



By Bruce Schoenfeld

Bruce Schoenfeld has been writing about baseball for over 30 years.

- Sept. 30, 2023Updated 11:01 a.m. ET

In late August, a few days after the remnants of [Hurricane Hilary hit the Southern California](#) coast as only the second tropical storm there in recorded history, the Los Angeles Angels played a doubleheader at home against the Cincinnati Reds — a regularly scheduled game and a game that had previously been postponed. In the first inning of the opener, Shohei Ohtani came to the plate with a runner on first base. With his first swing, he smashed a fastball 116 miles per hour over the billboards with the Japanese ads in right field and into the stands, a computer-estimated 442 feet away. It was not just Ohtani's 44th home run, the most in the American League at the time; it was an especially prodigious one.

Already that day, Ohtani had worked a perfect top half of the first inning as a pitcher, retiring the three Reds in order. After his home run, he returned to the mound as the American League leader in an assortment of statistical categories. He was both the leader in home runs and the starting pitcher who had held opponents to the lowest batting average, a combination nobody had achieved before. By the end of the day, he would lead in slugging percentage and O.P.S. (on-base plus slugging). He was at or near the top in all sorts of

pitching metrics, too, both traditional and more recently adopted: sixth in earned run average, fifth in strikeouts, third in generating weak contact. He had also allowed the fewest hits per nine innings.

Ohtani's emergence as both an elite pitcher and hitter is a phenomenon as rare as a California hurricane — there has never been anything like him. Since the 2018 season, his first in the majors, Ohtani has mastered the two disciplines, when his body has allowed it. For three seasons, from 2018 through 2020, he pitched a total of just 12 games because of a torn ulnar collateral ligament in his elbow that required surgery but didn't stop him from hitting. In 2021, he was the American League's most valuable player. By most analytical measures, he performed just as well last season. By some, he was even better.

This year was his best yet, perhaps the most remarkable season by an individual in baseball history. It started when he played for Japan in the World Baseball Classic in March, where he recorded the hardest-hit ball of the tournament and tied for the fastest pitch. The first five times he pitched for the Angels, he allowed a total of eight hits, the fewest by a starter to open a season in modern history. After that, he seemed to do something every week that hadn't been seen in years, or ever. Some feats were the obscure sort baseball likes to keep track of, like becoming the first player since 1964 to steal a base and homer in a game that he started on the mound; or his accumulation of especially long home runs. Others were more historic. He was only the second player ever to lead his league in both homers and triples at the All-Star Break, for example. On July 27, he reached an apotheosis of sorts by throwing a one-hit shutout against the Detroit Tigers in the first game of a doubleheader, then hitting two home runs in the second game, another combination without precedent. "In our lifetime, we've never seen anything like it," says Manny Machado, the San Diego Padres' All-Star third baseman. "I didn't believe it when he first came over here, that it would be possible. But he's proven me and a lot of other people wrong."



Shohei Ohtani at Citi Field facing the Mets in August, before suffering a season-ending injury in early September. Credit...David La Spina for The New York Times

When Ohtani arrived from Japan's Nippon Professional Baseball at age 23 in 2018, he already was renowned as a singular talent. A video of his [hitting a ball through the roof of the Tokyo Dome in 2016](#) had been widely circulated. The fact that he excelled at both hitting and pitching (also in 2016, he was chosen for his league's postseason "Best Nine" as its top pitcher *and* designated hitter) had captured the imagination of scouts and executives throughout Major League Baseball. Coveted by essentially every team, he signed a six-year deal with the Angels. It seemed clear that playing with [Mike Trout, baseball's best hitter at the time](#) and a superb center fielder, would increase his chances of winning a World Series. It hasn't worked out that way. In Ohtani's six seasons with the Angels, the team hasn't even managed a winning record. As of 2022, 12 of the 30 teams in the league now qualify for baseball's playoffs, yet the postseason will begin again next week without him. For millions of casual fans, the narrative of his career is playing out offstage.

