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How Baseball Counts a Two-Way Player

Reading level 13 · 1754 words

Through the end of the 2026 regular season, Baseball-Reference credits Shohei Ohtani with 3.2 wins above replacement as a hitter and 3.2 as a pitcher, a combined 6.4. As a batter he hit .275 with 30 home runs and 81 runs batted in over 135 games. As a pitcher he made 14 starts, allowed 1.79 earned runs per nine innings and struck out 95 batters in 85 2/3 innings. Each of those lines is a measurement, and each answers a different question. This book asks what batting average, on-base percentage, slugging, earned run average and WAR count and leave out. It also asks where two respected systems disagree about the same pitcher, how the rules came to allow one player on two ledgers, and what is still argued about a player whose value comes from two jobs.

Batting average, hits divided by at-bats, is among the oldest measures of a hitter. In recent years the league-wide figure has hovered around .250, and in 2026 it was .244, while Ohtani hit .275. MLB's glossary names the statistic's two blind spots: it ignores walks and hit-by-pitches, and it treats a single and a home run alike. In 1887 walks counted as hits for a single season, and the sport dropped the idea. On-base percentage addresses the first blind spot. It was invented in the 1940s or 1950s by the Dodgers executive Branch Rickey and the statistician Allan Roth, and it became an official statistic only in 1984. Ohtani's 2026 on-base percentage was .377 against a league average of .318.

Slugging percentage addresses the second blind spot by weighting hits: total bases divided by at-bats, so a single counts one, a double two, a triple three and a home run four. Ohtani slugged .512 in 2026 against a league average of .400. Adding on-base and slugging gives OPS, which was .889 for him and .719 for the league. Because ballparks and seasons differ, OPS+ rescales the figure so that 100 is league average and 150 is 50 percent better. Baseball-Reference lists his 2026 OPS+ as 143, or 43 percent better than average. A number like that means something only against the field it came from, and none of these measures says anything about defense or about pitching.

Pitchers get their own pair of measures. Earned run average is nine times the earned runs allowed, divided by innings pitched, and earned runs leave out runs that scored because of an error. Ohtani's 2026 ERA was 1.79. Fielding independent pitching, or FIP, ignores what happens once a ball is put in play. It counts only strikeouts, walks, hit-by-pitches and home runs, because a pitcher is believed to control the outcome of balls in play only partly. His 2026 FIP was 2.61. Which number describes the season better depends on the question. FanGraphs, which uses FIP, writes that there is some skill in suppressing hits on balls in play, but "we have no idea exactly how much."

Wins above replacement tries to put hitting, running, fielding and pitching on one scale. FanGraphs frames the question this way: if this player were injured and the team had to replace him with a freely available minor leaguer, how much value would it lose? For a hitter, WAR adds batting, baserunning and fielding runs above average, a position adjustment, a league adjustment and a replacement-level amount, then divides by the runs it takes to win one game that season. FanGraphs warns that WAR "is not meant to be a perfectly precise indicator." Its rule of thumb calls 6 or more WAR an MVP level, but a 6.4 and a 6.1, it says, cannot be told apart.

The two best-known versions, FanGraphs's fWAR and Baseball-Reference's bWAR, share a framework and a replacement level but treat pitchers differently. FanGraphs builds pitcher WAR on FIP, and Baseball-Reference builds it on runs allowed. Ohtani's 2023 shows the gap. His ERA was 3.14 and his FIP was 4.00. Baseball-Reference credits him with 6.1 WAR as a hitter and 3.8 as a pitcher, 9.9 in all. FanGraphs lists 6.6 and 2.3, or 8.9. Both systems put his 2023 at roughly nine or ten wins. The hitting figures are half a win apart. The pitching figures are 1.5 apart, much of which is the distance between a pitcher judged by the runs that scored and one judged by the strikeouts, walks and home runs he controlled.

WAR must also account for position. A shortstop who hits like a first baseman is worth more, because an average shortstop prevents more runs than an average first baseman, so the formula adds runs for hard positions and subtracts them for easy ones. FanGraphs's table gives a shortstop plus 7.5 runs for a full 162-game season and a designated hitter minus 17.5. The page itself concedes that the DH adjustment might be too negative, "because it's harder to hit when you're not playing in the field." In 2024 Ohtani did not pitch, and Baseball-Reference still credited his hitting with 9.0 WAR. Voters made him the first full-time DH to win an MVP award. Before the vote, CBS Sports had written that the offensive bar is higher for DHs.

Does WAR miss value in a player who does both jobs? In September 2022, MLB.com's Mike Petriello went through the arguments. In games that Ohtani pitched, he hit worse, with an .736 OPS against .924 as a designated hitter. Carrying a pitcher and a hitter in one roster spot has value, but the analyst Russell Carleton put it at "a few tenths of a win." There were costs too: the Angels could not use the DH spot to rest other hitters, and they regularly used a six-man rotation. Petriello concluded that WAR was not built to measure everything Ohtani does, but that it was hard to argue it missed much. That day WAR had him near 8 against Aaron Judge's 9.7. Judge won the MVP award, and Ohtani finished second.

