1 MARCH 2024 / It’s Shotime!

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

*<CLIP> MLB ANNOUNCER: But he was able to make the play and here is Ohtani and what will more than likely be his final at bat today in his Dodger Debut…*

*CLIP DUCKS DOWN*

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): A baseball player made his debut as a Los Angeles Dodger this week. And he delivered.

*<CLIP> MLB ANNOUNCER: Swung on, hit high in the air to left and deep. This ball carrying. This ball is gone! In his Dodger debut! Shohei Ohtani brings them to their feet! A two run home run!*

SEAN: The difference between this ball player and all the rest is that he’s the most expensive in the history of the game.

SCORING IN <OHTANI Ride of the Valkyries>

SEAN: Shohei Ohtani’s $700 million contract with the Los Angeles Dodgers – the biggest contract in any sport, ever – really suggests that our national pastime is the most international it’s ever been.

But it also comes at a time when baseball is struggling with diversity back home.   
  
We are digging into the dugout on *Today, Explained.*

[THEME]

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. Sean Rameswaram. Yes, we’re gonna do a show about baseball today. And yes, we understand it’s not for everyone. But we asked Ben Lindbergh from *The Ringer* to make the case as to why you might wanna take interest in the sport right now.

BEN LINDBERGH (WRITER, EDITOR, THE RINGER): Well, there's a lot of interest in baseball these days stemming from the rules changes that were implemented last season, a pitch clock in particular, which really sped up the games, so if baseball was too slow for you before, it's a little bit faster now. Spring is always a time of renewal and hope and faith in sports. And we have a lot of interesting storylines to follow. Foremost among them, maybe, Shohei Otani in a new uniform.

*<CLIP> ANNOUNCER: Breaking news from Major League Baseball where Shohei Ohtani is signing with the Los Angeles Dodgers.*

BEN: Dodger blue. Actually, every MLB player is in a new uniform right now, which has become kind of a controversial subject.

*<CLIP> ANNOUNCER: Major League Baseball is striking out with its new uniforms. The latest complaint hits below the belt. The pants are see through.*

BEN: So that's one reason why you might want to watch baseball now.

SEAN: <laughs> Ben, you buried the lede! If you weren't interested in baseball before, maybe you will be now that the pants are see through?

BEN: <laughs> Yes, but the players are as good as ever, even if the uniforms are not.

SEAN: And maybe one player, more important than all the rest?

*<CLIP> MCAFEE: Ay Shohei’s the greatest baseball player of all time.   
CC: He’s the fastest, he hit the ball the hardest, he throws the ball the hardest, like he’s playing little league out there. He’s the greatest player to ever play.*

*<CLIP> OHTANI Best show in sports*

*ANNOUNCER 1: Is Shohei Ohtani the best show in sports right now?   
ANNOUNCER 2: Yes he is!*

SCORING IN <8bit Adventure Time>

BEN: Shohei Otani has been the story of baseball probably for the past few years, really the past several seasons since he came over from Japan, because he has pioneered a new way to play baseball, or at least brought back a way to play baseball that we haven't seen for a century. He also signed an unprecedented, unparalleled contract with a new team this offseason.

*<CLIP> ANNOUNCER: Imagine if Tom Brady led the league in touchdowns thrown AND sacks. Shohei Ohtani, the first two way star in a hundred years, goes against everything we thought we knew about baseball. And yet he is making it look easy.*

BEN: He is a singular player because he is a two way player, he is among the best batters in baseball:

*<CLIP> ANNOUNCER: Oh he got another one! Get going! Ohtani has done it again! Two homers in the nightcap.*

BEN: He is also among the best pitchers in baseball:

<*CLIP> ANNOUNCER: This would be the first complete game shutout. And there it is! Shohei Ohtani goes all nine!*

BEN: And we have not seen anyone pull off that high wire act at the highest level of the sport for about a century. Since Babe Ruth and some Negro leagues legends like Bullet Rogan were able to do that, that was a much lower level of competition a century ago than we see in major league baseball today. And so it was more feasible for one person to be the best at both aspects of the sport. We have not seen anyone pull that off of late and it was thought to be impossible, frankly, before he showed that it could be done. So he has been the best player in baseball over the past few years. He has won two unanimous MVP awards in the American league:

*<CLIP> ANNOUNCER: Shohei Ohtani is your unanimous 2023 AL MVP. Another historic season by the unicorn.*

BEN: And it has turned him into a global superstar and an icon of the sort that Baseball doesn't manufacture much these days.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: And because of that, he has to get paid. How much are the Dodgers going to pay him?

