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# *RISING SON THE DEFECTION OF ICHIRO SUZUKI, A CAREER .353 HITTER, ISN'T SEEN AS ALL BAD NEWS IN JAPAN, IF HE BECOMES A SENSATION WITH THE MARINERS AND BRINGS HONOR TO HIS COUNTRY*

**MICHAEL FARBER**

Ichiro, I wish you have some good business with Sasaki in Seattle.  
--Fan's sentiment expressed in a message book at the Orix BlueWave souvenir shop

Resting snug on her mother's chest against the afternoon chill, Chinatsu Tanaka is a smiling, moon-faced, four-month-old girl who is one chromosome from having been called Ichiro Tanaka. Her mother, Aki, admits she rooted fervently for a boy so she could have named him after her favorite baseball player and didactic device, Ichiro Suzuki. No fairweather fan--she hasn't abandoned the idea of trying for a baby Ichiro even though she's 41--Aki is on maternity leave from her job teaching English in a junior high school, a break that affords her the luxury of congregating with 20 other fans outside the parking lot of the Orix BlueWave's practice facility in Kobe on this blustery Tuesday. When instructing her students, she often uses Ichiro's name in sample sentences.

Ichiro is a good baseball player.  
Where does Ichiro live?

Ichiro is, indeed, a textbook player--a seven-time Pacific League batting champion with gap power, a fleet base runner, a polished rightfielder and, now, the first Japanese position player to move to the North American major leagues, with the Seattle Mariners. Aki, with Chinatsu and a homemade sign declaring her affection for Ichiro in hand, would like to tell her hero about namesakes and junior high English classes and her faith in his ability to thump big league lefthanders, but in the two weeks since she has been keeping a vigil at the BlueWave's facility, he has yet to favor the fans with a word. This day is no different. Ichiro wheels a gray, bite-sized Nissan through the gate and into a parking space. Seemingly deaf to screams of "Ichiro-san!" he strides off, around a corner, gone.

"At first I felt sad when he signed with the Mariners," says Aki, "but now I want to go to Seattle to cheer him. I like his dream. His dream is bigger and bigger."

The reaction in Japan to Ichiro's imminent departure has been a touching mixture of barely concealed pride and barely expressed sorrow, the emotions of a parent driving his only child off to college. There's no more reason for the Japanese to be angry with the 27-year-old Ichiro for leaving than there is for a father to be angry with his son for growing up. Japan has been on a first-name basis with Ichiro for years--he dropped his last name, Suzuki, in 1994, the year he had a Japanese Leagues-record 210 hits--and his signing of a three-year contract with the Mariners, reportedly for between \$15 and 18 million, has been treated as if it were a family matter. He's the special son, the perennial leader in the All-Star balloting, a cottage industry of endorsements, a player so admired that the yellow Nike Air Max '95 model sneakers he favored touched off a minor wave of Air Jordanesque shoe-jackings (oi hagi) by roving gangs in nearby Osaka.

Righthander Hideo Nomo's early big league triumphs with the Los Angeles Dodgers and righty Kazuhiro Sasaki's 37 saves and American League Rookie of the Year performance last season with Seattle stirred a nation, but Nomo and Sasaki are pitchers, not every-day icons. If the lefthanded-hitting Ichiro bats .300 for the Mariners, he will reflect well on Japanese baseball and, by extension, Japan. If he fails, well, that's inconceivable. The national conversation, played out in Japanese newspapers, concerns the degree of Ichiro's stardom in the U.S., not whether he'll be a star at all.

"There's no doubt he'll succeed," says Isao O'Jimi, a New York Mets scout in Japan. "Defensively he's already one of the top players when compared to major leaguers. The same with his speed. If you hit .300 in the States, you're a real good player, right? Ichiro's first year I think he'll hit at least .280, and more than .300 his second year." Stronger praise comes from Mets manager Bobby Valentine, who saw Suzuki play while managing in Japan five years ago. "He's one of the top five players in the world," says Valentine. "He's the real thing."

The discussion in Japan has sweated the relatively small stuff: Ichiro's hitting technique, his mental toughness, the rigors of major league travel, the new pitchers he'll have to study, the adjustments to a new language and culture he will have to make. The central issue has been avoided like Ichiro himself at the plate with a 3-and-0 count and first base empty. The question shouldn't be how well will Ichiro do in Seattle, but how well will Japanese baseball do without Ichiro--and the other stars likely to follow him? Put it this way: Is Japanese baseball on its way to becoming a branch of MLB Inc., a glorified minor league? "With every player who goes over," says Robert Whiting, author of the brilliant 1989 study of baseball in Japan, *You Gotta Have Wa*, "the Japanese grip on their own game becomes less firm."

"This might be good for Ichiro, but it's a tragedy for the Japanese professional leagues to lose their best and most popular player," says Masaru Ikei, political science professor emeritus at Keio University in Tokyo and a rabid fan of the Fukuoka Daiei Hawks. "This is just like hockey in Russia. The best players all went to the NHL, and most of the teams in their pro league lost popularity."

Ichiro's defection, for what may amount to little more than a small bump in pay--Orix paid him 530 million yen (\$4.8 million) in 2000--probably would be devastating if not for the solid underpinnings of Japanese baseball. At the grassroots level more than 4,100 high schools and colleges have teams. Ichiro, who joins seven Japanese pitchers on major league rosters, said last week through an interpreter, "I go, but another star soon will replace me. This is good for the younger generation."

Japan has 12 big league teams (each also has a minor league affiliate) that are split into the Central and Pacific leagues, offering a brand of baseball rooted in fundamentals, a stable game that definitely won't have a work stoppage in 2002. (The last time Japan canceled games wasn't due to a tiff over revenue sharing or free-agent rights; it was because of World War II.) There are difficulties unique to Japanese baseball--the disparity between the Central League and the weaker Pacific, the 1950s Yankees-like sway over the game wielded by the Yomiuri Giants, middling facilities compared to the new palaces dotting the U.S. big league landscape, a milquetoast players' association that didn't win its members the right to representation by an agent until four weeks ago--but it's hardly about to wither.

"One thing Japanese baseball has in its favor is that some of its players aren't hungry," says O'Jimi. "A mediocre player can make \$1 million. To have that much money without having to take the risks of going to another country is enough for most players. For great ones like Ichiro, who have done everything here"--Ichiro batted .387 in 2000, after a late-season muscle pull in his rib cage ended his assault on .400--"the challenge of the next level might take them to the States."

Yomiuri may already be taking steps to douse some of those competitive embers. Multiyear contracts are rare in Japan, but according to the influential daily Nikkan Sports, the Giants plan to offer a six-year, \$40 million contract to 26-year-old Hideki Matsui, an outfielder who last season hit .316 with 42 home runs and 108 RBIs over Japan's 135-game schedule. "Ichiro's signing is actually good for Japanese baseball," says Nobuhisa Ito, who directs the Japanese Professional Baseball League's international affairs. "It forces us to make more realistic decisions. In business in Japan it's often sentiment first, then business. That has made us a fat people. We have to lose the weight. Now we are heading in a different direction."

The decision by Orix, a leasing company that owns the BlueWave, to sell Ichiro's rights to Seattle is certainly one with which major league small market clubs can identify. Kobe is a western port city of 1.5 million, and the BlueWave is a middle-of-the-road team. (Think Pittsburgh Pirates with shorter fences.) Ichiro was one season from free agency--a Japanese player needs nine full years of service--and he told Orix he would bolt after 2001, either to another team in Japan or, like Sasaki last winter, to North America. Faced with a situation similar to the one that induced the Montreal Expos to ship Pedro Martinez to the Boston Red Sox in 1997 and a teetering Japanese economy, Orix agreed to "post" Ichiro, opening a four-day window for sealed bids from major league clubs. The Mariners, whose principal owner is Nintendo president Hiroshi Yamauchi, trumped a handful of competitors with a \$13.125 million bid that, upon its acceptance on Nov. 9, earned them a 30-day window during which to negotiate with Ichiro.

Ichiro is the first native Japanese player to leave under the so-called posting system, an agreement between Major League Baseball and the Japanese Leagues reached in the aftermath of the New York Yankees' signing of Hideki Irabu in 1997. The Yankees obtained the rights to deal with Irabu from the San Diego Padres, who held exclusive negotiating rights to Irabu through an agreement with his Japanese club, the Chiba Lotte Marines. To foreclose on a system that might have provided big league clubs with a pipeline to Japanese players through cozy team-to-team relationships, the commissioner's offices in the two countries devised posting--over the objection of the Japanese players' association.

"If Japanese baseball people are worried about their game becoming a farm system to the major leagues, the posting system will only accelerate the trend," says Peter Miller, who represents the Major League Baseball Players Association in Japan, where he has lived for more than two decades. He's the son of former players' association executive director Marvin Miller. "This is a bonanza for Japanese clubs. Financially strapped teams will start doing it more often. Instead of opposing a posting"--a Japanese team isn't obliged to honor a player's request to be posted--"they're going to be pushing it."

Ichiro had been asking out since playing against touring major leaguers in the the autumn of 1996. "I wanted a change of circumstances in my life," Ichiro said last week. "I saw these good American players, and I wanted to play against them. Every time I would ask, Orix would say, 'No chance.'"

His yearning only intensified after a spring-training tutorial with the Mariners in 1999. He returned from that stint with some four-letter Anglicisms, a near-perfect "Wassup?" and a scraggly beard that further distinguished him in Japan's button-down baseball world. Ichiro is the upright nail that refuses to be hammered down. He shags fly balls with behind-the-back catches. Warming up between innings, he often shows off his arm by throwing across the outfield to the leftfielder. He's just as distinctive at the plate, cocking his bat toward the pitcher like Luke Skywalker preparing for a light-saber duel and then sweeping it into a hitting position when the pitcher starts his windup. Ichiro plays to the crowd and sometimes with the crowd. While his manager interminably argued a call last season against the Nippon Ham Fighters, Ichiro charmed the Nippon fans in the rightfield seats by playing catch with them.

On bustling Flower Street in Kobe stands a secular shrine to Ichiro: the BlueWave souvenir store. One third of the merchandise is dedicated to a player who won't be back next season. There are Ichiro cups, key chains, baseballs, action figures, jerseys, T-shirts, posters, cell-phone headsets, wristbands, stickers, calendars, notebooks, biographies, pins, memo pads, good-luck symbols, towels, postcards and flags. (Since Ichiro was posted, the store manager says sales have increased tenfold.) The Mariners are the only other team whose wares are on display. There is a small table with Seattle gimcracks and the message book in which customers have written nothing but warm, fuzzy thoughts on Ichiro's imminent departure. A monitor shows a continuous video loop of Ichiro's press conference, during which Mariners president Chuck Armstrong expresses confidence in Ichiro. With a three-year investment of more than \$28 million--\$13.125 to Orix, at least \$15 million to Ichiro--Armstrong had better be right.

