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## BASEBALL

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### On Baseball

By TYLER KEPNER

He gently places the silver case on the carpet of the [Miami Marlins'](#) clubhouse, then clicks the fasteners and lifts the lid. You know what is inside, but this is [Ichiro Suzuki](#), still a bit mysterious after all these years. You half expect the contents to glow, like the briefcase in "Pulp Fiction," a movie released more than two decades ago, in a year Suzuki hit .385.

Inside the case are eight Mizuno bats, four on the bottom rack and four on the top, alternating directions, like pairs of shoes fresh from the box. Each is prepared with a ring of pine tar in the middle, a few inches wide, and a stylized "Ichiro" stamped on the barrel.

One more thing: The bats are not



At 41, the Marlins' Ichiro Suzuki is closing in on 3,000 hits. "I feel confident putting him in any situation," his manager said.

Mike Ehrmann/Getty Images

black anymore. Michael Morse, the Marlins' first baseman, noticed this in spring training. Morse played parts of four seasons with Suzuki in Seattle and had never seen him use a light-colored bat. Suzuki explained that he had used the natural wood color in Japan.

"But, the black bat, gosh," Morse said he told him. "You did so much."

Suzuki agreed that the black bat had been good to him. Then he reminded Morse of his former life, before the major leagues.

"This bat," Morse said Suzuki told him, "nine M.V.P.s in Japan."

Morse laughed at the memory, which was embellished just a bit. Suzuki won only three Most Valuable Player Awards for the Orix Blue Wave, but he did hit at least .342 in all nine of his seasons, including his first, at age 18, in 1992.

Nobody playing in the majors today was active in the majors then. Some, like Bryce Harper and Mookie Betts, had not yet been born when Suzuki began his career with the Blue Wave. He hit .366 that season, collecting the first several dozen of his 4,127 hits — his combined total in Japan and the majors.

Suzuki was in the lineup Friday at Citi Field, batting sixth for Manager Mike Redmond, and went 1 for 4 in a 4-1 loss to the Mets. The Marlins might have the best young outfield in baseball, with Christian Yelich, Marcell Ozuna and Giancarlo Stanton — and they do not use a designated hitter. Yet Suzuki, 41, has played in every game.

"You never know," Redmond said, smiling, when asked if Suzuki might somehow play all 162. "I feel confident putting him in any situation, whether it be pinch-hitting, defense, a big at-bat, a lefty — these are the things we're talking about. His versatility is proving to be a perfect fit for us."

Suzuki is the Marlins' first Japanese player; every other team, except the Cincinnati Reds, had one before they did. A delegation of club executives flew to Japan to announce Suzuki's one-year, \$2 million contract in January.

Suzuki had played his entire major league career in the American

League — 11 ½ seasons with the [Seattle Mariners](#) and two and a half with the Yankees. Interleague play had never taken him to Miami. The Marlins, who began in 1993 as the Florida Marlins and rebranded themselves in 2012, were strangers.

“They might have been the team I knew least about,” Suzuki said through his longtime interpreter, Allen Turner. “I didn’t have that much information about the city or the team in general. The difference between the Marlins and the Yankees, the Yankees have a history. They already have themselves established. The Marlins are new, and they’re still trying to find that identity of what the Miami Marlins are all about.”

The Marlins have struggled early this season, but they are hoping for their first playoff appearance in more than a decade. Their young roster does not seem intimidated by Suzuki, as some teammates were when he played for the Mariners.

Morse was not among those. He said Suzuki was kind and helpful when Morse was a rookie, and had not changed at all.

“It’s incredible, because I know that for me personally, from when I first met him to now, I’m a totally different person,” said Morse, 33.

“This guy is the exact same person as when I first met him.”

Marlins starter Dan Haren was a teammate of Suzuki’s for one day — the 2007 All-Star Game, which Haren started as a member of the Oakland Athletics. Suzuki hit the first inside-the-park home run in All-Star history that night, after a colorful pregame address.

“Everybody assumed he didn’t speak English, because he has a translator, but he gave a perfect speech, had everyone laughing like 10 minutes before we went out there,” Haren said. “It was definitely R-rated, but it was hilarious.”

Suzuki was an All-Star in each of his first 10 seasons, a stretch that included a Rookie of the Year and an M.V.P. Award (both in 2001) and an otherworldly 2004 season in which he hit .372 and set a single-

season record with 262 hits.

At the 2009 All-Star Game, in St. Louis, Suzuki visited the grave of George Sisler, whose record he had broken. Suzuki has made six trips to the Hall of Fame Cooperstown, N.Y., and will probably be enshrined there someday.

He has 2,849 hits in the majors and is closing in on 3,000. He probably needs another season to do it, but Suzuki is exceptionally fit, and motivated. Asked how badly he wants to reach 3,000, he responded this way:

“That question is really similar to ‘Do you want to get a hit this at-bat?’ or ‘Do you want to go to the World Series?’ ” said Suzuki, who is 5 for 21 this season. “You want to get a hit every time you get up there, and everybody would love to go to the World Series. And I also know in one at-bat, you can’t get two hits. Of course that’s something I would want to do; that’s a given.”

The team, the league and the bats have changed. The pursuit rolls on.

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