BEN: The top line number is $700 million.

*<CLIP> ANNOUNCER: Big news in the sports world this weekend: Shohei Ohtani signed a record contract with the LA Dodgers. Seven hundred million dollars for ten years. The largest contract in US team sports history.*

BEN: The 700 million dollar number is arguably the biggest contract that any athlete in any sport has received.

SEAN: Ever! Ever in the history of sports?

BEN: Yes. Absolutely. And it is a 10 year contract, technically. However, it's really more like a 20 year contract, because the vast majority of that $700 million is deferred.

*<CLIP> ANNOUNCER: People are absolutely flabbergasted. And trying to find out what the reason behind this deal is.*

SCORING IN <Meiji de Tokasu>

BEN: There are a number of reasons why he and the Dodgers chose to use this structure, which Otani himself actually suggested. The way it breaks down is he will make a mere 20 million over the next 10 years.

SEAN: Poor guy!

BEN: I know, right? How will he make ends meet? But 680 million of this will be deferred, and he will then receive annual $68 million payouts from 2034 to 2043. So, if you factor in inflation – which most Americans have become pretty familiar with over the past few years, if you factor in the fact that a dollar today doesn't have the same buying power that a dollar will have in 10 or 20 years – it's really more like 460 million, which would still be the biggest in baseball history, but maybe not the biggest, if you compare to, say, some soccer superstars’ windfalls. However, it's 700 million, partly for bragging rights, so that he or his agent can claim that it is the biggest sports contract ever, not that he is someone who typically brags about his performance. He seems to be very humble, at least in public. It also, though, enables the Dodgers to have more short term payroll flexibility.   
  
SEAN: Aha!   
  
BEN: Because they will only be paying him two million dollars per year, at least for the next couple of years, which enables them to spend a lot more money on other superstars. And in fact, they have signed some other superstars, including fellow Japanese player Yoshinobu Yamamoto, since they signed Shohei Otani. So it gives them a little more flexibility, which he was in favor of because he wants to win. And in theory, at least, this helps the Dodgers surround him with other stars.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: And how much success has Ohtani had with the World Series?

BEN: He has no experience with the World Series.  
  
SEAN: Aha!  
  
BEN: In fact, he has not experienced the playoffs yet, in the majors, that is.

SEAN: What?!

BEN: Now, in Japan, he was a playoff player and got to play in the final series over there, but he's been with the Angels ever since he came to MLB in 2018, and the Angels famously have been hapless.

*<CLIP Angels in The Outfield*

*KID 1: But there were Angels in the outfield. And in the infield.   
KID 2: Yeah, nine of them.*

SEAN: Tell us about Ohtani's success *outside* of Major League Baseball.

BEN: Well, he was successful competitively speaking in Japan. He was a star in NPP before he came to MLB, and we should say that is no small accomplishment because the Japanese Major League is the highest level league in the world in terms of caliber of competition next to Major League Baseball. So he became a superstar there, and not just on the field, but also a celebrity. He inspires a sort of fan fervor. that we typically don't see surrounding baseball players these days. In fact, that's one reason why he was willing to accept or even suggest this contract structure. He makes tens of millions of dollars a year in endorsement deals.

*<CLIP> OHTANI Salesforce ad*

*OHTANI: [Japanese]*

BEN: And that is very unusual for baseball players these days, where if you ask someone, name a baseball player, they might name Babe Ruth or Derek Jeter, right? Someone who's not even active in the sport.

*<CLIP SANDLOT*

*KID 1: You keep telling me that. Who is she?   
KID 2: What?! What?!*

BEN: Ohtani is the exception in that even people who don't care about baseball sometimes care about Shohei Ohtani.

