

The Big Story

The Japanese import came to the U.S. with a desire to become an ace

BY CARY OSBORNE

There's not much to watch on television. It's kind of frustrating. So Kenta Maeda watches the only thing he can really understand, regardless of what language the commentators are speaking — Major League Baseball.

One of the first things Maeda noticed about a U.S. pitching mound is the rubber is harder, as is the dirt.

There are bags of sunflower seeds in the Dodger dugout — all-you-can-eat sunflower seeds. They were nowhere to be found in a Japanese League dugout. He kind of likes it. It's different.

There's something else Kenta Maeda isn't used to.

"I was the ace of the staff in Japan," he said. "Coming over here, I need to prove myself again, to hopefully eventually be in that position."

In January, Maeda uprooted his family and left the comfort of his home country for an eight-year commitment to the Dodgers. Not to be a novelty act or a serviceable pitcher, but to be as successful, if not more so, in Major League Baseball.

"I had the desire ... (especially) knowing it would be the Los Angeles Dodgers," Maeda said. "I was a little nervous, but there was definitely more excitement."



GET USED TO

KENTA MAEDA



Kenta Maeda hit a home run in his second Major League at-bat in his winning MLB debut.

TAKE IT FROM THE TOP

Maeda won the Japanese League's equivalent to the Cy Young Award — the Sawamura Award — in 2010 and again last season. Since Koji Uehara won the award in 1999, nine of the 15 different pitchers to win the prize have ended up pitching in the Major Leagues, including Maeda.

He said he spoke with Masahiro Tanaka, Yu Darvish and Hisashi Iwakuma about coming to the U.S., and each told him that he would need to adapt to the way of life here.

“Obviously, there’s an adjustment for the lifestyle, but for me it’s more important to produce results,” Maeda said. “I’m sure everything else will take care of itself over time.”

The Major League strike zone apparently takes an acclimation process as well. Or maybe it’s the level of hitter in the Major Leagues that forced other Japanese pitchers to be more careful.

Tanaka, Darvish and Iwakuma sported a combined 1.58 ERA and 0.92 WHIP in their final seasons in Japan. In their first seasons

in the Majors, they had a combined 3.36 ERA and 1.21 WHIP. Iwakuma’s walk rate went up from 1.4 walks per nine innings in his last season in Japan to 3.1 in the Majors, and Darvish went from 1.4 to 4.2. Tanaka stayed at 1.4.

Dodger pitching coach Rick Honeycutt believed from the start of the season that

Maeda will be successful in the U.S.

“What continues to impress is he can throw any pitch in any count,” Honeycutt said. “When you can do that in the Major Leagues, that’s a pretty powerful statement to the other team.”

The Tanaka-Darvish-Iwakuma trio also combined to pitch 110 fewer innings in the Majors than their final

seasons in Japan. Japanese teams tend to go with six-man rotations, and the league plays 18 less games with more days off.

Daisuke Matsuzaka and Hiroki Kuroda are the only Japanese pitchers to reach 30 starts in their first big league season. Matsuzaka is the only one to reach 200 innings.

Dodger manager Dave Roberts will play it smart with Maeda.



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On the mound, Maeda has already shown a toughness. Off the mound, Dodger teammates gravitate to him, despite the fact that he is still learning English.

“There’s no hard number on an innings limit,” he said. “We’re definitely going to be mindful of taking him out of games. There might be times during the season where we give him an extra day. I think he understands that: 32, 33 starts — that’s a lot of innings.”

Honeycutt echoed the sentiment, saying each inning isn’t treated equally. The fewer stressful innings, the more Maeda can go.

SO FAR, SO VERY GOOD

Maeda made the jump from 49 pitches in his final spring start to 84 in his Major League debut April 6 in San Diego — a debut so extraordinary that it bordered on the preposterous.

Maeda pitched six shutout innings, allowed five hits and no walks, made a nervous throwing error and struck out four. And in his second at-bat, Maeda hit a belt-

high slider from Andrew Cashner that cut through the thick San Diego air and over the wall in left field for a home run.

Maeda became the 11th pitcher to hit a home run in his Major League debut, the first Dodger pitcher since Dan Bankhead on August 26, 1947 and the first Dodger to homer in his first game since Jose Offerman on August 19, 1990.

“I didn’t know the ball was going out,” Maeda said with a smile we’re becoming accustomed to. “I was running really hard (around the bases). That’s all I thought about.”

Obviously that’s not what the Dodgers expect from Maeda. What he showed on the mound is the hope.

Maeda was said to be coming over from Japan packing a plus slider and average-to-above-average fastball with good command — which he flashed in his debut. Maeda threw 44 fastballs and got one

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JUAN OCAMPO

Maeda went 14 2/3 innings before surrendering the first run of his career. Through his first three starts, he had a 0.47 ERA in 19 innings.

swing and miss, but surrendered only two hits and no line drives with the pitch. Of the 24 sliders he threw, he got seven swing and misses, allowed two hits and one line drive with the pitch.

He added that he's comfortable with his curveball and changeup, which he threw a combined 16 of in his debut. The thought is that the better one of those pitches gets, the higher Maeda will rise.

"He can really spin the baseball," Honeycutt said. "He knows how to use his curveball, knows how to use his slider, and what we've seen is command to both sides of the plate with the slider. It's been really good. The changeup is the pitch I think all spring he wanted to continue to throw more. He threw some good ones at times. He's got weapons, so I don't think there's any time a hitter can sit on one pitch."

If you watched Maeda in Spring Training, you saw a pitcher not afraid to attack hitters up in the zone with his fastball, not timid about shaking off his catchers and

one who didn't back down when runners got on base.

"The only thing I'm focused on on the mound is getting outs," Maeda said. "I don't entertain the other aspects, the fear, What I try to do is really think of how to get hitters out."

Roberts said he has gathered a lot of impressions from watching Maeda in two months.

"He's very calm, and he's very observant," Roberts said. "There's really no panic in him. He's been such a good pitcher over there. His transition up to this point has been pretty seamless to him. He's a very likable guy. Players kind of gravitate to him. He's very athletic. There's a lot of takeaways with Kenta."

When asked what his goals are for this season, Maeda said to contribute to a lot of wins. He also said something about staying in the rotation.

Maybe something got lost in translation. Maybe he meant staying at the top of the rotation.

That's something we can all get used to.