Seattle general manager Pat Gillick, who has seen Ichiro play only on tape, calls him a "Kenny Lofton-Johnny Damon type," but Ichiro, who probably will bat first or second for the Mariners, doesn't have Lofton's whippet body. Ichiro's 5'11", 175-pound frame looks bigger than advertised. He's thick through the haunches and has rippling muscles in his thighs.

On the afternoon that he sped past Aki and Chinatsu Tanaka and the other fans outside the practice facility, he ran, threw, stretched and lifted weights for four hours. He had business in Nagoya the next day, but he made it back to the BlueWave site for his workout, arriving at 10:30 p.m., something he does occasionally anyway to dodge the media. Ichiro finished his running close to midnight. "Sometimes I am nervous, sometimes anxious," Ichiro said of his new big league adventure, "but I want to challenge a new world."

By having the temerity to leave, Ichiro-san--truly a name player--is challenging the old one.

COLOR PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPHS BY V.J. LOVERO WHO'DA THUNK IT? In early 1999, Ichiro made a spring training guest appearance with the major league team that 21 months later would sign him.

COLOR PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPHS BY V.J. LOVERO

TWO COLOR PHOTOS: TAKEO TANUMA GUY AND DOLLS Ichiro has a Jordanesque following in Japan, inspiring artistic young fans and action figures that mimic his stance.

The reaction in Japan to Ichiro's departure has been a mixture of barely concealed pride and barely expressed sorrow.

In Japan's button-down baseball world, Ichiro is the upright nail that refuses to be hammered down.

SEP 17, 2001

## *ITCHING FOR ICHIRO*

**RICK REILLY**

The next time you think your job sucks, consider the 47 Japanese journalists who gather each day at the foot of a mute god--the Seattle Mariners' Ichiro Suzuki.

He's the fastest man in baseball with the best outfield arm playing for the winningest team, and he doesn't speak to them. He leads the major leagues in batting, is on pace to break a dozen records and has set Japan ablaze, and he doesn't speak to them.

"What we are doing is not journalism," says Hideki Okuda of Sports Nippon. "I feel very sad about this."

"There are so many of them," says Ichiro, who's embarrassed by the horde wanting to talk only to him, "and only one of me."

Occasionally Ichiro speaks to one Japanese writer--the pool reporter, Keizo Konishi of the Kyodo News--but only if that writer adheres to strict protocol. The gaggle of Japanese reporters submits their questions to Konishi and then gather together in the corner of the clubhouse and watch breathlessly as, 30 feet away, Konishi timidly loiters near Ichiro, who faces into his locker.

When at last Ichiro signals, Konishi tiptoes up, squats respectfully and whispers the questions into the great man's ear. But Ichiro, being a very humble man, answers in only the tiniest of morsels designed to paint himself in the palest light possible. Quotes like "This does not matter" and "Only the team counts" and "It is not my position to answer such a thing."

After three or four minutes Konishi rises, bows slightly and trudges back to the huddled mass, bearing no fruit. "Ichiro says, 'This is not the time to think of that,'" he reports, and 46 faces fall like souffles at a bass drum recital.

The Japanese reporters left their wives and kids in February to live in Phoenix and then Seattle hotels, putting in 14-hour days, attending every Mariners game. They have traded bento boxes for Happy Meals. They are here to record the thoughts of the man who was named the most recognizable person in their country, just ahead of the emperor. And he doesn't speak to them.

They fantasize about a day when they can ask him one question, face-to-face. Would they ask if he ever has the desire to snap a nude picture of himself and thus collect the rumored \$2 million offer from a Japanese publishing company for such a shot? Would they ask how a 160-pound rookie sprite can become, according to Texas Rangers catcher Ivan Rodriguez, "the best player in the big leagues"?

Would they ask about his glamorous marriage to Yumiko, a former TV sports anchor? Or his insatiable desire for autographs? (He desperately wants Wayne Gretzky's and Tiger Woods's.) Or his being the only man in baseball with simply his first name on his back? Or why he speaks to all the American press but to only one of them? Or the reports by the Japanese tabloid Friday of his infidelity?

No, no, no. These questions are indelicate. "We must be very, very careful not to offend him," says Konishi, "or he may cut us off completely."

In July he and Seattle closer Kazuhiro Sasaki did just that for a week, after Japanese paparazzi got in Ichiro's way as he tried to back out of his garage and one photographer tried to enter Sasaki's town house complex by bribing the gatekeeper. Now the 47 tread carefully, like a Hitchcock character through a roomful of birds. Yet their editors howl for stuff to fill their daily Ichiro spreads, so the writers report the exact time he entered the dugout. They produce charts on his at bats. When Yumiko went to one exhibition game, a Japanese writer reported that Ichiro was "roused" by her and had 21 hits in 31 batting practice pitches. Film at 11!

What torments the 47 most is that after they leave, Ichiro suddenly becomes Carrot Top. He does imitations. Yelps Snoop Dogg lyrics. Walks up to opposing Latin catchers and asks, "Que pasa?" He's loved by teammates, who call him the Wizard. They wear T-shirts that read HE'LL FIND A WAY. The other day, in Baltimore, they stole his clothes, leaving him only a Hooters' waitress uniform to wear on the plane home. He vamped the whole way.

But when the Japanese reporters are around, he goes back to doing his impression of a rock. Zen koan: What is the sound of two hands typing nothing? Yet they carry on, undaunted, ever hopeful. "I know that someday I will get an interview," says Okuda. "Perhaps when he retires."

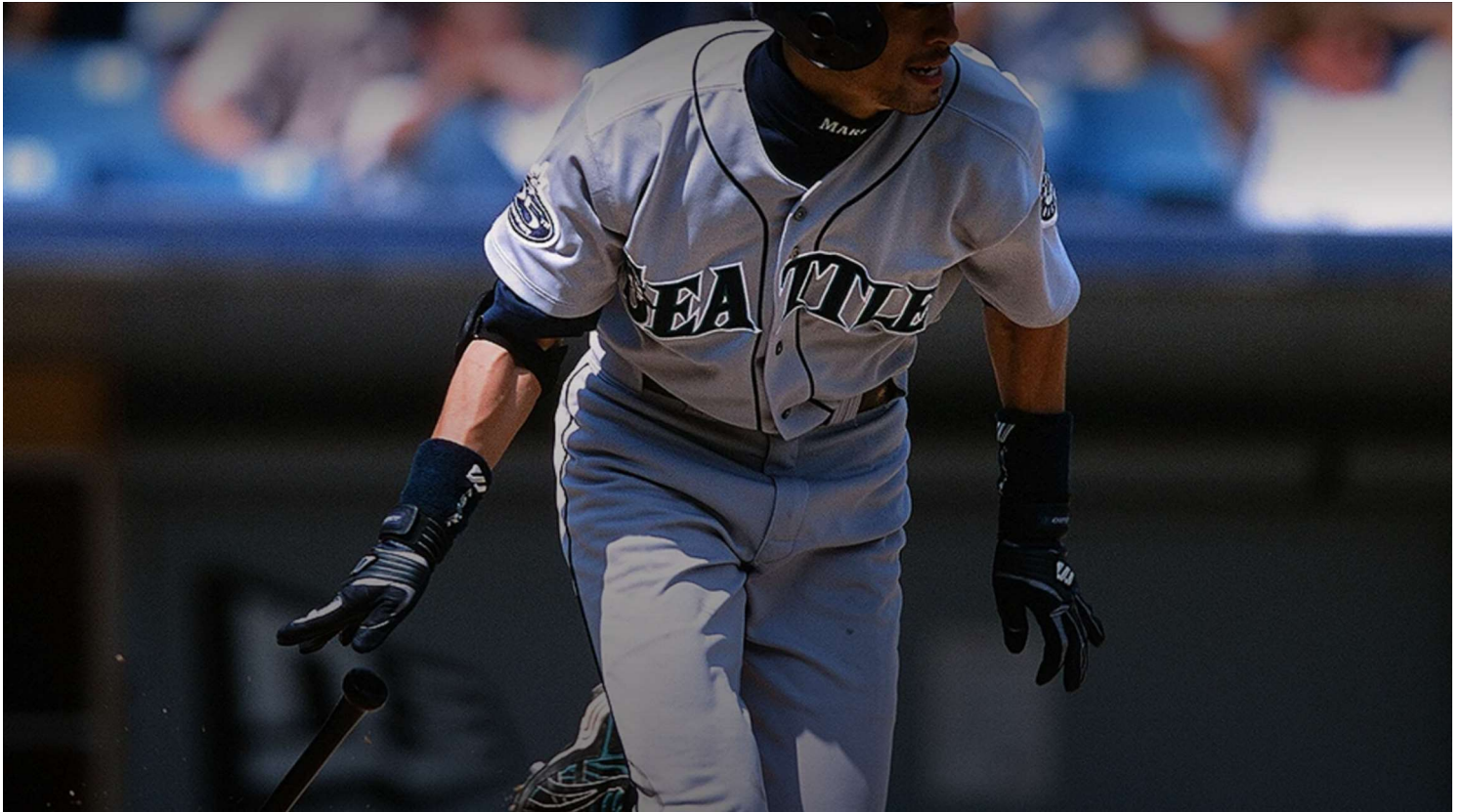
Ichiro is 27.

COLOR PHOTO: DANA FINEMAN/SYGMA

Konishi tiptoes up, squats respectfully and whispers the questions into the great man's ear.







JUL 8, 2002

## *THE ICHIRO PARADOX*

NO POWER, NO PERSONALITY, YET WITH NO PEER, THE MARINERS' ICHIRO SUZUKI MAY BE THE GREATEST PLAYER TO COME OUT OF JAPAN AND THE WORST THING TO HAPPEN TO JAPANESE BASEBALL

**S.L. PRICE**

Who sits like this? No American male over six years old and, Lord knows, no baseball player. Players slouch. Players hunch over with headphones on. Players sit like emperors with arms folded. Yet here is Ichiro, on a chair in front of his locker: feet drawn up, heels pressed against his butt, knees together—a position physically impossible, not to mention unacceptably precious, for the musclebound types populating clubhouses these days. Twenty minutes pass. Ichiro doesn't move. His head is tilted up to watch a TV set hanging from the wall. He stares, grinning. He would look like an amused child, except he's too alert. He looks about as harmless as a panther on a tree limb.

Ichiro is watching a tape of tonight's opposing pitcher. He does this before every game. After batting practice he sits oh-so-cozily amid the clubhouse bustle, looking for weakness. No teammate speaks to him. His eyes shine. He looks hungry.

