

International Man of Mystery

Even after leading the Seattle Mariners to the baseball playoffs, Japanese rookie Ichiro Suzuki remains an enigma

By Mike Greenstein

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Back in April, the Seattle Mariners baseball team seemed unlikely to approach the 91 wins and American League Championship Series they reached the previous season. After all, the M's would have an anemic offense without Alex Rodriguez, the free-agent shortstop who defected to the division rival Texas Rangers for a record \$252 million contract. Some experts predicted a plunge to the cellar.

Six months later, the Mariners enter the playoffs (beginning Oct. 9 at Safeco Field against the Cleveland Indians) with one of the highest winning percentages in the history of baseball. Throughout the Pacific Northwest, anything less than a World Series title will be widely viewed as disappointing.

Without Rodriguez and previously departed superstars Randy Johnson and Ken Griffey Jr., the Mariners won so often this season because of consistent execution of baseball fundamentals from everyone on their roster. Staying remarkably focused for the full length of baseball's 162-game grind, they never lost more than two games in a row until after they clinched their division title, boasting a different hero virtually every day.

The most important cog in the Mariner machine, however, was the player who last spring was their biggest unknown. While rookie right fielder Ichiro Suzuki had won seven consecutive batting titles with a .353 lifetime batting average in Japan, professional baseball there is considered no better than the top minor leagues in the U.S. A few Japanese pitchers had succeeded here, but no Japanese hitter had ever played in the major leagues. Even after the Mariners paid his Japanese team \$13.125 million just for negotiating rights and signed Suzuki to a three-year contract for \$15 to \$18 million more, many spring training scouts looked at his tiny frame and slap-happy hitting style and scoffed.

Nobody's laughing now, and his contract looks like a relative bargain--at least in baseball terms. Ichiro, the only player in Major League Baseball to have his first name on the back of his jersey (a holdover from Japan, where three other teammates had the same surname) ranked among league leaders in hits, runs, stolen bases and batting average. A cinch for the American League Rookie of the Year award and a contender for Most Valuable Player, Ichiro also topped fan voting for July's All-Star Game, making him arguably the most popular baseball player in the world. Merchandise carrying his face, name or number (51) flies out of stores faster than Junior or A-Rod stuff ever did, and in August

fans camped all night outside the stadium to be in line for a plastic bobblehead doll in his likeness.

As popular as he has become, however, to most American fans Ichiro remains the Austin Powers of baseball, an international man of mystery. His already collectible baseball card says Ichiro is 5-foot-9, 160 pounds, 27 years old, born in Kasugai, southwest of Tokyo, and that he came from the Orix Blue Wave of Japan's Pacific League. He's married to a Japanese television celebrity, and the couple's rock-star popularity over there is so high that they had to sneak away to Los Angeles to have a private wedding. The Japanese are so hungry for all things Ichiro that his father, who personally coached him as a youngster, has opened a four-story museum in his honor, charging fans \$8 apiece to look at his son's memorabilia.

In the U.S., however, aside from the incredible feats he has accomplished on the field (laser-beam throws, game-saving catches, dramatic home runs), fans have gotten to know little about him. Most players receive media scrutiny as they come up through the minor leagues or earn reputations with other teams before coming to a team in trades or as free agents. Once they arrive, they are interviewed incessantly on TV and radio, sharing their opinions on issues pertinent and mundane.

Ichiro, on the other hand, is rarely heard and seldom seen without a bat or a glove in his hands. When his post-game comments appear in newspapers, they are always brief and strictly limited to the day's action. National magazines (*Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine*) came to the Mariners' clubhouse looking for lengthy cover profiles and left scratching their heads. Other than a press conference right after his November 2000 signing, a brief ESPN interview before the All-Star Game and other tightly controlled All-Star related sessions, Ichiro's off-the-field Seattle TV exposure consisted of a single photo op of him clowning around with young kids during a Mariners' stay-in-school appearance.

His few radio interviews are generally uninformative and hard to follow. The fawning Mariners broadcasters direct their innocuous questions not to Ichiro, but to his interpreter (as in, "Ask Ichiro how he feels about the All-Star voting"), which dilutes and delays the proceedings. After the question, the interpreter speaks to Ichiro in Japanese, and after Ichiro responds in Japanese, the translator answers in English. Since both unfamiliar Japanese voices speak fast and sound similar on the air, it's hard to tell who's talking. And each Japanese answer comes out about one-third as long in English, leaving the impression (real or imagined) that the translator is condensing Ichiro's remarks.

The language barrier is a big part of his media reticence, Ichiro has explained, although in his ESPN interview his use of idiomatic phrases like "mired in a funk" and "nuances of the game" indicate his command of English is better than he has let on. Another factor is the constant barrage of Japanese media that he and Mariner relief pitcher Kazuhiro Sasaki must endure. Early in the season a Japanese publication was widely rumored to have offered a \$1 million bounty for a nude photo of Ichiro; later, he and Sasaki briefly

stopped talking to the Japanese media when photographers staked out Ichiro's suburban home.

But other elements of the persona Ichiro has revealed so far suggest that his veil of silence is just an extension of an intentional cloak of intrigue that he wraps around himself. His teammates acknowledged it by nicknaming him the Wizard, which applies both to his magical exploits in the outfield and to the way he deploys his bat like a wand, spreading his spell (base hits) to all parts of the field. Furthering that theme, fans dubbed his regular station in right field Area 51, a homage to Ichiro's uniform number and the locale famous for UFO sightings, alluding to a place where opponents' fly balls disappear into thin air.

