Name: _____ Date: _____

Shohei Ohtani and the Two-Way Player

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1330 words

On one night in October 2025, a baseball player pitched six innings without letting in a run. He also hit three home runs. Who is Shohei Ohtani? He was born on July 5, 1994, in Oshu, Japan. He plays for the Los Angeles Dodgers. Through early November 2026, he has won four Most Valuable Player awards and, with the Dodgers, two World Series. What does a two-way player do, and why are there so few? How does baseball measure a pitcher's speed and a hitter's power?

That night was October 17, 2025. It was Game 4 of the National League Championship Series, and the Dodgers were hosting the Milwaukee Brewers. Ohtani pitched six innings and struck out ten batters. The Brewers did not score against him. At the plate, he hit three home runs, and the first came in the first inning. Los Angeles won, 5 to 1, and finished a sweep of the series. He was named its most valuable player.

Baseball's roster rules treat pitching and hitting as two separate jobs. In general, every active player must be listed as either a pitcher or a position player. A team may carry only 13 pitchers, or 14 in September. A player can earn a special two-way label. To get it, he must have pitched at least 20 major-league innings. He must also have started at least 20 games as a hitter. Both must happen in the current season or the two before. Two-way players do not count against the pitcher limit.

He is not the first. Babe Ruth pitched and hit for the Boston Red Sox. In 1918, he won 13 games as a pitcher and hit 11 home runs. In 1920, he joined the Yankees. By then he had almost stopped pitching, and he hit 54 home runs. As of 2022, MLB.com's records showed Ruth in 1918 as the only other player with ten wins and ten home runs in one season. Ruth played long before the designated hitter, so the two men worked under different rules.

Ohtani's two-way career began in Japan. In 2013, at 18, he made his pro debut for the Nippon-Ham Fighters. He played right field, and he also pitched. Japan's pro league is called Nippon Professional Baseball. He bats left-handed and throws right-handed. In 2014, he won 11 games and hit 10 home runs in one season, which MLB.com calls a first for a Japanese player. In 2016, he was the Pacific League's Most Valuable Player.

Speed is where his pitching became famous. On September 13, 2016, a radar gun read one of his fastballs at 164 kilometers an hour. That is about 102 miles an hour. At that time, it was the fastest pitch in Japan's pro league history. Statcast, MLB's tracking system, has his four-seam fastball averaging 98.1 miles an hour in 2026. It is the pitch he throws most. A four-seam fastball is almost always a pitcher's fastest and straightest pitch.

How does a ballpark know that? Statcast runs on a platform of 12 video cameras at each ballpark. A pitch's velocity is its top speed, at the release point. The ball slows down on its way to the plate. By our arithmetic, a pitch that held a steady 100 miles an hour would cross 60 feet 6 inches in about four tenths of a second. A real pitch is a little slower by the time it arrives, and it leaves the hand a few feet in front of the rubber. So that flight time is only a rough guide.

The 60 feet 6 inches is not ancient. The first surviving rules, written in 1845 by the Knickerbocker club, gave no pitching distance, and a pitcher had to throw underhand. The distance changed several times, and in 1893 it moved back to 60 feet 6 inches. MLB.com's glossary says the rules changed to rein in pitchers as they found more speed and movement. In the earliest days, strikes did not exist yet, and the goal was simply for the batter to put the ball in play.

Hitting has a speed too. It is called exit velocity. It is how fast the ball comes off the bat. In 2025, Ohtani averaged 94.9 miles an hour. By our arithmetic from Baseball Savant's tables, the typical qualified hitter averaged about 90. Only two hitters averaged more than Ohtani. Statcast calls a ball hit 95 miles an hour or harder hard-hit. The ball must also leave at the right angle to carry over the fence.

One of his pitches is a splitter. It looks like a fastball and then dives near the plate. MLB.com says the splitter is much more common in Japan's pro league than in the majors. In 2021, hitters batted .087 against his splitter. That was 11 hits in 127 at-bats, the lowest in the majors that year against any pitch that was used often enough to count. Batting average is hits divided by at-bats. Across the league, it usually sits near .250.