Pitchers went straight at Ichiro Suzuki last year, figuring to dent his gaudy Japan League credentials, and the Seattle Mariners' 27-year-old rookie rightfielder made them all pay. He sliced up the American League with a .350 average, got more hits (242) than anyone else in 71 years, became only the second man ever voted American League Rookie of the Year and Most Valuable Player in the same season. No one found a way to neutralize him then, and now, just a season and a half after he hit the beach, American baseball is waving the flag of surrender. At week's end Ichiro—no one bothers with his last name anymore—was hitting .359.

"There's no secret way to get him out," says Boston Red Sox manager Grady Little. "All you can do is concentrate on the other eight guys."

"Impossible to defend," says Ray Knight, the bench coach of the Cincinnati Reds, "but he's a joy to watch."

Strange words from an opponent, but such is the nature of baseball's Ichiro paradox. He makes contradiction logical. Through Sunday he had but two home runs yet led the league in intentional walks. He speaks little English in a sound-bite era, yields no emotion in a culture that prizes personality; he's a contact hitter in a sport overdosed on power—yet he is baseball's most popular player. This year, for the second season in a row, Ichiro led every major league player in the fans' All-Star Game balloting. Yes, his 2.5 million votes were padded by Internet voters in Japan, but consider: Even on hard ballots filled out mostly in American ballparks, Ichiro topped everyone with 1.7 million votes.

None of this leaves him the least bit mystified. "I'm unique," Ichiro says. "I'm a very rare kind of player."

More than even he knows. There's a Pepsi ad in Japan that pictures Ichiro swinging a bat above the words CHANGE THE WORLD. It's not just marketing. His was supposed to be the tough adjustment, but in truth Ichiro has made few concessions. American fans, pitchers and general managers are the ones scrambling to adjust. Already his success has killed, once and for all, the long-held conceit that a small Japanese player (Ichiro is 5'9" and 160 pounds) would be overwhelmed in the major leagues. In Japan, meanwhile, it has completely altered the landscape. A mere baseball star when he played there, Ichiro is now an omnipresent cultural icon.

Japanese mornings begin with unprecedented TV broadcasts of each of his games. His face stares from T-shirts, newspapers, subway ads. He is, appropriately enough, both everywhere and nowhere to be found, dominating a nation while squatting in a chair half a planet away. But the Ichiro paradox cuts most deeply across the game he left behind. Ichiro has given Japanese baseball new life, yet by the time he's done, it may be crippled beyond repair.

Kazuo Matsui is like a lot of young men in Tokyo these days. At the mention of Ichiro his face lights up with wonder. "When I think about him being in the major leagues, it amazes me," he says through an interpreter. "Then I see Ichiro getting two, three hits a game? I get so much out of it."

**"I'm unique. I'm a very rare kind of player."**

**- Ichiro**

It is late June. Like most of his generation, the 27-year-old Matsui has spent the last month obsessing about the World Cup and looking to soccer, not baseball, players for style tips. He wears a soccer bracelet and spends several minutes fluffing his thick mop of tinted hair skyward so he can look more like English star David Beckham. "I've always liked Beckham," he says. "He's why I dyed my hair."

The difference between Matsui and his peers, though, is that an hour after adjusting his coif at the Seibu Dome the day before, the durable, switch-hitting shortstop for the Seibu Lions cracked the second pitch he saw for a leadoff home run, played flawlessly in the field and again showed why he may be the best all-around ballplayer in Japan. Los Angeles Dodgers pitching coach Jim Colborn, a former Mariners director of Pacific Rim scouting who coached in Japan, says some three dozen Japanese players could play in the majors. But it's the imminent exodus of top players like Matsui, along with Yomiuri Giants centerfielder Hideki Matsui and Kintetsu Buffaloes third baseman Norihiro Nakamura, that threatens to turn a national point of pride into just another major league farm system.

"Every day, people [in Japan] are watching major league baseball games, and short term, that's not so good for us," says Steve Inow, the former general manager of the Orix Blue Wave who sold the rights to Ichiro to Seattle in 2000 rather than lose him as a free agent with no compensation. "These are difficult times. Japanese baseball is at a turning point. Which way do we go?"

So far, all arrows point down. Attendance and TV ratings for Japanese baseball have been sliding for years, but last season, with Ichiro's Mariners games as competition, the drop was precipitous. Even the bellwether Giants saw their television share drop to 15.1% of viewers last season—the first time the Tokyo-based team's share had dipped below 20%. Meanwhile, since 1983 the percentage of baseball viewers 19 years and under has plummeted more than 66%. You can walk the streets of Tokyo for weeks without seeing a Giants hat; you'll see a Mariners logo within an hour. The recession has reduced the number of teams in Japan's Industrial League, its de facto minor league system, from 300 in the late 1980s to 90 today. There has been talk about creating an Asian League with South Korea and China to spark interest, even whispers about contraction.

Yet the success of Ichiro and the 10 other Japanese players now at work in the U.S. not only blunts any popular concern about the health of the Japanese game but also contradicts it. Never have so many Japanese players done so well at so high a level; fans can justifiably say that Japanese baseball has never been better. Last year Robert Whiting, a Tokyo resident and expert on Japanese baseball, appeared on Japanese TV and asked the host, "Doesn't this bother you? You had this great tradition of baseball, and now you've lost it. All your stars are leaving."

The host said, "No, the Japanese are very excited. It shows Japanese superiority to Americans."

It wasn't always this way. Baseball has been played in Japan since the late 1800s, and the Japan League started in 1936, but before 1995 only one Japanese player had made it to the major leagues. Reliever Masanori Murakami appeared in a total of 54 games for the San Francisco Giants in 1964 and '65, and then only because his parent club sent him to the U.S. for seasoning. But in the winter of '95 Kintetsu Buffaloes pitcher Hideo Nomo and his agent, Don Nomura, exploited a loophole in the agreement between Japanese baseball and the major leagues: If a player retired, he was free to play for whomever he wished. Nomo announced his retirement and promptly struck a deal with the Dodgers, and all Japan reacted as if he'd blown a hole in Mount Fuji. The Buffaloes' general manager resigned. Nomo's parents wept and begged him to come home. Nomura's mother and stepfather, legendary catcher Katsuya Nomura, broke off all relations with their son.

"Nomo opened the gate, and at the time people said, 'He's a traitor to Japanese baseball,'" says alltime homer king Sadaharu Oh, who manages the Fukuoka Daiei Hawks. "Now if you're a good player, people ask, 'Why don't you go to the United States?'" Oh likes it better this way. "Why not?" he says. "I wish I had the chance to go."

Nomo's success—he was the 1995 NL Rookie of the Year and at week's end was 10 wins short of 100 for his major league career—led so many other pitchers to take the leap that in 2000 Inow devised the current system of player "posting." Instead of losing talented players when they became free agents after nine seasons, Japanese teams could now sell them to American teams.

Inow sold Ichiro's rights to Seattle for \$13 million. The second player to be posted, Kazuhisa Ishii, was signed by the Dodgers in February and was tied for third in wins (11) in the National League through Sunday, but it's the daily success of Ichiro—the first Japanese-born position player to make it in America—that has erased the inferiority complex of his ballplaying countrymen. "Now we feel if you're a good player in Japan, you can be a good player anywhere," says Kazuo Matsui, who's still mulling over whether he wants to be posted after this, his eighth season. "It pushes me even more, having that freedom."

For the next five months, though, all manner of speculation, panic and pride will rain down on Giants centerfielder Hideki Matsui, 28, the free-agent slugger, two-time MVP and former batting champion who is called Godzilla "because I look so scary," he says. The 6'2", 210-pound Hideki bears the fortunate burden of playing for Japan's oldest, most successful team, an institution combining the prestige of the Yankees and the fan reverence accorded Notre Dame. The Giants always lead the league in attendance and give their stars a profile Ichiro could only have dreamed of when he played in Japan. Giants owner Tsuneo Watanabe has never lost a player to America and speaks often these days about "sports patriotism." But Hideki turned down a long-term contract last year and has spent this season making adjustments in his swing, some say, to prepare for the majors.

The idea that Ichiro's success could spark interest in baseball and blunt soccer's growing popularity seems logical. But it's scant consolation to those who love the proud history of the Japan League. More Japanese kids will want to play, certainly—just not in Japan.

"If Hideki leaves, it's a tragedy," says Jun Ikushima, a Tokyo reporter and co-author with Seattle Mariners reliever Shigetoshi Hasegawa of the book *My Way to Study English*, which became a best-seller in Japan. "Hideki's the best player in Japan now, and the Giants are the symbol of Japanese baseball. It's bigger than Ichiro leaving. We depend on Hideki for so much—his popularity, his dynamism—that if he goes, I can't imagine what will happen. I will feel emptiness. It will be the beginning of the destruction of Japanese baseball."

Fans intent on seeing the best Japanese players will have to follow the trail taken by the stream of jet-lagged Japanese tourists stumbling around Dodger Stadium, Pac Bell Park and Safeco Field. The influx into Seattle has been so pronounced that the team has posted signs in Japanese around the ballpark. "I'd like to say to Seattle baseball people and the mayor of Seattle, 'Please give an award to me,'" Inow says. "Seattle was known in Japan before, but it was not so popular. Now look: Seattle is Ichiro's town, and Japanese people are coming. I need a special bonus."

Who waits like this? More ballplayers each day, it seems. Ichiro's on-deck gyrations have become a Seattle model of cool, with Little Leaguers everywhere trying to keep their faces blank while contorting like pretzels. It is the fourth inning of last Thursday night's game against the Oakland Athletics. Lefthander Barry Zito, winner of nine straight, is on the mound for the A's. As he prepares to step in, Ichiro betrays no awareness that he's enduring his longest drought—0 for 13—of the season. No, as always, Ichiro spends his time running through at least six different stretches. "Same thing every time," says Mariners outfielder Charles Gipson. "He never gets out of the zone."

Ichiro's at bats are clinics in working over a pitcher: stretch, shirt tug, foul, foul, foul, flare to left center. With his maddening skill at making contact, it's nearly impossible to fire three pitches past Ichiro. When he dives after a curveball in the dirt, as Zito induces him to do in his first at bat, "I can't really pat myself on the back," Zito says. He figures Ichiro just made a rare mistake.

No one makes the game look easier, and for a public happy to interpret Ichiro's few, banal utterances ("Whether it's a good day or a bad day, I look back and find anyplace I can correct myself," he says. "I absorb it, digest it and come back the next day. That's all I can do") as proof of Zen profundity, there's the temptation to believe he received his gift from some monk on a mountaintop. It doesn't quite fit that Japan's master hitter actually grew up an American cliché: Ichiro worked himself to greatness.