Ohtani's six-year contract expires at the end of this season. It has been taken for granted by just about everyone that his next one would be the largest in baseball history; after all, the team that signs him would be getting both an ace

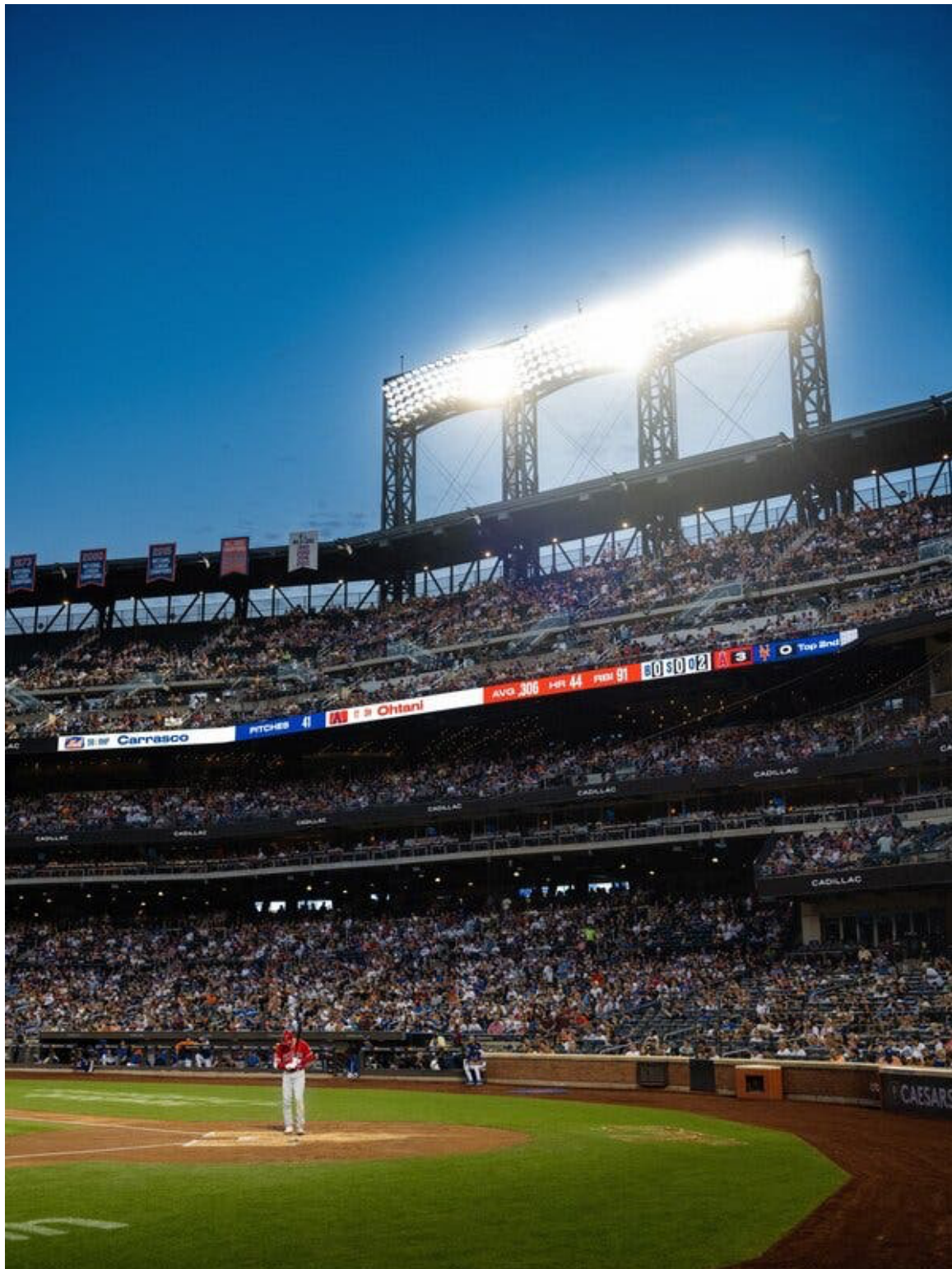
starting pitcher and one of the sport's most productive hitters. But while pitching in that August doubleheader against the Reds, Ohtani left the mound while still facing a batter. That night, it was announced in the media conference room that he had torn the ulnar collateral ligament in his pitching arm for the second time. In mid-September, he underwent another surgical procedure that was designed to allow him to hit next year while his elbow healed. When he would return to pitch remained uncertain.