Certainly the spiky hair, scraggly beard and dark sunglasses he favors further that air of mystery, making him look more like a martial arts movie star than a jock. And three recently published books provide more evidence of Ichiro's shaman-like otherworldliness.

In *"Baseball Is Just Baseball": The Understated Ichiro* (TNI Books), University of Washington English professor David Shields presents 112 short Ichiro pronouncements culled from newspaper articles and radio interviews during the first half of the 2001 season. Through his introduction and quote selection, Shields purports that Ichiro's comments convey a kind of mystical Eastern wisdom. Taken together, the quotes certainly reveal a person who values Zen qualities such as simplicity, balance and harmony, and who revels in challenge, not in achievement. Based on his team's won-loss record, apparently some of this philosophy has already rubbed off on his teammates, and his fans would obviously be smart to follow as well. "Every at-bat, there's something to learn from, something to improve," Ichiro said. "It's in the seeking that you find satisfaction."

Rob Rains' *Baseball Samurais--Ichiro Suzuki and the Asian Invasion* (St. Martin's Paperbacks) recounts numerous instances of the awe Ichiro has earned from opponents and teammates for his skill, versatility and self-discipline. "Most of us try to groove one swing," says Mariner second baseman Bret Boone, Ichiro's competition for the American League Most Valuable Player award. "He's got about five different grooves, and he breaks out a different one depending on what the situation is." After losing a game on Ichiro's extra-inning home run, former Texas Rangers manager Johnny Oates marveled, "During each at-bat, he knew what to do at the plate. If they needed a man on base, he got on base. If they needed a fly ball, he hits the fly ball. Suzuki did everything he was supposed to do on the field."

Rains' book also includes chapters on Mariners relief pitching ace Sasaki, no-hit hurler Hideo Nomo (now with the Boston Red Sox), and other current Japanese players in the big leagues, all pitchers except for Ichiro and New York Mets outfielder Tsuyoshi Shinjo. Another chapter covers the history of Japanese baseball, which by all accounts (in particular, Robert Whiting's *You Gotta Have Wa*, which chronicles the difficulties of American professionals playing in Japan) is a different strain than America's pastime.

Ichiro reflects that tradition, which stresses "wa"--group harmony, as illustrated in the proverb, "the nail that sticks up shall be hammered down."

While Shields and Rains, a sportswriter from St. Louis, have merely compiled and organized previously published material, Jim Allen has personally followed Ichiro's career since 1992. A sportswriter and columnist for the English-language Tokyo newspaper Daily Yomiuri, Allen has covered Japanese baseball since 1984. His 96-page paperback *Ichiro Magic!* (Kodansha America) is predominantly a photo book, but also includes the most detailed commentary yet on Ichiro's development as a player and as a person. In a chapter about his high school years, Allen describes the Spartan existence and taunting from upperclassmen Ichiro endured, but how he persevered by keeping his eye on the prize. "He was something else when it came to his powers of concentration," his high school baseball coach recalls.

Since baseball reveres its past, the sports commentators lauding Ichiro's accomplishments have continuously groped to name his historical antecedents in the game. Some cite the obvious: Spray hitters Rod Carew and Tony Gwynn, both members of baseball's exclusive 3,000-hit club, for the way they control the bat, or Rickey Henderson for his speed, occasional power and ability to wreak havoc on the bases from the lead-off spot in the batting order. Others point to more obscure players, such as Ralph Garr, who won a batting title for the Atlanta Braves in the Seventies, or Paul Waner, a Hall of Fame outfielder for the Pittsburgh Pirates in the 1930s. The way Ichiro and his countrymen burst on the baseball scene bears similarity to the immediate impact Jackie Robinson and other veteran Negro League stars had when they broke baseball's initial color barrier in the late 1940s and Fifties.

While there's validity to all these citations, Ichiro's supernatural start in the big leagues might be more closely compared to figures from literature, not history: Joe Hardy of Douglas Wallop's *The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant* (which became the musical *Damn Yankees*), and Roy Hobbs of Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*, later a Barry Levinson film starring Robert Redford. In both stories, a player arrives from nowhere, suddenly and mysteriously, new to his team and the big leagues but already seasoned and at the top of his game. Both come with a past nobody knows--and most who meet them (except the nefarious press, of course) are content not to explore. Both lead the way to improbable victories with wondrous, Ruthian exploits that inspire their teammates as well as their fans, only to vanish at their moments of ultimate triumph.

Unlike Hobbs and Hardy, Ichiro won't disappear after the World Series--for two more seasons, anyway. By then he'll have matured into an even better and more complete player than he is now. He'll learn the tendencies of American pitchers, gain upper-body strength for more power, get more selective in the pitches he swings at and more aggressive on the base paths. His batting statistics will become even more eye-popping, his fielding more incredible. Inevitably, he will start to speak English in public and become more accepting of the media. Eventually, he and his American agents will unleash a tsunami of publicity and endorsements (sunglasses and kids' magic/amusement

centers would be naturals) that will make the marketing of A-Rod look like a minor-league giveaway night.

At that point, of course, the Mariners will once again be trying to figure out how they can hang onto a superstar they nurtured. And then the answer to Ichiro's final mystery will be revealed: Will it be the wallet or the wa?

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Book Information

"Baseball Is Just Baseball"--the Understated Ichiro by David Shields. TNI Books, 2001. Paperback, 120 pages. \$10.

Baseball Samurais--Ichiro Suzuki and the Asian Invasion by Rob Rains. St. Martin's Paperbacks, 2001. 209 pages. \$6.50.

Ichiro Magic! by Jim Allen. Kodansha America, October 2001. Paperback, 96 pages. \$14.