His father, Nobuyuki, made him feel special from the start, naming him Ichiro—"first boy"—though he was actually the second. Nobuyuki, a former high school player himself, poured his chosen one into the game, drilling with him every day for four years. By the time Ichiro was a freshman in high school, his competitiveness had been honed to a fine point. It's a tradition in Japan for freshman ballplayers to wash the uniforms of the seniors, so to make sure he lost no daylight practice time, Ichiro would wake up at 3 a.m. to do the laundry. During classes he slept. In his first year as a professional he spent most of his free time in the batting cage, with teammates coming and going from breakfast, lunch, nap, dinner to the endless tattoo of his bat on ball.

So now arrives the perfect Ichiro moment. He slaps a ground ball three steps to the left of first base, but he is so fast that Zito never comes close to covering the bag in time, and what would be a sure out for anyone else ends with Ichiro safe again, a paradox in action. "When Ichiro doesn't hit the ball well, it's almost to his advantage," Zito says. "He's a pain in the ass."

The crowd of 42,159 at Safeco Field erupts. Everyone leans forward, waiting for his reaction. But Ichiro gives nothing away. Somewhere in Tokyo a ballplayer forgets his breakfast for a moment and stares, wondering how it feels to be so very rare.

COLOR PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPH BY HOWARD SCHATZ COVER MIDSEASON BASEBALL REPORT  
The Improbable Impact of Ichiro "I am very rare"

COLOR PHOTO: BRAD

MANGINCOLOR PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPH BY CHUCK SOLOMONCOLOR PHOTO: KOJI SASAHARA/AP PIED PIPER Ichiro's popularity back home may lead more stars like San Francisco's Tsuyoshi Shinjo (right) to join him in the U.S. COLOR PHOTO: KYODO NEWS/AP [See caption above]COLOR PHOTO: JED JACOBSONH/GETTY IMAGES [See caption above]COLOR PHOTO: YOMIURI SHIMBUN TWO COLOR PHOTOS: KYODO NEWS (2)COLOR PHOTO: BOB ROSATO FAST TRACK Always a threat to bunt because of his speed, Ichiro is leading the majors in hits for the second straight year.

Coming ATTRACTIONS? Japan has already lost a slew of its best pitchers, and these position players may follow

HIDEKI MATSUI Centerfielder, Yomiuri Giants .316 BA 15 HR 38 RBIs .433 On-base Pct. A free agent and the best bet to test the market in the U.S., Matsui would deal a major blow to the Giants, who are the Yankees of the Japan League, if he were to depart.

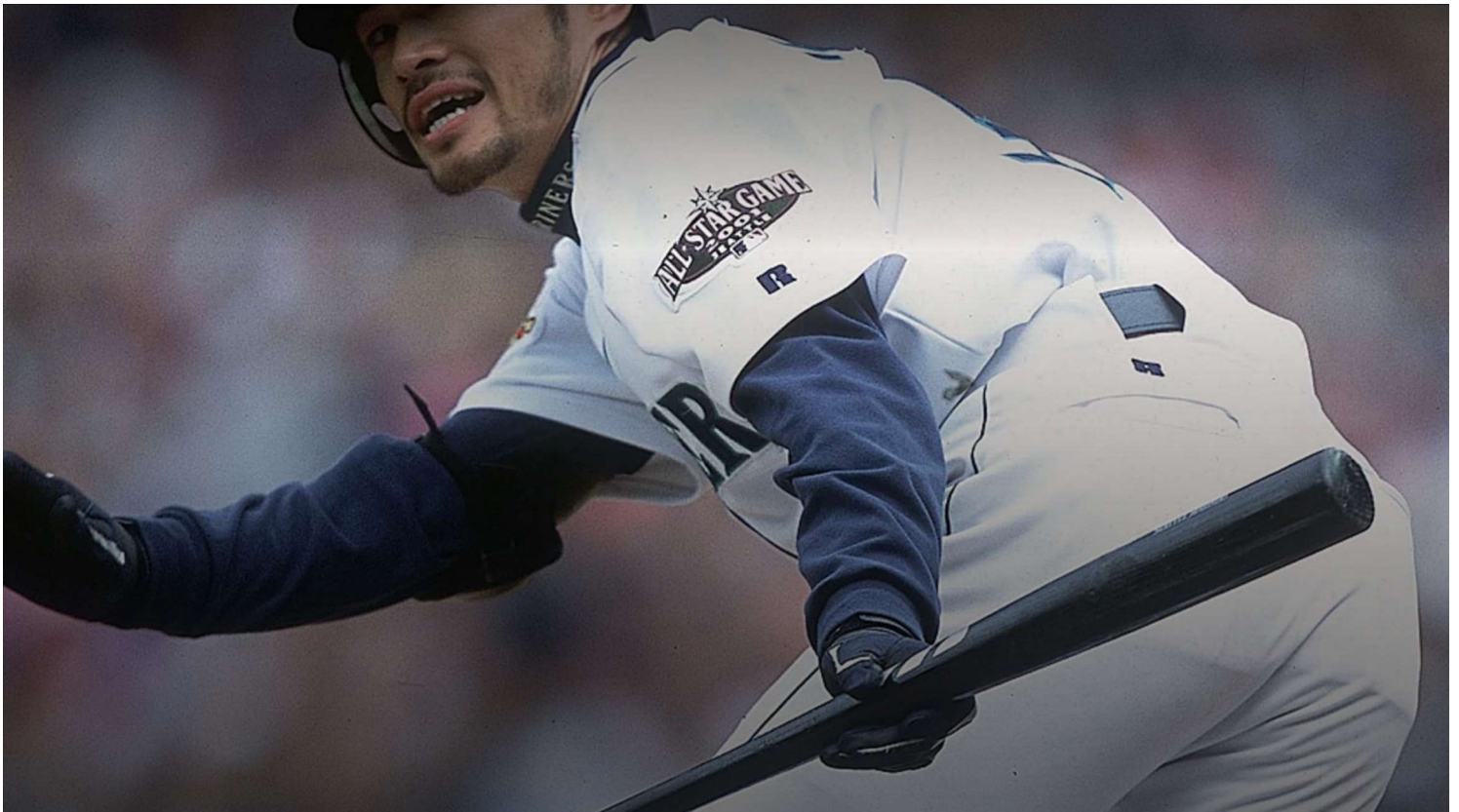
KAZUO MATSUI Shortstop, Seibu Lions .318 BA 16 HR 39 RBIs 13 SB This Matsui, a switch-hitter, has been more coy about coming to the U.S. and will require a posting fee to the Lions if he's to be signed, but he's considered the best athlete in Japanese baseball.

NORISHIRO NAKAMURA Third baseman, Kintetsu Buffaloes .302 BA 23 HR 55 RBIs .672 Slg. Pct. The righthanded-hitting Nakamura is a free agent and one of the top power hitters in Japan, but there are questions about whether he would be as big a homer threat in the U.S.

Statistics through Sunday

"Every day, people in Japan are watching major league baseball games," says Inow. "Short term, that's not so good for us."

"When Ichiro doesn't hit the ball well, it's almost to his advantage," says Zito. "He's a pain in the ass."



MAY 28, 2001

## *BIG HIT*

FANS HAVE QUICKLY GOTTEN ON A FIRST-NAME BASIS WITH ICHIRO, THE BRILLIANT BATSMAN AND DAZZLING ALL-AROUND TALENT FROM JAPAN WHO HAS LED THE MARINERS TO THE TOP OF THE AMERICAN LEAGUE

**JEFF PEARLMAN**

On a late Thursday evening two weeks ago, the Seattle Mariners were bored to the point of flat-lining. Their charter had just landed at Toronto's Pearson International Airport and, as if taxes and Alan Thicke weren't enough reasons to dread crossing into Canada, everyone in the Mariners' traveling party had to slog through a tedious customs check and then claim his own luggage. As the men circled the baggage carousel, Gerald Perry, Seattle's hitting coach, began collecting \$1 bills. The first guy whose luggage emerged would win the loot.

The average major league player salary this year is more than \$2.2 million. Still, the average big league player would, given the chance, stand naked on the field and sing a rendition of Hall & Oates's Maneater for a free bologna sandwich. Hence, when the carousel lights started blinking to signal the imminent arrival of their bags, the Mariners packed in shoulder to shoulder, each one dreaming of that juicy wad of 28 singles. "It sounds like chump change," said Perry, who doesn't make anywhere near \$2.2 million, "but we can all use the money."

Then--thud!--a small green Samsonite suitcase appeared. The one labeled in meticulous Japanese writing. The one belonging to rightfielder Ichiro Suzuki.

"Wizard!" the Mariners cried.

"Wiz-aaard!"



"Wizzzzz!"

With bag in hand, the diminutive Suzuki—Wizard to his teammates—quietly walked up to Perry, grabbed the bills and, just as quickly, returned to his sheltered spot among taller, wider teammates. No gloating. No celebration. "Very calm and cool," said Perry, smiling. "Like he expected to win."

If there was little surprise that Suzuki won the pot, it was because, a quarter of the way through his first major league season, there's little surprise about anything he does. Suzuki is named American League Rookie of the Month for April? Big whoop. Suzuki has back-to-back single-double-triple games? Ho-hum. Suzuki rifles a one-hopper from the rightfield wall to home plate? Yawn. Suzuki's on pace to break George Sisler's 81-year-old record of 257 hits in a season? Zzzzzzzz. Suzuki imprisons Saddam Hussein, discovers a cure for AIDS and beats up Mike Tyson? You expected less?

In Japanese there's no direct translation for the word superstar. How about, simply, Ichiro (pronounced ee-chee-roh). How else to describe a man who, despite having never faced North American major league pitching (save for the random exhibition against touring big leaguers and a few spring training cuts), entered this week batting .365 (third in the American League); leading the league in hits (73), runs (40) and stolen bases (15); having strung together hitting streaks of 15 and 23 games (the latter snapped by the New York Yankees' Orlando Hernandez and Mariano Rivera in New York's 2-1, 10-inning win at Safeco Field last Saturday), all the while filling the role of catalytic leadoff man as his club achieved the best record in baseball and built an 11-game lead over the second-place Oakland Athletics in the American League West?

It can be argued that Wade Boggs, George Brett and Tony Gwynn were the three best hitters for average of the past two decades. They hit safely in 39 out of 41 games four times in their combined 59 seasons. Suzuki began his major league career with such a run—while playing in unfamiliar stadiums in an unfamiliar country and while dealing with an unfamiliar language and eating unfamiliar foods. "He's a legitimate hitter, no question," says Yankees manager Joe Torre, whose team held Suzuki to four hits in 14 at bats while taking two of three games from 32-11 Seattle last weekend. "I don't think you can pitch him one way. You can go in and out, up and down, and he makes the adjustment. You can get ahead in the count, and Suzuki still seems relaxed. He doesn't seem to have any weaknesses."