Perry Minasian, the Angels' general manager, rejected the notion that Ohtani's double workload contributed to the ligament tear. "He obviously performed for multiple years doing what he's done," Minasian said. But with [news of the injury](#), baseball's most pressing question was suddenly no longer where Ohtani would be playing as he blew up the record book over the coming years. Instead, it seemed pertinent to wonder whether his past three seasons had been an anomaly, as fleetingly sensational as a comet lighting up the sky — and if we would ever see anything like them again.

The most famous hitter in baseball history [was also an accomplished pitcher](#) — the best left-hander in the American League — before he was converted into a home-run-hitting outfielder. And really, Babe Ruth didn't become an outfielder so much as a *batter*. He needed to play somewhere in the field because the designated hitter, which is Ohtani's position when he isn't pitching, wouldn't exist for another five decades.

During the 1920s, Ruth put together an unparalleled run of offensive production. Consider his .847 slugging percentage in 1920, his 168 R.B.I.s and 177 runs scored in 1921, his .393 batting average in 1923, his 60 homers for the 1927 "Murderers' Row" Yankees. Before any of that happened, however, he had all but stopped pitching. After coming to New York from Boston following the 1919 season, Ruth pitched in five games over the rest of his career.

Starting pitchers appear in games once every five days or so, but they put in hours of work every day. Even for Ruth, the notion of pitching once or twice a week and then playing the field the rest of the time was preposterous. In recent years, as pitching has become less of an art and more of a science, that attitude has hardened. "Just how demanding it is, and the fatigue level that has to take its toll," Pete Fairbanks of the Tampa Bay Rays, one of baseball's top relievers, told me the day before Ohtani's injury. "It takes a superhuman level of organization and concentration just to get there, let alone sustain it."



Credit...David La Spina for The New York Times

Ohtani's success has changed the conventional wisdom, but only slightly. "We can discuss the merits of trying to develop two-way players," says Rocco

Baldelli, the manager of the Minnesota Twins. “But what he’s capable of — mentally, physically, health-wise, being able to handle all that — is just extraordinary, and it isn’t going to be matched by anyone. I feel pretty comfortable saying that.”

