies in two years. But he has given no indication that is his desire and already has signed a long-term deal with the Angels once.

You would be trading someone on the arc to be among the greatest players of all time, in his prime (27) for unknowns. Going into the 2014 season (via Baseball America), the Twins had the first (Byron Buxton), sixth (Miguel Sano), 45th (Alex Meyer) and 52nd (Kohl Stewart) prospects in the game. That would have felt like the kind of haul you should get for Trout. It would have been a disaster.

Also, no executive wants it on their ledger that they traded the best player in franchise history in his prime when he has done nothing but play great while not causing an iota of trouble.

"In Mike, we know we have the best player in baseball and one of best people I've ever been around," Eppler said. "You don't enjoy it until you are around him every day and you don't capture all that he is unless you are around every day."

FROM THE SCORE

Report: Angels plan to offer contract extension to Trout

By Michael Bradburn

In what is shaping up to be a pivotal offseason for the Los Angeles Angels, the club reportedly plans to offer a contract extension to their superstar center fielder Mike Trout, according to Ken Rosenthal of The Athletic.

Trout's current contract doesn't expire until after the 2020 season, having signed a six-year, \$144.5-million extension prior to the 2014 season to avoid his arbitration-eligible years and three seasons worth of free agency. Trout is owed \$33.25 million over each of the next two years. The 27-year-old accrued the six years of service time necessary to become a free agent prior to the current 2018 campaign.

The offer could be around \$320 million over eight years, according to Rosenthal. If Trout's camp rejected the offer, general manager Billy Eppler and the rest of the front office could explore the possibility of a trade.

Despite having the three-time AL MVP still in his prime, the Angels are set to miss the postseason for the fourth straight year and sixth time since Trout's AL Rookie of the Year campaign in 2012. At 68-72, Los Angeles currently sits in fourth place in the AL West, though it does own a positive run differential.

With a declining Albert Pujols, who is still owed \$87 million over the next three seasons, and an oft-injured starting rotation, which hasn't featured a pitcher with more than 200 innings pitched since Garrett Richards in 2015, the Angels find themselves in a precarious position. Heading into the 2019 season, in addition to pitching, Los Angeles will likely need to address holes at catcher, first base, and possibly the outfield. Even further, reports of longtime manager Mike Scioscia parting with the club surfaced earlier this year.

While Richards is set for free agency this offseason, the roster will stay ostensibly the same heading into 2019 and through 2020. However, along with Trout's contract expiring after 2020, the contracts of Andrelton Simmons, Zack Cozart, Justin Upton, Tyler Skaggs, and Matt Shoemaker are all set to come off the books.