He does, however, have strong feelings about his name. As was stated in a Mariners press release issued before their May 17 game against the Chicago White Sox, "It is Ichiro's preference to be identified by his first name only. He is the only current Major League Baseball player to have his first name on his jersey." Yes, there's a presence to the man, and not only because he's 27 years old, with seven straight Japanese League batting titles and seven consecutive Gold Gloves to his credit.

Ever since Seattle paid the Orix Blue Wave of the Japanese Pacific League \$13 million last November for the right to negotiate with its best player and then signed him to a three-year, \$14 million deal, Ichiro has exuded an aura of professionalism mixed with a boy's giddy excitement over discovering a new playground. "He's a rookie, but only by the standards of the league's rules," says Mariners catcher Dan Wilson. "Nobody here is treating him like a kid coming up. Really, how can we?"

Instead, Wilson and his teammates have marveled at Ichiro's one-of-a-kind approach. Between pitches in rightfield, Ichiro puts on a calisthenics clinic. If he's not rolling his shoulders, he's stretching his quads. If he's not stretching his quads, he's bending at the waist and touching his toes. When he sits at his locker, Ichiro methodically rubs a six-inch wooden stick up and down the sides and the bottoms of his feet. "It's for pressure points," he says through an interpreter. "If your feet are healthy, you're healthy." In an effort to keep his vision sharp, Ichiro rarely watches television for extended periods without wearing sunglasses. Before every game a Mariners trainer gives him a massage.

After he steps in the batter's box at the start of every at bat, the lefthanded-hitting Ichiro crouches into a catcher's tuck, loosening his hamstrings. Then he pops up, plants his left foot, drags it parallel to the plate and plants it again. With his right foot resting outside the box, Ichiro wags his black Mizuno bat back and forth below his belt like a putter. He proceeds to whip it around in a counterclockwise loop, stopping as soon as his hands reach his chest. Then Ichiro uses his right hand to hold the bat parallel to his upper body. When he brings his right foot into the box, Ichiro--knees bent, left elbow cocked high--is ready for the pitch. This routine is repeated before every pitch. "Some people may think it's strange," says Ichiro, "but if something works, there's no need to change it." It works. Thanks in no small part to Ichiro and despite not having a top slugger in their lineup, the Mariners through Sunday had scored 243 runs, second in the league to the 256 scored by the power-laden Cleveland Indians.

In spring training various scouts, coaches, managers and players took one look at Ichiro's 5'9", 160-pound frame and his open stance, and thought the same thing: inside heat. But Ichiro, a quick-wristed, fast-out-of-the-box slap hitter with excellent bat control, will not be bullied. In the second inning of the Mariners' 6-2 victory on Sunday, Yankees ace righthander Roger Clemens threw a wicked 93-mph splitter that broke near Ichiro's knees. No matter. Ichiro grazed the ball with the tip of his bat, sending it rolling down the third base line for a double. (Typical of the way he has helped manufacture runs since Opening Day, when he keyed a game-winning rally with a bunt single, Ichiro took third on a wild pitch and then scored on second baseman Alfonso Soriano's throwing error.)

"It's almost as if he has a tennis racket in his hands," says John Moses, Seattle's first base coach. "I'm gonna lob this one—and it's a blooper over the shortstop's head. I'm gonna ace this one—and it's a liner down the rightfield line. He's toying with guys, and there's nothing they can do about it."

After Ichiro puts the ball in play, fielders have to deal with his speed down the line. The Mariners have timed him to first at a Mickey Mantle-like 3.7 seconds. In the bottom of the ninth during New York's 14-10 win last Friday, Ichiro startled several Yankees when he hit an innocent one-hopper back to Rivera and—whoosh!—missed beating the throw by only half a step. "He caught Mo 100 percent by surprise," said Yankees lefthander Ted Lilly. "He tore off for the base like a rocket."

When they are not calling him Wizard (a tribute to his magical offensive abilities), the Mariners gleefully refer to Ichiro as Ichiballs (pronounced itch-ee-balls). He has learned a variety of English curse words, plus some of America's most useless phrases. Rookie reliever Ryan Franklin taught Ichiro to say "chillin' like Bob Dylan."

"Then," says Franklin, "I had to teach him who Bob Dylan is."

Ichiro is also quick to utter such dandies as "chillin' like a villain," "whassup?" "thanks, dogg" and "no pain, no gain." When a reporter noted Ichiro's smooth feet, Ichiro nodded, smiled and said, "They sexy." He has picked up bits and pieces of English by listening to conversations, as well as television, movies and hip-hop. "I very much like hip-hop," he says in English, pronouncing hip as heep.

If there's one obstacle to total happiness for Ichiro in the big leagues, it's the Japanese media's obsession with him. The Mariners have issued seasonlong press credentials to 23 Japanese writers, 11 Japanese photographers and one Japanese television crew. No matter what happens—a 10-1 Seattle loss or a 10-1 Seattle win—Mariners manager Lou Piniella will field at least four or five What about Ichiro? questions from this horde before it moves to Ichiro's locker. Whenever he feels he has not contributed sufficiently to a game, Ichiro will remain in the trainer's room until the press has left.

When he does speak, Ichiro is—from a journalist's viewpoint—frustratingly reserved and without candor. Asked in a recent interview to cite the differences (which are known to be wide) between the North American and Japanese strike zones, he replied, "I would not want to address this as any problem. The umpires here are very good." Later Ichiro noted that of all the things he misses about Japan, No. 1 is his dog. (Ichiro and his wife, Japanese TV personality Yumiko Fukushima, live in a no-pets-allowed apartment complex in the Seattle suburb of Bellevue.) What's the critter's name? "I would not wish to say," said Ichiro, "without first asking its permission."

The Wizard smiled. It might not be his country, but he knows who's in control.

Late on an Arizona spring-training afternoon, somebody trails Ichiro out of the Peoria Sports Complex, tracks him through the parking lot and shadows him on the streets of suburban Phoenix. Ichiro, his antennae always up when he's out in public, spies the tail right away in his rear-view mirror and goes into zigzag deception mode.

A feint here, a bluff there, and his mission is accomplished. He's home free.

"I'm hoping this won't be true of other American fans," says Ichiro, who for four or five hours a day finds safe haven as the new right fielder for the Mariners. "But this one tried to follow me home from the ballpark. In a car. An American fan. I had to go to a different place and lose him."

Nothin' like a good ol' fashioned stalker to make a fella feel at home. In Japan, the hounds of the public nip at Ichiro's heels 24/7, so this little escapade in suburban Phoenix doesn't raise much of an eyebrow. After you've experienced the adulation of a nation of Japanese fans, one overzealous Arizonan isn't much of a challenge.

"In Japan, I can't use a public restroom along the highways," says Ichiro, speaking through an interpreter. "For me to stop at a large public restroom would be asking for trouble, so I have to hold it until I get to a smaller one. And even then, when I use the facilities, the person next to me starts going, 'It's Ichiro! It's Ichiro!' And all of a sudden, they start lining up, standing behind me when I'm trying to use the restroom. Picture that. This may be rude, but there are some very strange Japanese fans, in that aspect."

In Japan, Ichiro is an icon, as big there as ... who here? J. Lo? Britney? Tiger? Elvis? Yes, he's that big, at least in the name game. For the record, his last name is Suzuki, but that knowledge is handy only as the answer to a trivia question. Japanese fans don't need it to refer to him, to greet him or even to correspond with him.

It is said that a letter addressed only to "Ichiro, Japan" will reach him. He confirms that it happens as long as the letter is addressed in *katakana*, or Japanese phonetics. (If the name is written in *kanji*, or picture characters, the chances go down.)

So he is Ichiro. Period. That name—pronounced "EE-chi-row," according to a Mariners' interpreter—will be the only one on the back of his Mariners uniform, which, to the best of our knowledge, is a first for stodgy ol' major league baseball. If it sounds a little XFL-ish ... well, is that such a bad thing? Ichiro looks like a guy the majors can use.

"He's different from other baseball players," says Yuji Kato, who works for Japan's NHK network and is covering Ichiro in spring training. "He's reaching a younger generation in Japan. He has spiky hair and sunglasses like a rock star in the States. The younger generation in Japan calls him 'cool' or a 'tight dude.' We expect him all the time to be a superstar and give us the superstar-like quotes. But he is a man of few words, so he doesn't talk so much. And the more mysterious he acts, the more mystique he has."

**SPECIAL AURA:** Suzuki's reserve, and shades, add to his mystique.

Ichiro is 27 years old and already has his own museum. The fully staffed Ichiro Museum in Nagoya City is a labor of love created by Ichiro's father, Nobuyuki. It includes not only baseball memorabilia but a collection of toys Ichiro played with as a kid, the bicycle he rode to elementary school and exams on which he got good grades. Call ahead for tour times. Seriously.

So Ichiro breaks a few baseball conventions. Most noteworthy, he's breaking the one that has kept the best Japanese position players in Japan and out of the major leagues. Until this offseason, when the Mariners won a bidding war for Ichiro and the Mets signed center fielder Tsuyoshi Shinjo, no Japanese nonpitcher had ever even been given a major league contract. Till now, none was deemed worthy.

Shinjo, a seven-time winner of the Japanese Gold Glove with some power, may see occasional playing time for the Mets this year. But Ichiro is expected not only to start but to star for the A-Rod-less, Junior-less, Unit-less Mariners. His credentials, the scouting reports and his early play in Arizona summon comparisons to a handful of American baseball luminaries. His numbers in Japan, for instance, rival or better Tony Gwynn's with the Padres. His swing reminds insiders of Rod Carew. Bobby Valentine, who managed against him for a season in Japan, says Ichiro is one of the five best players in the world.

Ichiro won the last seven batting titles in the Japan Pacific League, playing for the Orix Blue Wave in Kobe. Last year, he hit .387. His career batting average over nine seasons in Japan is .353. He has led his league in on-base percentage five times, including last season (.460).

"His natural ability alone and his baseball instincts—those are two factors you can't teach a ballplayer, and he has them," says Melvin Nieves, an outfielder in the Rockies camp who played against Ichiro for the Fukuoka Daiei Hawks over the past two seasons. "You're either born with them or you're not. He was. The way he handles the bat, his coordination, things like that ... He's as good as Tony Gwynn."

That isn't a universal opinion, though. Braves hitting coach Merv Rettenmund scoffs at comparisons between Ichiro and Gwynn, whom he coached for nine seasons in San Diego. Rettenmund says Ichiro won't put up Gwynn-like numbers this season—not the worst snub one could get.

Ichiro is a slasher at the plate, a line-drive hitter who runs and who ought to make the most of Safeco Field's spacious-outfield gaps. The Mariners will hit him somewhere in the top three of their batting order, probably at leadoff. He has stolen as many as 49 bases in a season, though his base-stealing numbers have dropped off over the past three years.