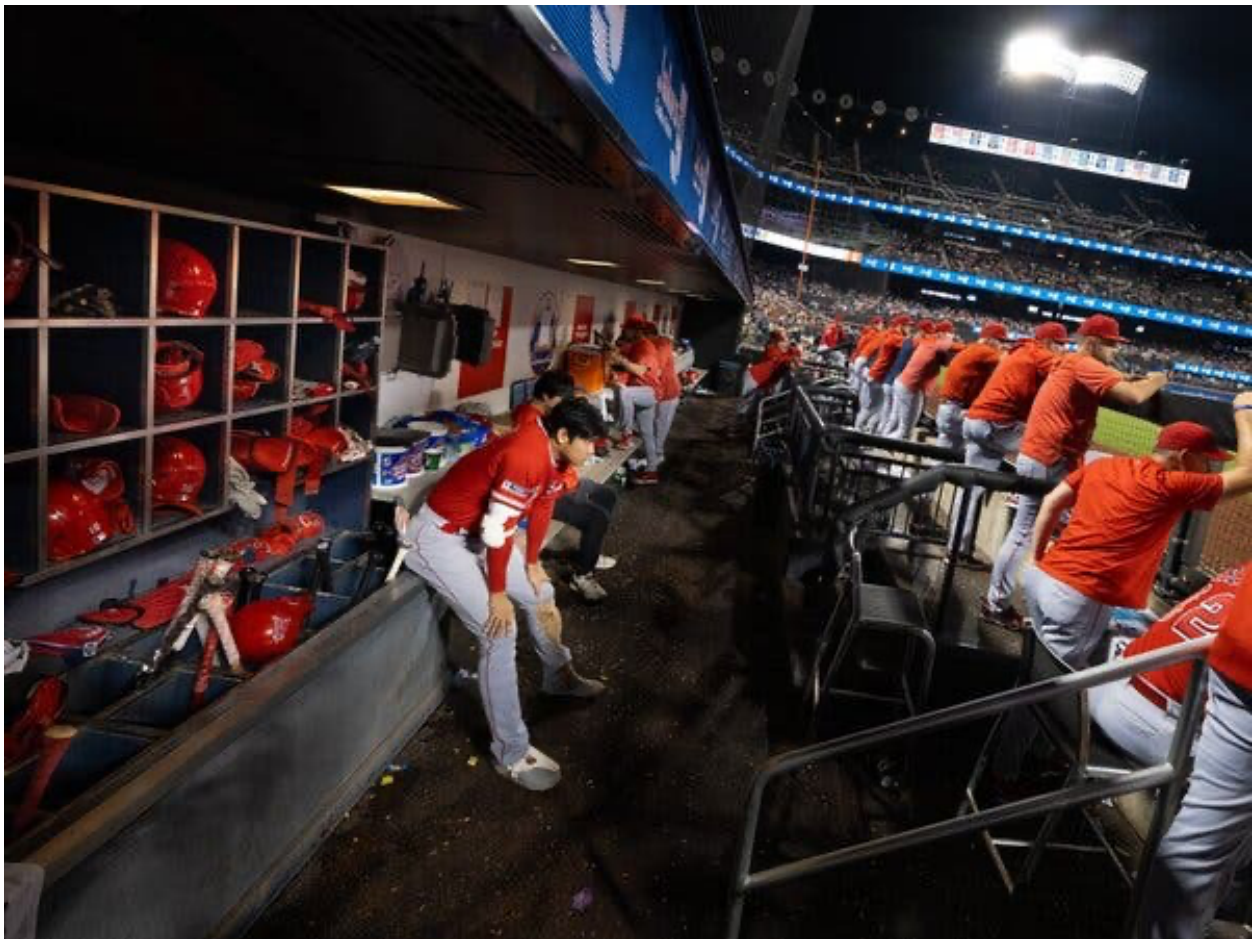
Despite having done it for five seasons in Japan, it took a while for Ohtani to emerge as an elite two-way M.L.B. player. Initially, the Angels tried to ease his transition. Not only did he not bat on the days he pitched, he also skipped the days before and after. In September 2018, he tore his U.C.L. for the first time. He could hit, but he couldn’t pitch for the rest of that season or the following one. He pitched in two games during the pandemic-shortened season of 2020, but struggled.

Ohtani’s ambition has always been to be both baseball’s best pitcher and best hitter. To do that, he needed to get to the plate as often as everyone else. In 2021, the Angels decided to let him hit every day. Ohtani responded with 46 home runs and 100 runs batted in that season. He also tied for the league lead with eight triples (his speed is probably his most overlooked skill). Fully recovered from surgery, he went 9-2, with a 3.18 earned run average. Combined with his offensive output, he was an easy choice as most valuable player. The only reason he didn’t get the award again last season is that the [Yankees’ Aaron Judge hit 62 home runs](#), breaking the American League record. This year, though Ohtani hasn’t pitched for almost two months and stopped hitting for the season in early September after straining a muscle, he is favored to win it again.