SEAN: Does a Japanese player getting the biggest contract in the history of Major League Baseball, and arguably the history of professional sports, mean that diversity is kicking butts and taking names in baseball?

BEN: We've certainly seen a trend towards international players in MLB who make up about 30 percent of the player pool these days. Some of the most compelling, productive players in the game today were not born in the US. We've seen Japanese superstars before, of course, Ichiro, who will be entering the National Baseball Hall of Fame soon. But Shohei Otani has, I think, been the best player from the country that we've ever seen. And you have had concerns from people who've expressed the idea, because of the language barrier, because he was a Japanese player,

*<CLIP> STEPHEN A. SMITH: If you are a star and you need an interpreter, that might have something to do with your inability to ingratiate yourself to that young demographic and attract them to the sport.*

BEN: and we've seen how wrong that has turned out to be. He is a player whose charisma transcends any cultural differences or language barriers. Of course, he's a big handsome guy. He's easy on the eyes. A lot of people who might not be interested in his baseball prowess might be interested in him as a fashion model, which he has been professionally. But also because he's funny. He's always smiling and laughing. He's a good role model. And so he's about the best ambassador for the sport that you could imagine on any number of levels.

SCORING IN <25,000 Pyramid>

SEAN: Ben Lindbergh is a senior editor at *The Ringer*, where he’s made the case that Shohei Ohtani isn’t just an MVP, but that he might be the GOAT. Read it at The Ringer dot com.

His goat status might make it seem like diversity in baseball has never looked better, but the sport’s got a bit of a problem back at home. We’ll tell ya all about it when we’re back on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> SANDLOT:   
KID 1: The Sultan of Swat!  
KID 2: The King of Crash!  
KID 3: The Colossus of Clout!  
KID 4: The Colossus of Clout!   
SEVERAL TODAY, EXPLAINED STAFFERS: Today, Explained!*

*Kid 5: The GREAT BAMBINO!*

SEAN: Shakeia Taylor loves baseball.   
  
SHAKEIA TAYLOR (sports writer, *Chicago Tribune)*: I love baseball. I think all of the things that people hate about it are the things that I enjoy.

SEAN: <laughs>

SHAKEIA: I won't say all, let's say some. <laughs>  
  
SEAN: She also writes about it for the *Chicago Tribune*.

SHAKEIA: I think the game being a little bit slower allows for it to become sort of a character in the background and you can have a conversation with the person next to you.

SEAN: Mmmm!

SHAKEIA: I feel like you can kind of come in and out of the game and engage. And it's perfect for a sunny day for something to be slow. We're always in a hurry.

SEAN: She’s also written about the game’s *history*.

SHAKEIA: Particularly black history in baseball, as I feel like it's a pretty under-covered, uh, part of the game.

SCORING IN <KOS\_KOL\_0072\_00301\_Buoyant\_Rhythm\_APM>

SHAKEIA: Particularly Black Americans, because I want to be clear, you know, you can be Black from anywhere, um, have been involved in baseball since at least the Civil War. And throughout history, Black players have made tremendous contributions to the game. The Negro Leagues are, to me, one of the greatest achievements in Black American history. There's sort of a dramatic style and flair that comes from, Black American players in the game that is unique to them. They bring a lot of the swagger to the game:

*<CLIP> MLB Vault - Willie Mays makes "THE CATCH": <baseball hit at bat> There’s a long drive way out in centerfield. Way, way back… it is— OOH! Willie Mays just brought this crowd to it’s feet with a catch that must’ve been an optical illusion to a lot of people.*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: But despite that history Black representation in Major League Baseball sort of peaked in the 90s.   
  
SHAKEIA: The last time black representation in Major League Baseball was above 10 percent was 2004.

SCORING IN <Naughty By Nature - Hip Hop Hooray>

If we look back into the 90s, like 1994, 1995, 1996, we're looking at 16 percent or better. And if you look back at that, you know, 95, 94 era, that would be the Ken Griffey Jr. era. The game was more fun, you know, the backwards caps and, “Hip-Hop Hooray” and the home run derby was a big, big deal at that point.