For three consecutive seasons (1994-96), Ichiro was the Pacific League's most valuable player; and he is a six-time winner of the Japanese Gold Glove.

At 5-9 and 160 pounds, he is slight. He isn't a power hitter, but he has been in the 20s in home runs twice in his career with Orix. And in Japan, the legend of Ichiro seems to know no limits.

"I used to talk to some of the other ... players who were his teammates," Nieves says. "They'd tell me he would come in one day and say, 'Now I'm going to start hitting home runs. My average is high enough. I'm going to start hitting for power



**COVERED:** Suzuki doesn't have to go far for news from back home. He is the news, and interest in him hasn't been dampened by his trip across the ocean.

now. And he'd do it."

According to another story, Ichiro's hand-eye coordination is so keen that he once got a base hit on a ball that bounced well in front of the plate. This, too, **Ichiro** confirms. It happened last season, a single, a line drive to right on a forkball in the dirt.

In 1997, he set a Japanese record by going 216 consecutive at-bats without striking out. In his 536 total at-bats that year, he struck out only 36 times. Nothin' to it, apparently.

"If all you're worrying about is statistics, I could break that record easily," **Ichiro** says. "I don't think that's an impressive statistic at all. I could break that record if all I'm worrying about is not striking out."

So he has attitude to hitch to his talent, which surely helps account for his notoriety in Japan. Oh, and he has style. Until a year or so ago, his lefthanded batting stance included a high leg lift in which he swung his right foot back and forth through the box like a pendulum, as a timing device.

The stance wasn't the same as the one Japanese slugger Sadaharu Oh used to become baseball's all-time home run king. Oh lifted his leg high and kept it still as the pitch approached. But Ichiro's stance was just as distinctive. It was one of his trademarks, as singular to **Ichiro** as the corkscrew windup was to Hideo Nomo in Japan.

"It was part of my image," **Ichiro** says. "If you think of **Ichiro**, you think of the leg kick."

Nonetheless, he dropped the leg kick a year ago, when he realized he no longer needed it to generate power. The adjustment, **Ichiro** says, had nothing to do with his preparation to play in the United States and nothing to do with a request from the Mariners, as has been reported. He wants that known.

Now, his stride into a pitch is conventional. That, though, is one of the few conventional items in the **Ichiro** package.

He is fond, for instance, of wearing his cap backward. He is fond of his Oakley sunglasses, the ultra-chic Juliet model. And he is fond of his baseball shoes, an Asics Gel design made especially, and only, for him. Asics equipped **Ichiro** with his own shoe in Japan, and now the company has him wearing a spiffy pair of cleats festooned with very visible stripes of a neon green to match the Mariners' colors.

The man stands out.

"Just look at his shoes," says Mariners center fielder Mike Cameron, whose locker is next to

Ichiro's at the Peoria Sports Complex. "That tells you what type of guy he is. He's a feisty little sucker. But he's smooth about his game. That's what makes him very good."

Masato Yoshii has pitched for the Mets and the Rockies during the three seasons since he left the Yakult Swallows. He pitched against **Ichiro** in Japan seven years ago, when **Ichiro** won the first of his seven batting titles.

Yoshii speaks little English, and the Rockies don't provide an interpreter at their spring training camp in Tucson, as the Mariners do for **Ichiro** and their other Japanese player, closer Kazuhiro Sasaki. But Yoshii understands most of the interviewer's questions and is able to formulate pertinent, if terse, responses in English. So why, he is asked, is **Ichiro** so popular in Japan?

"His batting form," Yoshii says. "Strange."

And what about Ichiro's fashion statements—the backward cap, the sunglasses?

"Hot dog," Yoshii says with a smile.

**Ichiro**, Nieves says, is going to have to lose the Oakleys as quickly as he lost that fan following him out of the ballpark—at least when he's on the field. **Ichiro** doesn't wear the shades to the plate, but he likes to use them in the outfield.

"And they're not made for that," Nieves adds. "It's a little hot-dogging thing. As soon as I get a chance to see him, that's the first thing I'm going to tell him."

The sunglasses, the hat, the shoes, the stance—

it's all part of the **Ichiro** phenomenon, but it makes for a sometimes-uncomfortable relationship with snoopy fans and the Japanese media. There are hordes of the latter in Peoria keeping the **Ichiro** epic alive at home. They chronicle every swing he takes in batting practice and tally the connections that would be base hits in a real game—21 of them, including three home runs, in 31 batting-practice pitches during one recent workout. Word was soon relayed back to Japan.

Little wonder, then, that **Ichiro** draws a crowd at a urinal. Or that he is awakened from naps on the bullet train and requested to sign autographs. Or that he can't enjoy dinner out with his wife, Yumiko, an anchor at the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics for Tokyo Broadcasting.

"He has so much charisma," says Ted Heid, the Mariners' director of Pacific rim operations and one of Ichiro's interpreters during spring training. "The first time I saw him play in Japan, it was unbelievable. If there were 40,000 people in the stadium, 39,999 of them were cheering for **Ichiro**. And that's very uncommon over there. I think that charisma isn't found all the time in the Japanese players. They're very clinical. But he just took it to another level."

So buckle up, American baseball. Ichiro's next level is here.

TSN

*Michael Knisley is a senior writer for THE SPORTING NEWS.*

## Asia major

The roster of players from the Far East is growing fast, with the Mariners having two of the group's finest.

Name, team	Country	Pos.	Comment
1. <b>Ichiro</b> Suzuki, Mariners	Japan	RF	Japan's biggest star heads west.
2. Chan Ho Park, Dodgers	S. Korea	SP	18-game winner last year.
3. Kazuhiro Sasaki, Mariners	Japan	RP	A.L. rookie of the year in 2000.
4. Byung-Hyun Kim, Diamondbacks	S. Korea	RP	Youngster showed promise last year.
5. Shigetoshi Hasegawa, Angels	Japan	RP	One of baseball's top setup men.
6. Hideo Nomo, Red Sox	Japan	SP	Has sealed starting spot.
7. Mac Suzuki, Royals	Japan	SP	Shoulder trouble may land him in bullpen.
8. Hideki Irabu, Expos	Japan	SP	Trying to regain early promise.
9. Tomo Ohka, Red Sox	Japan	SP	Looking for spot in rotation.
10. Sang Lee, Red Sox	S. Korea	RP	Should be top lefty in pen.
11. Masato Yoshii, Rockies	Japan	SP	Battling for spot in rotation.
12. Tsuyoshi Shinjo, Mets	Japan	OF	Figures as defensive replacement.
13. Sun-Woo Kim, Red Sox	S. Korea	SP	Could make switch to bullpen soon.
14. Chin-Hui Tsao, Rockies	Taiwan	SP	Flamethrower is a year away from majors. —M.K.



# Welcome, Ichiro

**T**hey threw quarters and ice cubes at him in Oakland. They stole \$4,000 in Japanese yen from his father's rented van in Seattle. They called a radio station in Chicago and vowed to taunt him from

the Bullpen Sports Bar, a double-decked den of heckling inequity inside Comiskey Park.

Welcome to America, **Ichiro**.

Hopefully, these are small, demented pockets of bigots and losers who will vanish in days and years to come. Hopefully, we're progressive enough in this country, properly respectful and fair, to accept a Japanese ballplayer as a superhero. Because **Ichiro** Suzuki is not going anywhere—except maybe the All-Star Game, the World Series and a career of significant impact with the Seattle Mariners. If folks would stop hurling objects and boos long enough to watch him, they'd see the most delightful story in baseball.

"Just an amazing guy,"

marvels Mariners general manager Pat Gillick, who signed the import for \$14 million, a mere \$238 million less than the departed Alex Rodriguez got in Texas.

I know what you're thinking. Who does this **Ichiro** dude think he is, arriving on our shores and demanding solo-name treatment? First names work for Tiger, Michael, various gangsta rappers and possibly Britney, depending on what she's wearing, but never for a 160-pound wisp of a right fielder in his first month in the majors.

Do yourself a favor. Give him a long look. He's the one stylin' in skinny sideburns and shades, looking like a club kid. He's the one diving into the plate, daring the pitcher to hit him, putting the ball in play with a slashing swing, bullet-training down the line in 3.8 seconds, rarely striking out.

Maybe he'll hit a game-winning home run, as he did the first week of the season. Maybe he'll use his explosive arm to throw out a runner and save a victory, as he did the second week. Maybe he'll leap against the fence to fetch a dangerous liner, as he did the third week. And maybe you'll finally get it and shout out his preferred moniker:

"EE-cheer-o!"

He's a refreshing sensation, slicing and dicing across our landscape like a flying Ginzu knife, in a sport that needs novel twists. It's difficult to determine what's most impressive: his smooth adjustment to our game or the way he has made Seattle forget Rodriguez, at least for now.

He instantly has become the feistiest leadoff hitter out there, helping the Mariners to a stunningly dominant start and ranking among A.L. leaders in batting average, hits and on-base percentage. Asian pitchers have come to the majors and fared well, from Hideo Nomo to Chan Ho Park, but never has a position player from the Far East been handed a starting job with a mandate to excel. **Ichiro** has done that and more at a savvy 27.



**MOST VALUABLE IMPORT:** Already a legend in Japan, Suzuki has brought his thrilling brand of baseball to America. Early results have him among the A.L. leaders in batting—and Seattle at the top in the West.

**He's a refreshing sensation, slicing and dicing across our landscape like a flying Ginzu knife, in a sport that needs novel twists.**

saw people watching me," he says. "They say, 'It's Ichiro!'"

Which explains why he has been a good sport after some shabby treatment in our ill-mannered country. Of the Oakland incident, he jokes, "Something came out of the sky and hit me. I couldn't tell if it was rain or money coming down."

He is having way too much fun to notice any hatred. He is a budding icon in Seattle, where Gillick and Piniella have been shrewd enough to counter three vicious blows—the departures of A-Rod, Ken Griffey Jr. and Randy Johnson—with cost-conscious diamonds like **Ichiro**. "The fans know baseball well," he says. "They're cheering for me, and I can feel the good pressure from them."

His only hassle, apparently, is the media. Not the local contingent, but the swarms of Japanese writers and TV types who follow his every waking nanosecond. "Those people are everywhere," teammate Mike Cameron says. "I asked **Ichiro** if he wants me to hire a hit man and get rid of them." It wasn't a bad question. So intense is the coverage, **Ichiro** refuses to dress with teammates after reports that a Japanese web site is offering \$2 million for naked photos of him.

If the media are his only problem, he will have a wildly successful career and make us ponder a question: Why didn't major league scouts invade Asia earlier?

