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Shohei Ohtani rewrote our understanding of what one player can do



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Back in 2018, before [Los Angeles Angels](#) two-way star [Shohei Ohtani](#) rewrote our understanding of the limitations of athletic performance, I was one of the skeptics. That spring in the Cactus League, when all anyone could talk about was Ohtani's arrival from Japan to join [Major League Baseball](#), I kept asking the same question: "Isn't he just going to get hurt?"

My doubt had less to do with Ohtani than with historical precedent. If human beings could do this, if they could hit and pitch at the game's highest level in the modern era of baseball, then someone would have done it already. To survive as a hitter requires a remarkable amount of technical skill and an elevated capacity of mental fortitude. But the physical strain of pitching is even more daunting. "When you pitch, your shoulder and elbow bleeds," [Mets](#) manager Buck Showalter said earlier this year. Every season, starting pitchers damage their limbs attempting to answer the bell every fifth day — and they weren't trying to compete as a hitter during the other four days. Ohtani, I figured, would succumb to this reality.

For a little while, I was right. Near the end of his rookie season, Ohtani tore the ulnar collateral ligament in his right elbow. He underwent Tommy John surgery and pitched only once over the next two seasons. But then I was proved very, very wrong. It is unlikely baseball fans will ever again see a sustained performance like they witnessed from Ohtani since his return to the mound in 2021. In part, because Ohtani graced such absurd heights. And, in part, because Ohtani established a new upper register for what is possible for one player to accomplish on a baseball field. If anyone recreates these feats, in the years to come, you will only believe it possible because you saw Ohtani.

A curtain fell on the one-man show on Wednesday, when the Angels announced an examination had revealed another tear in Ohtani's UCL. His arm had been bothering him for a while. This was far from an ideal outcome. He will not throw another pitch in 2023. Ohtani will spend the coming days gathering information about how to rehabilitate the injury. A second round of Tommy John surgery would likely prevent him from pitching in 2024. His impending free agency will become more complicated, as teams may shy away from a \$500 million commitment for a player with a twice-wrecked elbow — although, assuredly, teams will still pay great sums just to employ him as a hitter.

How much money Ohtani makes has always mattered less to him than what he can accomplish on the diamond. He eschewed significant riches to leave Japan early, intending to conquer baseball's toughest league in a way no player before him had. And after that initial hiccup, Ohtani did more than conquer the sport. He expanded the horizons of its viewers.

How else to explain what he has done in these past three seasons? Ohtani won his first American League MVP award in 2021, bashing 46 homers while making 23 starts with a 3.18 ERA. A year later, all that prevented him from winning the Cy Young award, with a 2.33 ERA and league-leading strikeout rate, was his day job as a hitter, where he slugged 34 more homers with an .875 OPS. After watching [Aaron Judge](#) win MVP last season, Ohtani has made his own chase of 62 homers in 2023. Even with a torn UCL, he still leads the American League with 44 home runs, 78 walks and a 1.069 OPS. He has become the best hitter in the sport — a year after he might have been the best pitcher. FanGraphs pegged Ohtani's value last season at 9.6 wins above replacement; one rival executive, who requested anonymity in order to speak freely about a player on another team, suggested he was probably worth closer to 18.

But evaluating Ohtani with data almost misses the point. To watch him is to marvel. Not just at the tape-measure homers. Not just at his ability to learn new pitches, seemingly on the fly. He plays the game as if on a relentless quest for its new frontiers, even when his health is at risk, even when his team is falling apart around him. Last week, during a game against the [Texas Rangers](#), Ohtani blasted a first-inning home run. A couple innings later, he chopped a grounder to third base. It looked like a routine play — except Ohtani sprinted out of the box for an infield single. Later that night, he did the same thing, only on a ball hit to the shortstop. “He’s always been like that,” manager Phil Nevin said. “That’s a team play. That’s a winning play.”

Those are the plays Ohtani can still make, with his legs and his swing, even with an injured elbow, if he continues to play out the string for the Angels. What he will not be able to do is something so many within baseball questioned at the outset, before he changed the landscape. He will not be able to pitch and hit. But he was, at least for a little while. It was unprecedented. It was hard to fathom. And, at least for now, it is over.

The limitations of the human body remain undefeated. In this case, everyone loses.

(Top photo of [Shohei Ohtani](#) leaving his start on Wednesday: Ronald Martinez / Getty Images)

Baseball came up with the “Buster Posey Rule,” long overdue, when a star was the casualty.

Baseball has to try to figure out what to do about that ulnar collateral ligament. This is getting obscene.

Perhaps players need to be allowed to take HGH while rehabbing from Tommy John Surgery. Pump the damn stuff into the ligament itself. I believe Andy Pettite got caught using PED’s after his surgery.

Not so long ago baseball was wracked with rotator cuff surgeries, but other than Nestor Cortez, who does a variety of arm angle stuff, rotator cuff is not a problem anymore. I have read that pitchers were taught deliveries that prevented what caused rotator cuff wear. But no delivery fix will stop ulnar collateral ligament tears, especially given how pitchers are taught to snap off breaking balls.

We need a “Shohei Ohtani” rule change!