There are various reasons Ohtani has been able to combine pitching with hitting like nobody before him. Perhaps the most important is opportunity: Because he had done it in Japan, in a league at roughly the level of the high minors in North America, M.L.B. teams were willing to give him a chance. It also helped that, as a designated hitter, he didn’t need to concern himself with fielding. “Not playing in the outfield makes it easier,” says Rick Rhoden, who pitched in the majors from 1974 to 1989, mostly in the National League, when it didn’t have the D.H. That meant that Rhoden had to hit, and he did — compiling 47 extra-base hits and driving in 75 runs during his career. Unlike the other pitchers, Rhoden would take batting practice with the hitters throughout the season. “You can’t be lax on one or the other,” he says now. “You have to have a routine for both of them. And even with that, the day after you throw, you’re going to be stiff. That would have to bother your hitting.” To ameliorate the stiffness, Ohtani has a special stretching routine.

Ohtani has also made a science out of spending his time as productively as possible. “That may be the most important thing he does,” says Byron Buxton of the Minnesota Twins, who says he studies the habits of other outstanding players. Unlike most hitters, Ohtani rarely takes batting practice on the field, which involves a lot of standing around and watching others hit. He prefers to work in the batting cages underneath the stands, usually taking only a few minutes of soft tosses each day. He has the same routine between starts as most pitchers, including throwing from distances of up to 80 or 90 feet, and doing resistance exercises with elastic bands, but he seems to finish in about half the time as everyone else. He has to — that’s only half his job.

Image



After undergoing surgery to repair the ulnar collateral ligament in his elbow, Ohtani most likely won't be able to pitch before April 2025. Credit...David La Spina for The New York Times

In another attempt to limit unproductive time, Ohtani meets with the media only after he pitches, and then only perfunctorily. In Anaheim, he does not use the conference room, with its rows of waiting chairs and riser in the back for cameras, for fear of seeming overly important. Instead, he and his interpreter,

Ipppei Mizuhara, stand in a narrow corridor on the way to the Angel Stadium kitchen. It is an incongruous scene, the best baseball player of his generation giving his only public statements as dollies rumble past carrying boxes and beer kegs, and electric carts reverse with audible beeps. Reporters mass three and four deep, their arms extended in the hope that their recorders will catch Mizuhara's softly rendered translations.

Whenever Ohtani sits at his locker, which never seems to be for long, it's as if a force field surrounds him. Even teammates are wary of intruding. During more than a week's worth of Angels games this season, I didn't see anyone approach him. The problem isn't language, though Ohtani uses his interpreter for all official interactions. "His English is good," the Angels catcher Chad Wallach insisted to me. "We can communicate." Was it good enough that Wallach could say something to Ohtani as he walked past, one of those lighthearted quips that serve as a kind of connective tissue among teammates? "Yeah, I think so," Wallach said, after considering the idea; clearly, it was something he had never done. "He's a nice guy," Wallach added. "But he's usually working on something, either on the hitting side or the pitching side. So he just isn't around very much. And if he's rushing around, we're not going to stop him in his tracks."

Even for an elite athlete, Ohtani is unusually competitive. "Being a major-league player, a good major-league player, is not enough for him," says Andrew Bailey, a coach with the San Francisco Giants who was with the Angels when Ohtani arrived in 2018. "He literally wants to be the best player of all time." Following the 2021 season, he spent time at Driveline Baseball, a facility in Kent, Wash., that advertises "data-driven baseball performance training" for pitchers and hitters. By the time he left, I was told, he held the facility record for both the fastest pitch and the hardest-hit ball. "But he wanted all the records," says Alex Cobb, a former Angels teammate now with the Giants who was there working on his pitching delivery. During one session, the players were doing box jumps, leaping onto an elevated surface from a standing start. Ohtani asked someone to find out the highest anyone had ever done — not at Driveline, but *anywhere*. "He sincerely wanted to know what the world record was so he could break it," Cobb says. "It wasn't boastful or anything like that. He was just curious. It was, 'You know, I think I could probably beat the record if I set my mind to it.'"