Pitchers will compile an **Ichiro** game plan, but you sense he's losing little sleep over it. He's always in a good mood and is known to blurt out a phrase in the clubhouse.

"Waassssuuuupp!" **Ichiro** shouts.

See, he's already one of us. Treat him well.

TSN

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Ken Rosenthal

## Insider

## Mets can blame themselves for failing to land Ichiro

**F**orget Alex Rodriguez and Manny Ramirez. Forget Juan Gonzalez, Johnny Damon and Gary Sheffield. **Ichiro** Suzuki was the one itch the Mets should have satisfied in their

swing-and-miss offseason.

Mets manager Bobby Valentine called **Ichiro** "one of the top five players in the world" during last year's World Series. Assistant general manager Omar Minaya and Japanese scout Isao O'Jimi backed that endorsement.

"What I said, without a doubt, is that he'd be Rookie of the Year," Valentine recalls. "I thought he'd lead the league in triples. And I thought he'd hit in the high .300s."

"I also said that before the year was over, someone will say that he has the best arm, someone will say he is the best hitter, someone will say he's the best defensive player, someone will say that he's the fastest runner."

Pretty fair scouting report, don't you think?

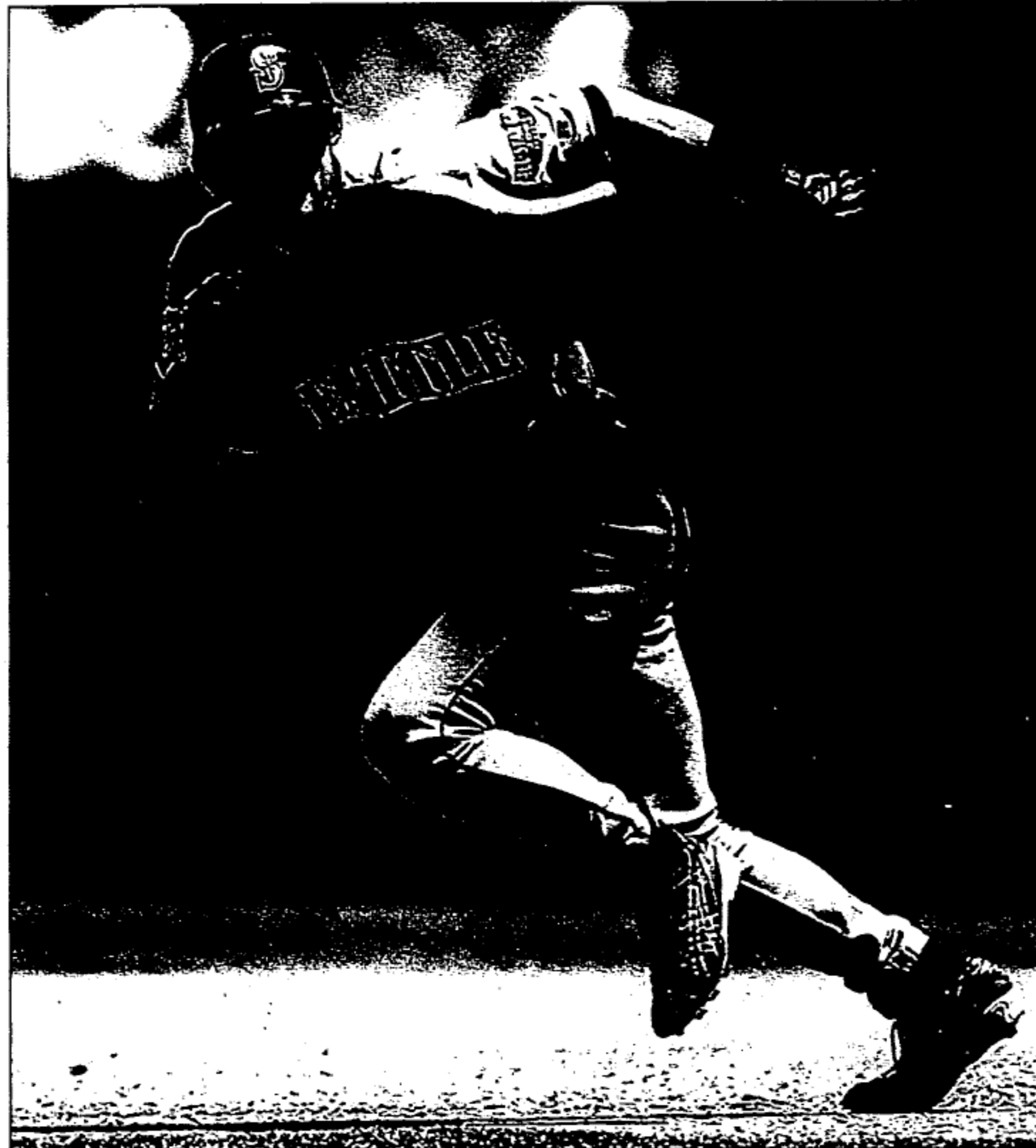
The Mets had the resources to outbid the Mariners for **Ichiro**'s negotiating rights. They also had the connections to persuade him to play him in North America. Valentine had managed him in Japan. He knew the ownership of **Ichiro**'s club, the Orix Blue Wave. And he and **Ichiro** share the same agent, Tony Attanasio.

The Mets needed the offensive boost: Their outfield again lacks a proven 20-homer or 20-stolen base man after ranking 14th among the 16 National League clubs last season in batting average, home runs, RBIs and stolen bases. The team's run production also is below-average at first base and shortstop and only average at third.

That's six of the eight spots in the lineup that are lacking—seven, if you count second baseman Edgardo Alfonzo, who has been bothered by back trouble for much of the season. Yet the defending N.L. champions spent \$90.65 million on five free-agent pitchers last winter and a mere \$700,000 on their only offensive acquisition, Tsuyoshi Shinjo, a .249 career hitter in Japan.

G.M. Steve Phillips wanted to fortify his pitching after losing Mike Hampton. But the Mets' early-season difficulties, while partly attributable to injuries, cannot be considered a major surprise after the team ignored its offensive deficiencies.

The Mets are willing to spend. Their \$93 million payroll is the game's fourth highest. However, one agent says the team's ownership declined to enter into any major long-term commitments because it is preparing to sell the club—an idea that CEO Fred Wilpon calls "ridiculous."



**THE RISING SUM:** With his knowledge of Japanese baseball, Valentine knew how good **Ichiro** (above) could be and encouraged the Mets to pursue him, but the team fell short in its bid attempt.

Perhaps the Mets were just trying to act responsibly. They had reasons for failing to sign Rodriguez (agent Scott Boras), Ramirez (an A.L. player) and Juan Gonzalez (an A.L. player with back problems). And they had reasons for failing to acquire Damon (it would have cost them Alex Escobar) and Gary Sheffield (too high a price in players and dollars).

**Ichiro**, though, turned out to be a bargain. The bidding for his services took place in early November, a time when the Mets were still the leading contender for A-Rod. But the total cost for **Ichiro** was \$34.125 million—\$13.125 for his negotiating rights, \$21 million for his three-year contract. That's nearly \$8 million less than the Mets wound up giving pitcher Kevin Appier.

Few expected **Ichiro** to be this good, but the Mets should have listened to Valentine, one of their shrewdest evaluators. Valentine said last season that the Mets should have signed Kazuhiro Sasaki, the Mariners' Japanese closer, rather than first baseman Todd Zeile. He was right about that, too.

"You couldn't see (**Ichiro**) play on a consistent basis and not say to yourself, 'There's something unbelievable about this guy. He's magic,'" Attanasio said. "Over there, he was hitting third and fourth. You could picture him as a leadoff guy, doing the things he's doing. Bobby knew that. Any international scout worth a nickel knew that. The problem was the blind bid."

Under the "posting" arrangement established by Major League Baseball and Japanese officials, each team can submit one bid for non-free-agent Japanese players. The player's team has the right to accept or reject the highest offer.

The Mariners offered **Ichiro** several advantages—Japanese ownership, a Japanese teammate who had achieved success, Pacific Rim proximity. They ingratiated themselves with **Ichiro** when he participated in their 1999 spring training. And several major league executives suspect that they struck a "house deal"—some kind of pre-arrangement with **Ichiro** and/or Orix.

The Mets make no such claim, though Phillips says, "We anticipated Seattle would win the bidding." The amounts of the losing bids were not disclosed. Phillips says the Mets' bid was "one of the more significant," but a major league source says that no club was within \$5 million of the Mariners.

"They killed everybody," says Tigers G.M. Randy Smith, whose team did not bid. "There wasn't going to be another team that had a chance." Adds Wilpon, "They valued the player differently than anybody else in baseball. And they were right. They are reaping the benefits, and they deserve them."

The Mets, meanwhile, are sputtering along below .500 heading into this weekend's Subway Series rematch against the Yankees. Injuries forced