*<CLIP> OHTANI Mariner's to the ALCS*

*ANNOUNCER: Swung on and lined down the left field line for a base hit//here comes junior to third base. They’re gonna wave in! The throw to the plate will be late. The Mariner’s are going to fight for the American League Championship!*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Do we hit, like, a low point? When does this problem become super noticeable for fans?

SHAKEIA: I really believe that while numerically the number has, has hovered around six or seven percent for a few years now, that it felt at its lowest in 2020. There was the uprisings around the George Floyd killing around the country and there was already a lot of issues regarding race within the sport.

*<CLIP> KOMO News - Steve Clevenger tweet  
Reporter: And just as Baldwin was calling for change, a controversial rant was posted to injured Mariners catcher Steve Clevenger’s Twitter account. The tweets talking about the unrest in Charlotte, used racially charged words like “animal” and “thug”. It called Black Lives Matter “pathetic” and mockingly said “keep kneeling for the anthem”.*

SHAKEIA: And there were protests. And I remember seeing some of the players talk about how they would sneak off and join a protest.  
  
SEAN: Huh.   
  
SHAKEIA: And they weren't sure how their teams would feel about it. There was this idea that the players would protest, um, on Opening Day and it turned into an approved protest. Well, anyone who knows the definition of the word protest knows that an approved protest it’s kind of an oxymoron. It's, is it really a protest if the people you're protesting are comfortable with it?

*<CLIP> Bally Sports Ohio & Great Lakes - Indians & Royals stand united with Black Lives Matter*

*Announcer: AND THE CLEVELAND INDIANS AND MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL ALSO STAND UNITED WITH BLACK LIVES MATTER AND ALL OF THOSE WHO SEEK SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EQUALITY. (fades down)*

SHAKEIA: And it felt obvious that Major League Baseball was lacking in a lot of ways as it pertained to race. We could even identify that there were teams who didn't have a Black player at all on their roster.   
  
SEAN: Huh!  
  
SHAKEIA: Which seems kind of impossible. And all of the issues that I think people have been sitting on came to a head in 2020.  
  
SEAN: So Black representation in the MLB hits a record low in 2022. And then 2023 beats that record. So we are at an all-time low currently. What does baseball lose when there aren’t Black players in the league?

SHAKEIA: I think what the league loses without Black players is, first of all, a lot of the things that we enjoy about baseball, base stealing, things like that. Those things were perfected and made a thing in Black baseball.

SEAN: Hm.   
  
SHAKEIA: A lot of the flair, a lot of the excitement of the game, that came from Black players. But I also think without black players or black American players, you're losing a significant portion of history. When Major League Baseball reintegrated. It marked the beginning of the end for the Negro Leagues. So, once there are no Black American players in Major League Baseball, what happens to that history? Who is bringing that forward?

*<CLIP> Mr Jay Hill Network, Carl Crawford  
Crawford: When you turn on the TV and you see the baseball commercial or endorsement or whatever, you never see nobody that look like you – that you can relate to. When you turn on basketball, you can see Lebron James, you can see Steph Curry or whatever… That’s me right there! Know what I'm sayin? But when you see baseball, Black kids look at it, they don’t see them nowhere.*

SEAN: Do we know *why* there are fewer Black players now, Shakeia?

SHAKEIA: I've heard from parents all over the country, really, that they're paying now for private coaching. They're paying thousands of dollars for trainers to train their kids. They're paying for travel ball.   
  
SEAN: Huh.   
  
SHAKEIA: And it's just becoming a middle class game, regardless of race, it is becoming a middle class game.

*<CLIP> Blacks in Baseball, Deion "Prime Time" Sanders Explains Why Black Kids Don't Play Baseball*

*SANDERS: Baseball is not the option. Back when I was coming up, we had a lot of African-Americans in Major League Baseball. Now that’s not the thing, because they’ve priced us out as well. Back when you played, it was cool, probably like $150 to register.*

*REPORTER: Uh-huh. Yup, yup.*

*SANDERS: To play on a select team now, it’s at least two grand, $2500.   
REPORTER: Wowwww.  
SANDERS: So kids can’t afford it. They priced us out.*

SHAKEIA: But then there was also an a thing with baseball and these unwritten rules and how non-white fans would feel in the ballpark. You know, there's people saying if you hit a home run off a pitcher and you celebrate it, then you can get hit on your next at bat. It's things like that that deterred young black kids from wanting to participate because it was no fun.