Newer numbers measure the motion itself. Statcast, MLB's tracking system, has relied since 2020 on a platform of 12 video cameras at each ballpark. It reports pitch speed at the pitcher's hand, exit velocity off the bat, and launch angle, which is the vertical angle off the bat. A fly ball is 25 to 50 degrees. MLB's glossary uses an Ohtani home run to define a blast, a swing whose squared-up rate (out of 100) plus its bat speed adds up to at least 164. Squared up

means close to the fastest exit speed that swing and pitch allow. His bat speed was 82.8 miles an hour, and the contact was 93 percent squared up. His 2026 average bat speed was 74.7 miles an hour, against about 72.3 for the 209 qualified hitters, by our arithmetic.

Rules are measurements that get adjusted. The Knickerbocker Rules of 1845 said that the ball must be pitched, not thrown, and strikes did not yet exist. An 1857 convention of 16 New York-area clubs set the 90-foot base paths and put the pitcher 45 feet away. Overhand pitching became fully legal in the National League in 1884, and in 1893 the distance became 60 feet 6 inches. After 1968, the "Year of the Pitcher," the mound dropped from 15 inches to 10 and the strike zone was shortened. MLB's glossary describes a pattern: as pitchers experimented, "the rules evolved to rein in their dominance." The American League added the designated hitter in 1973, and the National League in 2022.

Baseball's own origin story had to be weighed against evidence too. A commission appointed in 1905 reported on December 30, 1907, that the first scheme for playing baseball was devised by Abner Doubleday at Cooperstown, New York, in 1839, relying on letters from a mining engineer. Doubleday's diaries never mention baseball, and most of the commission's documents were lost in a fire in 1916. The Library of Congress holds earlier evidence: a Princeton student's diary entry from March 22, 1786, about playing "baste ball" on the campus, and a 1787 American printing of a children's book with a "Base-Ball" rhyme that first appeared in London 43 years earlier. A Library of Congress blog post says the game's roots lie in colonial-era soil and in England.

In September 2022, MLB announced three rule changes for 2023, approved by majority vote of a joint committee of club representatives, players and an umpire: a pitch timer, limits on shifts and larger bases. The timer set 15 seconds between pitches with the bases empty and 20 with runners on, later trimmed to 18. Two infielders had to stand on each side of second base, and the bases grew from 15 inches square to 18. MLB's stated goals were pace of play, more action and fewer injuries. The average nine-inning game fell from 3:04 in 2022 to 2:40 in 2023, and it stayed between 2:36 and 2:40 through 2025. League batting average rose from .243 to .248, and stolen bases from 2,486 to 3,503. The rules began together, so those numbers cannot say which did what. Ohtani's 59 steals in 2024 came on the new bases.

In 2026 the umpire's strike zone became a measurement too. Under the Automated Ball-Strike Challenge System, a pitcher, catcher or batter who disagrees with a call taps his hat or helmet at once, and Hawk-Eye cameras check the pitch. The zone is a flat rectangle as wide as home plate, 17 inches, with its top at 53.5 percent of the batter's height and its bottom at 27 percent. Each team starts with two challenges and keeps the ones it wins. In that first season, the Associated Press reported on October 2, 2026, there were 10,557 challenges, about 4.35 a game, and 54 percent of them changed the call. The umpire still makes the first call. Ohtani's 81 walks and 152 strikeouts in 2026 all came in the first season with the system.

In early November 2026, MLB named Ohtani one of three finalists for the National League MVP Award, with Pete Crow-Armstrong of the Cubs and Brice Turang of the Brewers. The winner is to be announced on November 12. The two ledgers read 3.2 and 3.2 at Baseball-Reference, and the two season lines read an .889 OPS and a 1.79 ERA. Of the 2022 race, in which he finished second, Petriello wrote that there was "really not a wrong answer." The formulas supply the inputs. Whether to add the two ledgers, weigh them or set them aside is a judgment each voter makes, and no formula has settled it.

Questions

1. Why do FanGraphs and Baseball-Reference give Ohtani's 2023 pitching a different WAR?

A. One system counts only hitting
B. One builds pitcher WAR on runs allowed and the other on FIP
C. One uses a different baseball

2. What blind spot does on-base percentage address in batting average?

A. It ignores walks and hit-by-pitches
B. It counts errors as hits
C. It measures only home runs

3. In the sentence "the rules evolved to rein in their dominance," what does dominance mean?

A. Speed
B. Weakness
C. Control over the other side

4. Why does the book say the 2023 results cannot show which new rule caused which change?

A. The rules took effect together
B. MLB refused to publish results
C. Only one rule was changed

5. What does FanGraphs say about telling a 6.4 WAR player from a 6.1 WAR player?

A. The 6.4 is always better
B. They cannot be told apart with WAR
C. WAR cannot be negative

6. According to Petriello's 2022 piece, what did Ohtani's batting look like in games he pitched?

A. Better than as a DH
B. The same as as a DH
C. Worse than as a DH

Words to know

replacement: baseline player
adjustment: correction
ledger: record book
dominance: control
qualified: meeting the minimum

Answer key: How Baseball Counts a Two-Way Player

1. B. One builds pitcher WAR on runs allowed and the other on FIP
2. A. It ignores walks and hit-by-pitches
3. C. Control over the other side
4. A. The rules took effect together
5. B. They cannot be told apart with WAR
6. C. Worse than as a DH