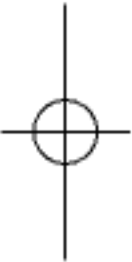
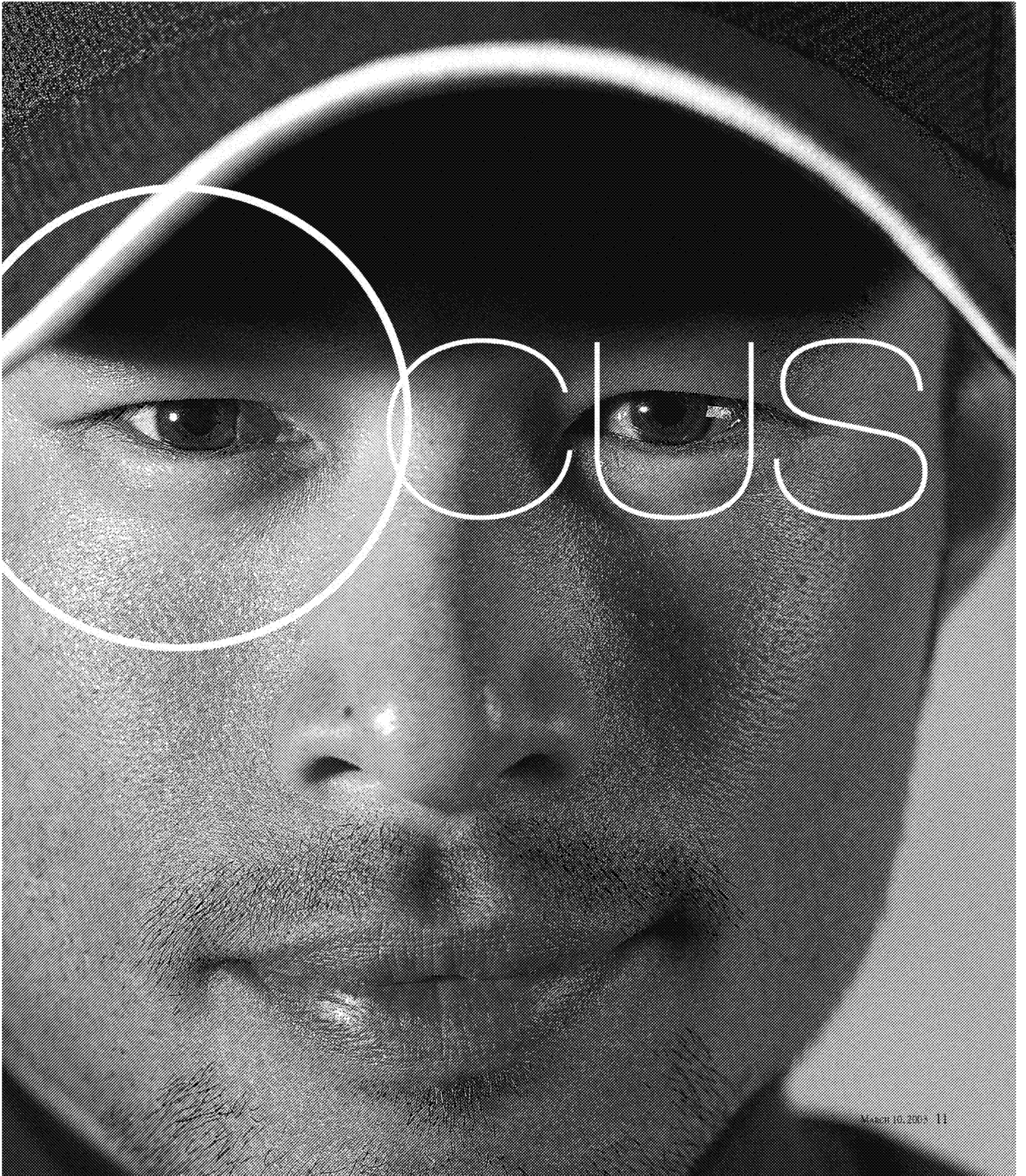
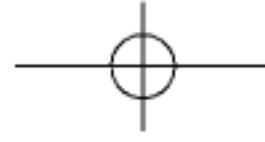
Valentine to use 52 different lineups in the first 60 games. Phillips, however, says, "We've had some periods where we've had everybody playing together, and it hasn't been close to what our expectations were."

Wilpon bristles at any suggestion that the team overestimated its talent, pointing out that the Mets were on an upward slope, nearly making the postseason in '98, getting there in '99 and reaching the World Series in 2000.

"You can't look back," Wilpon says. "You do what you have to do. We might have gotten Sheffield, OK? But we might have given up so much of our club it wouldn't have mattered."

They didn't have to give up any of their club for **Ichiro**. They needed only to act on the recommendation of their manager. **TSN**

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## 'The key is to always make sure you're in a normal

checking the direction of the wind? There is a giant flag in left-center field at Comerica Park, but he didn't seem to be looking that far back. Was he confirming the number of outs on the scoreboard? Maybe he was getting information about the batter from the video board.

"I'm always looking in that direction, but not for any of those reasons," Ichiro says. "I identify several points in every ballpark, and by looking at them I achieve mental control. The idea is to always make sure you're in a normal mental state. By looking at the point, I assure myself that my mind is in a normal state. I believe your best chance to perform at your maximum potential is when you're in a state of normalcy. So I guess you could say the exercise of looking at the points is a form of preparation. You know, preparation comes in many ways: an appropriate diet, the proper amount of sleep, daily conditioning, and so on. Keeping your mind in a normal state by referring to a fixed point during a game is just another form of preparation."



**T**he first outfield assist of Ichiro's career in the majors has become a highlight play known as The Throw. The clothesline relay from right field to third base nailed the A's Terrence Long and has come to define Ichiro's defensive brilliance.

Pardon **Ichiro** for downplaying that moment. It's not that he's not proud of it, but ask him and he'll rattle off a bunch of unheralded plays that he believes define him better than that throw at Oakland. One of them went almost unnoticed in the series at Detroit last season. With the Mariners ahead, 3-0, in the fifth inning, with one out and a runner at first, **Ichiro** fielded a line drive on a bounce and threw out a runner at second for what was scored a 9-6 fielder's choice. It was a seemingly unspectacular outfield assist and had little meaning in the Mariners' 8-2 victory.

But to **Ichiro**, it was the type of play he's most proud of. "You can't make that play unless you are in a normal mental state," he says. He was charging the dropping ball at full speed. If he had kept coming hard, he probably would have fielded it on a short bounce, but the runner likely would have taken second because Ichiro's momentum would have made it difficult to stop, set and throw quickly. But **Ichiro** slowed, fielded the ball on a longer bounce and was able to set himself quicker to make the throw. Getting the out at second required a split-second judgment while running at full speed. Only **Ichiro** knew what he was going to do. The runner had to hold close to first to see if the ball would be caught. When the ball fell, the runner had to go and **Ichiro**

nailed him.

"If I wasn't in the right frame of mind to be able to think that play through clearly, I couldn't have made it," he says. "If I had succumbed to some kind of pressure that I had to do everything to catch the ball on the fly, I wouldn't have been able to make that play. The key is to always make sure you're in a normal mental state so you can play your normal game."

By contrast, as scintillating as The Throw was, there was nothing mentally challenging about it. Just eight games into his rookie season, runners didn't yet have reason to respect his arm. Figuring that would be the case, all he had to do was look at the runner grinding it out in front of him and make an instinctive play. The resulting perfect throw simply was what he is physically capable of. While requiring less athleticism, the play in Detroit depended on a clear and focused mind, which **Ichiro** always strives to achieve.

**Ichiro** got a dose of division intensity last July. The Mariners went into Anaheim for the first of successive weekend series against the Angels. The first-place Mariners were up by four games over the A's and Angels and had won six of seven from the Angels in April. Since the Mariners' opening day win over the A's in 2001, Ichiro's first game in America, the Mariners had not been out of first place except for a few games in early April of last season. But the surprising Angels were surging. They were 48-25 since the Mariners had last seen them. These six games were Anaheim's chance to

announce its arrival.

The Angels swept Seattle in the first series and arrived at Safeco Field for the return engagement just one game out of first place. A split of the first two games set up a dramatic series finale. It was a beauty—so tight that each team advanced only one runner as far as second base through seven innings. With the game scoreless, No. 9 hitter Carlos Guillen led off the bottom of the eighth with a single to left. The sellout crowd cheered wildly, sensing a Mariners rally. Here was the game's most reliable hitter, Ichiro, coming up with the job of getting Guillen to second. Ichiro squared to bunt Kevin Appier's first pitch, but he bounced it in the air and forced Guillen at second. The crowd hushed, but only momentarily because the Mariners still had the speedy Ichiro at first. An out later, Appier bounced a pitch that rolled away from catcher Jose Molina. The crowd roared again as Ichiro broke for second. But there was a sudden silence when Molina recovered quickly and caught **Ichiro** in a rundown. Inning over. Rally snuffed. Ichiro's play directly led to two outs, and his mistakes seemed magnified when the Angels scored in the ninth and won, 1-0, leaving town in first place.

**Ichiro** describes that game as "not just my worst game in America, but the worst game I can remember in my professional career." He can accept the reality that even good hitters fail 70 percent of the time (or closer to 65 percent in his case), but he has no tolerance for what he terms "avoidable mistakes."

In the somber Mariners clubhouse, most players sat in a motionless funk. There was a slight stir coming from Ichiro's locker, the same stir that usually comes from that corner of the room after a game. **Ichiro** was engaged in his routine of caring for his glove. Win or lose, start or come off the bench, ending the day with an expression of appreciation to his handcrafted glove is important to Ichiro's soul. It's a private moment at his locker in which he routinely wipes away dirt, applies a protective cream and checks the strength of the strings. As sure as this is one early step in preparing his equipment for the next game, he's also cleansing his mind. It's here during the exchange with his glove that **Ichiro** carefully works through any frustrations he has with his performance that day. The session with his glove after the Angels game was particularly meaningful.

"The goal is to have no regrets at the end of every day," **Ichiro** says. "It would be nice to be perfect on a daily basis, but since we're human beings, that's impossible. So the goal is to be as close as possible. In order to achieve that, it is imperative to set aside a period of self-reflection each day. That's what the time with my glove represents for me. The glove is directly connected to the game. There's a special

## mental state so you can play your normal game.'

meaning in reflecting back on your day's work while paying homage to a piece of equipment that helped you. So while I care for my glove, I also reflect back on my mistakes and try to identify the causes. It's mostly about things that happen in the game, but it can also be about things like sleep, diet and that kind of stuff."

When satisfied that he has carefully tended to his glove, Ichiro puts it away. As easily as he puts the glove to rest, he also leaves his emotions in the locker room. Frustration does not follow Ichiro out of the ballpark.

Later, he says, "My reflection from that game was I wasn't performing in a normal frame of mind. I was a bit eager, impatient, and that's not the way to be. But in a big game like that, your emotions are such that you want to settle it quickly. And there's a psychology working there that even though (the pitch I bunted) is a ball, you want to do something with it. The conclusion is, I have to work harder to keep my emotions in a normal state and allow myself to play as if a big game were a normal game."

**Beneath Ichiro's steely gaze is a player who combines great skill with great mental clarity. Together, these attributes allow his ability to flow freely on the diamond.**



In most dugouts, players congregate on the outfield side while the manager and coaches gather on the home plate end. But Ichiro sits silently on the infield end. Bench coach John McLaren, who followed Piniella to the Devil Rays in the offseason, used to sit next to Ichiro. "I think it helps him concentrate on the pitchers and focus on the game better, but I've never asked him," McLaren says. What McLaren does know for certain, though, is that even as

Ichiro sits and watches the field intently, he is relaxed beyond his appearance. "Pretty much, I just try to leave him alone, but when you do say something to him on the bench, he's always ready with a humorous comeback," McLaren says. He recalls a game in which Mariners second baseman Bret Boone was walking around the dugout saying some off-the-wall stuff. Smiling and shaking his head, McLaren blurted out, "Boonie's nuts." In a classic deadpan, Ichiro slowly removed his view from the field, glanced at McLaren, and quickly put to use a word he had just picked up in the clubhouse. "Absolutely." The two shared a quick laugh, and Ichiro returned his attention to the field.

With Ichiro, that scene is as likely to take place in a March exhibition as in October because he's always prepared, focused and, most of all, relaxed. **TSN**

*Brad Lefton is a St. Louis-based journalist who spent the 2001 season producing a documentary on Ichiro for Japanese TV. He has spent his career covering baseball in Japan and America.*

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