Effortless Grace: A Hero in Two Hemispheres

There are a few moments in a baseball game that can't be described as anything less than perfect: the crack of the bat to hit that game-winning home run in the bottom of the ninth; the last-minute dive by a runner to safely avoid the tag of a catcher at home plate. But perhaps the greatest and rarest of all of these is robbing a batter of a homerun. Players have made their fortunes scaling outfield walls and taking long fly balls away from the outfield bleachers with spectacular grace. If there was ever a player that had mastered this sacred art of fielding, it was Ichiro.

Ichiro Suzuki was a name I frequently heard throughout my Little League career. As I sat in my dugout eagerly anticipating my next at-bat, I occasionally got pieces of advice from my coach. “Hit it like Ichiro.”

Ichiro has never been known for his power. His speed, however, made any connection between ball and bat a threat to the opposing team. A routine ground-ball to the pitcher’s mound could turn into a single in the blink of an eye. No matter how bleak the outlook seemed, Ichiro had determination I had never seen before and will likely never see again. His probable Hall of Fame career has featured some incredible statistics: 10 dominant years with 200 or more hits which was deemed impossible by baseball experts around the globe (www.baseball-reference.com) and 2001 Most Valuable Player award in his first year in the Major Leagues. Every time I struck out in Little League, I always remembered how Ichiro would always bounce back. With his perseverance in mind, I never gave up.

It was impossible to describe my excitement in 2012, when the front page of the newspaper announced that Ichiro was becoming a Yankee. To me, it was a match made in heaven: one of my favorite players on my favorite team. Ichiro was much more than simple statistics and awards. He served as a symbol of perseverance and hope to both the United States and his home country of Japan. In 2011, Suzuki donated 100 million yen to the Japanese Red Cross in order to aid earthquake relief efforts, motivating the Mariners to donate profits from the first six home games (sports.espn.go.com). Additionally, when Ichiro was traded to the Yankees, he signed his equipment and donated the proceeds to 26
different charities across New York (kenthimmel.blogspot.com). I realized then that one of baseball’s greatest players was also one of the world’s greatest international heroes.

Ichiro settled in well with the Yankees in 2012, leading the team to the postseason with his stellar performance at the plate. However, my story with Ichiro didn’t end there. During the summer of 2013, I was offered a chance to interview relief pitcher David Robertson for Newsday and explore Yankee Stadium as a reporter. Words cannot describe my energy as I sprinted to the ballpark, took my stadium pass to the stadium, and followed my guide through the maze of hallways that held endless secrets.

After hours of exploration, it was finally time to step onto the field. The entire team was out for batting practice. Up at bat was none other than Ichiro himself, looking as confident as ever as he scattered hits all over the ballpark.

I watched with bated breath as he walked back towards the dugout where I was sitting and looked me in the eye with a smile on his face. He didn’t speak English well and he had never seen me before, but the way he shook my hand and welcomed me into this unfamiliar place said enough. That same day, Ichiro hit a monstrous home run that helped the Yankees win the game, and is a moment in my life I will never forget.

Ichiro’s kindness and compassion are inspiring. He is a symbol of Japan in more ways than one. He is tranquil and patient at the plate, using precision and grace in every at-bat. His generosity has transcended his native country and he has become the embodiment of international charity. Most of all, Ichiro is the embodiment of perseverance, never giving up on or off the field. For this reason, Ichiro is an inspiration and I try to emulate his effortless grace. When assignments seem insurmountable, when exams keep piling up, and when I feel like caving in to the pressure, I think of #31 dashing to make the seemingly impossible catch, and keep my eye on the ball.
Sources Cited