SEAN: Does Major League Baseball notice this problem in 2020, or before, or after, or have they even noticed it now?

SHAKEIA: Major League Baseball has noticed this problem. I feel like even as far back as 2017, um, is when I really started paying attention to what Major League Baseball was doing with regard to this. And they have things like the Baseball Breakthrough Series, the Dream Series, which occurs every MLK weekend where they bring out the top black high school baseball players. They have the Hank Aaron Invitational. And I think we're seeing some results from it because many of the young black men who are in Major League Baseball today, who are relatively new, came through those programs.

SEAN: Hm! so you're saying it's working?

SHAKEIA: It might be. I would probably need a little bit more data.You know, baseball people are big data people.   
  
SEAN: <chortles>   
  
SHAKEIA: But on the surface, it looks to be working, but not just because of them. Um, but because of other people on a grassroots level who are also helping participate, who are also helping get these kids seen by the Major League Baseball programs.

SEAN: Yeah, tell me more about that, because this isn't just about, you know, turning great athletes into Major League Ball players. This is about turning kids on to baseball in the first place, right?

SHAKEIA: Absolutely. It's about turning kids on to baseball and introducing kids to baseball in all sorts of communities at a younger age is important to gaining that interest in not just being a fan But in watching and in playing the game. There's an organization where I'm located in Chicago called Lost Boyz, Inc. There is another organization called Minority Baseball Prospects who also have a Minority Softball Prospects. There is Black Baseball Media. There is a podcast called The Black Baseball Mixtape. They're all of these people on a grassroots level who are working and organizing to help create this pipeline who are helping to say like, ‘Hey, I love baseball. It is for us. We are not excluded from the sport. You are welcome in it’. And that's also helping make a major impact because they're getting kids who may have been ignored.

SEAN: Do you think there could be enough change to make baseball, which is our national pastime …

SHAKEIA: <chuckles>   
  
SEAN: … as cool as football and basketball? Do you think there could be a day where baseball has the same cachet as, as say, basketball or football?

SHAKEIA: No, I don't think that.

<both laugh>  
  
SHAKEIA: And here’s …

SEAN: “No.”

SHAKEIA: And here's, here's why I don't think that. I mean, I had to give you a solid no because I just don't think that … there is a stat going around that the average major league baseball fan was a 50 something year old white male.   
  
SEAN: Hm.   
  
SHAKEIA: So I don't know what that looks like today, but it's probably still trending that way. And I think once the fan base goes. more diverse once, you know, more women are involved in the game, and I don't mean involved in the game as in on the field necessarily, but I mean in positions of power. Once we see more diversity across positions of power across MLB, I'm sure things will start to trend a little differently. With superstar players like Shohei, Fernando Tatis, they’re all just incredibly amazing and they’re doing a lot for the game. But the league itself has to step in too.

SCORING IN <CEZ\_CEZ\_4493\_01401\_I\_Will\_Live\_Without\_You\_Alternate\_APM (1).wav>

SEAN: Shakia Taylor. Chicago Tribune dot com.  
  
Our program today was produced by Hady Mawajdeh and Jesse Alejandro Cottrell. We were edited by *Today, Explained*’s leading football correspondent, Matthew Collette, fact checked by Laura Bullard, and mixed by Rob Byers and Patrick Boyd.

Shohei Ohtani announced just yesterday on Instagram that he got married! “Congratulations! The first of many rings with the Dodgers.” one fan responded.

“Shohei Ohtani is married. This is the worst day of my life,” said another.

SEAN: Is there anything else you want people to know about this moment in baseball?

SHAKEIA: Everyone should check it out for a little bit. Lock in on a team that maybe you wouldn't look at and see what's happening. Maybe it's a little early now, but in a couple of months, it should get interesting around the summertime.

SEAN: But if you get in now, you can enjoy the see through pants while they last.

SHAKEIA: Ooh, you can. [laughs]

SEAN: Or you can not enjoy them, depending.

SHAKEIA: There are definitely some leers and jeers happening with the pants. That's for sure.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]