Ohtani joined the Angels in 2018 and was named the American League's Rookie of the Year. In 2021, he hit 46 home runs and also pitched. All 30 first-place votes for the league's Most Valuable Player went to him. On July 13, 2021, at Coors Field, he became the first player chosen for an All-Star Game as both a pitcher and a hitter. He started as the American League's pitcher and its designated hitter.

A designated hitter, or DH, bats in place of the pitcher and does not play defense. The American League adopted the DH in 1973, and the National League in 2022, apart from one season in 2020. Before 2022, a two-way player who left the mound could not keep hitting as the DH. In 2021, the Angels sometimes moved him to the outfield after a start. MLB.com said no ball was hit to him there. The 2022 fix treats a starting pitcher who bats for himself as "two separate people." MLB.com said it was being dubbed the Ohtani rule.

On March 21, 2023, Japan played the United States in the World Baseball Classic final, in Miami. Japan led 3 to 2 in the ninth inning. Ohtani came in from the bullpen to pitch. He got the last out on a full-count breaking ball. The batter who struck out was Mike Trout, his Angels teammate. Ohtani was voted most valuable player of the tournament. Months later, he was

the unanimous American League MVP for the second time.

In December 2023, the Dodgers announced that they had signed him. In 2024, he did not pitch. On September 19, 2024, in Miami, he hit three home runs and stole two bases. A stolen base is when a runner takes the next base while the pitcher is throwing. That night he became the first player with 50 home runs and 50 stolen bases in a season. He won his first World Series that fall. He was also voted National League MVP, the first full-time DH to win an MVP award.

In 2025, he pitched again, for the first time since 2023. The Dodgers won the World Series for the second year in a row. In 2026, he made 14 starts as a pitcher. His earned run average was 1.79, which means he allowed 1.79 earned runs for every nine innings. MLB.com calls it the most commonly accepted tool for judging pitchers. He also hit 30 home runs. The Dodgers won 100 games but lost the National League Championship Series, four games to none.

In early November 2026, MLB named him one of three finalists for the National League MVP. The winner is to be announced on November 12. Statcast came to every major-league ballpark in 2015. That was nearly a century after Ruth pitched. Today, nearly every Ohtani pitch and swing goes into a table. One table is for the arm and one is for the bat. Baseball people still argue about how to add the two tables together.

Questions

1. What does a player need to earn the two-way label under MLB's rules?

A. Pitch in a World Series
B. Pitch at least 20 major-league innings and start at least 20 games as a hitter
C. Hit 20 home runs in a season

2. Why does the book call its 100-miles-an-hour flight time only a rough guide?

A. Pitchers release the ball a few feet in front of the rubber, and the ball slows in flight
B. Radar guns cannot measure a baseball
C. The 60-foot distance changes in every ballpark

3. In the sentence "Hitters batted .087 against his splitter," what is a splitter?

A. A rule that splits a game in two
B. A pitch that looks like a fastball and then dives
C. A bat made of two pieces

4. What did the 2022 rule change allow?

A. A pitcher no longer has to bat
B. A team can carry as many pitchers as it likes
C. A starting pitcher who bats for himself can stay in as the DH after he leaves the mound

5. Why is it hard to compare Ohtani's two-way seasons with Babe Ruth's?

A. Ruth played before the designated hitter existed, so the two worked under different rules

B. Ruth never pitched

C. Ruth played in Japan

6. What does Statcast call a ball hit at 95 miles an hour or harder?

A. A bunt

B. A pop-up

C. Hard-hit

Words to know

velocity: speed

splitter: diving pitch

unanimous: every vote

designated: assigned

qualified: meeting the minimum

Answer key: Shohei Ohtani and the Two-Way Player

1. B. Pitch at least 20 major-league innings and start at least 20 games as a hitter
2. A. Pitchers release the ball a few feet in front of the rubber, and the ball slows in flight
3. B. A pitch that looks like a fastball and then dives
4. C. A starting pitcher who bats for himself can stay in as the DH after he leaves the mound
5. A. Ruth played before the designated hitter existed, so the two worked under different rules
6. C. Hard-hit