Credit...David La Spina for The New York Times

While attending high school in Japan, Ohtani scripted his life and career from ages 18 to 42. The peculiarly specific timeline (Age 24: Throw a no-hitter and 25 wins; Age 31: First daughter is born) includes winning three World Series before retiring from baseball at age 40. Despite his accomplishments, he has fallen behind schedule. With an eye to extending his greatness, some medical professionals have advised Ohtani to skip the 2024 season entirely and give his arm an optimized chance to heal. (It may be relevant too that his worst years as a hitter, 2019 and 2020, were the two when he wasn't also pitching; some observers on those teams felt that the extra time he had to focus on his swing was counterproductive.) But given Ohtani's ambitions, that scenario seems unlikely. He will sign with some team this winter, almost certainly one with a good chance of advancing deep into the playoffs, and one that will allow him to pitch whenever he's ready. Come April, he will be back in a lineup.

At bat, Ohtani looks like nobody else in baseball. Standing motionless, he holds the knob of the bat up high, about the level of his helmet, and points the barrel toward the sky. When the pitch comes, he often corkscrews his body with such velocity that he appears to be falling out of the batter's box. When

fooled by a curveball, he occasionally resembles a Little Leaguer, and not a particularly good one. “He flails at pitches,” Phil Nevin, his manager, says.

That willingness to look terrible at the plate is rooted in confidence. If he wanted to, Ohtani could hit like his countryman Ichiro Suzuki, who retired in 2019. Suzuki amassed more than 3,000 hits, a vast majority of them singles, and rarely struck out. But as baseball has evolved, the ability to hit the ball both hard and far has taken on increased prominence. It’s no accident that Ohtani excels in more recently derived metrics such as O.P.S. and average exit velocity. With each pitch, Ohtani is acquiring data — about the break of a particular off-speed pitch, for example. Then he swings as hard as he can on the next one, even with two strikes. Unlike more strategic hitters, he isn’t willing to temper his swing and sacrifice the possibility of an extra-base hit just to increase his odds of getting his bat on the ball.

‘It takes a superhuman level of organization and concentration just to get there, let alone sustain it.’

If he strikes out three times in a game, which occasionally happens, he remains impassive. Partly that’s because he’s reluctant to show his emotions, but he also understands what he’s trying to accomplish. “That all-in result — that 490-foot home run, that 120-mile-an-hour exit velocity — it comes with a trade-off,” says the Reds’ Joey Votto, one of baseball’s most thoughtful hitters. “Nothing is free, and that’s the price he sometimes has to pay.”

By April 2025, which seems to be the earliest that he would next pitch in an M.L.B. game, Ohtani will be nearly 31, an age at which many players start to decline. It’s tempting to wonder what he might do as a hitter if he decides to concentrate on hitting for the latter half of his career. “I think that’s one of the great what-ifs,” Pete Fairbanks says. “If he was convinced to only do one, just how good could he be?”

As usual, Ohtani has been circumspect about his plans for where he might be going next and what he’ll do once he gets there. But his timeline offers a clue to how he perceives himself; on it, all the individual achievements involve pitching. He listed the three no-hitters he planned to throw once he came to North America, and the record he would set for most wins by a Japanese pitcher, and the one for the fastest pitch ever thrown — but there is no

mention of home runs or batting average. And when his agent, Nez Balelo, addressed the media in early September, he was adamant: “There’s not a question in his mind that he’s going to come back and he’s going to continue to do both,” Balelo said. Or, at least, that he would try.

The day after leaving the game with the torn U.C.L., Ohtani traveled with the Angels to New York for a series with the Mets. The day after that, he was in the lineup. He came up with a runner on third and hit a ball 115 miles per hour, harder than all but seven balls he has hit this season. As he stood on second base, the cheers from the Citi Field fans engulfed him. These were Mets fans, no doubt, but they were also baseball fans. They understood what we have been privileged to witness this season, and how evanescent it might have been.



Credit...David La Spina for The New York Times

Bruce Schoenfeld is a frequent contributor to the magazine and the author of “Game of Edges: The Analytics Revolution and the Future of Professional Sports.” **David La Spina** is a photographer in New York City and a former photography editor for the magazine. He has exhibited and published work from three baseball-themed zines with his imprint, Roman Numerals.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/30/magazine/shohei-htani.html>