

White Sox’s Japanese slugger making teams look foolish

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USA TODAY

PHOENIX – Well, maybe Munetaka Murakami won’t have a difficult time making that transition from Japan to Major League Baseball after all. In the meantime, is he ever making a whole lot of teams look foolish for ignoring him in free agency.

Murakami made more history the night of April 21 by homering for the fourth consecutive game in the Chicago White Sox’s 11-5 rout over the Arizona Diamondbacks – a 434-foot shot – going where no Japanese player has ever gone before.

He is not only the first Japanese-born player to hit nine homers in his first 23 games, but also the first player since at least 1900 to produce nine homers and more than 20 walks in the first 23 games of an MLB career.

The only Japanese players who have homered in four consecutive games at any juncture in their career are three-time MVP Shohei Ohtani of the Los Angeles Dodgers and Chicago Cubs All-Star outfielder Seiya Suzuki.

Murakami, 26, is looking just like the dude who was Nippon Professional Baseball’s premier slugger, breaking the legendary Sadaharu Oh’s single-season



Munetaka Murakami hit a home run April 21 against the Diamondbacks.
CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES

home run record with 56 homers as a 22-year-old, and winning two MVP awards.

Sure, the season is just three weeks old, but the strikeouts and swing-and-miss rates that spiked since his historic 2022 season, with teams concerned whether he’d make enough contact to even provide power, now are regretting that they allowed the White Sox to virtually steal Murakami with a modest two-year, \$34 million contract.

Murakami is soft-spoken and humble about his early heroics, saying he simply is happy that he’s contributing, but his bat is doing a whole lot of talking.

Murakami is hitting .234 with nine

homers – just one behind MLB leader Yordan Alvarez of the Houston Astros – with 17 RBIs and a .978 OPS. He has struck out 33 times in 97 plate appearances, but he has also walked 22 times, giving him a .398 on-base percentage.

He is everything the White Sox could have imagined, and much more.

“He puts himself in a real good position every single pitch,” White Sox manager Will Venable said. “He’s on time. He sees the ball well. ... We’re seeing real good plate discipline. Obviously, the power is incredible. Continues to improve defensively. I think I may be slowing him down a little bit on the bases. He always wants to get out and steal some bases. But he’s just a guy that’s getting more and more comfortable every day.

“Obviously, he’s having a lot of success.”

Murakami indeed is looking quite comfortable these days, hitting four homers for a combined 1,705 feet. He reached base four times April 21, including his 434-foot blast off Diamondbacks starter Merrill Kelly, his MLB-leading third homer this season traveling 113 mph or faster off his bat.

It certainly brought back memories of his 432-foot blast off Kelly in the 2023 World Baseball Classic championship game over the USA.

“I was able to imagine the pitcher a lot better because I did face him in the WBC,” Murakami said. “The time I hit in the WBC was a fastball, but today was a [89-mph] change-up. But I was really happy that I was able to hit it for a home run.”

What pleases Murakami more than anything, he says, is that his home runs have helped ignite the White Sox offense. They’ve scored 33 runs in their four games on this trip, winning three of them.

“We’re very much connecting from the top to the bottom in the lineup,” he said, “and I think it’s just really important that we really continue as a team to get good results. I hope we can keep doing that.”

The Diamondbacks, one of several teams that had interest in Murakami but were not a finalist in the bidding, could only sit back and admire the show, feeling a tinge of jealousy.

“He was on a lot of people’s radar screens,” Diamondbacks manager Torey Lovullo said. “We knew there was a special player there. I’ve been watching him closely, and I’ve been a fan of his.

“He’s going to be a pretty special player.”

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Shedeur Sanders will try to stave off Watson and Dillon Gabriel for the top job. General manager Andrew Berry said last week it was “wholly realistic” that the Browns could add another young passer who could push to the forefront of the competition. Still, in a thin class at the position, the only reasonable option might be Alabama’s Ty Simpson. Maybe Cleveland could take a flier if he’s still around in the early second round, but dropping an inexperienced signal-caller into this setup seems like an invitation for disaster.

5. Dallas Cowboys

With Jerry Jones typically only occasionally dipping his toe into the free agency pool, the draft holds heightened significance for the Cowboys. But with Dallas owning two picks in the top 20 – and the higher of their two first-rounders in 2027 headed to the Jets to pay off the Quinnen Williams deal – the pressure is on to make good on the returns from the Micah Parsons trade.

Cowboys executive vice president Stephen Jones said on 105.3 The Fan on April 14 that the team typically has 16-22 first-round grades on players in a given draft class, but he added that he’s “not sure we will get there this year.” Could that be sufficient incentive for Dallas to move up? Dealing into the top 10 for Bailey, Styles or Downs could net Jerry Jones the top-tier talent he covets – with the latter two capable of helping satisfy Jones’ desire to stuff the run. The more reasonable option might be to trade down from No. 20, though it might be difficult to drum up a buyer.

No matter where they end up picking, the Cowboys are positioned to double-dip on defense. New coordinator Christian Parker surely wants to cut down on the secondary miscommunications and meltdowns that plagued the unit throughout 2025, and taking a cornerback or safety early could help the secondary rapidly retool. But an edge rush that might struggle to do much more than get by likely requires a first-round talent to significantly alter this year’s outlook. And while identifying a linebacker to put alongside DeMarvion Overshown might be atop the to-do list, orchestrating a trade for a veteran might

be the more reasonable route for a franchise eager to return to the playoff chase.

4. Las Vegas Raiders

It probably goes without saying that the team holding the No. 1 overall pick has a lot riding on its rookie class. Las Vegas, however, is the only organization that can enter the proceedings feeling any sense of control, with the expected selection of Indiana quarterback Fernando Mendoza atop the draft seemingly all but a certainty.

Yet general manager John Spytek knows he has a sizable task ahead of him to create an environment around Mendoza in which the Heisman Trophy winner can flourish. The failed Maxx Crosby trade drove home Spytek’s interest in utilizing this draft to reconfigure his roster to that end.

Adding a stout target capable of stabilizing a shaky receiving corps could go a long way toward helping Mendoza settle in as a rookie. Washington’s Denzel Boston would be a natural solution should he fall out of the first round, but Germie Bernard, Ted Hurst or Elijah Sarratt – Mendoza’s former teammate – could all be considerations on Day 2. Infusing the defensive line with some form of interior disruption also might help the Raiders curb their reliance on Crosby to generate a spark up front. With three fourth-round picks in hand, Spytek has to bolster the depth of a defense that looks in flux almost everywhere except inside linebacker.

3. Miami Dolphins

In a league where teams often deny the realities of their competitive credentials, the Dolphins confronted their current inadequacies and acted accordingly. First-year general manager Jon-Eric Sullivan stripped a top-heavy roster of its most expensive and superfluous parts, saddling the team with a record dead-cap hit of nearly \$200 million while loading up on draft picks. The result: Miami owns 11 selections, including two in the first round and seven of the top 100 choices.

With their nearly blank slate, the Dolphins possess far more flexibility than most teams while also working on a more extended timeline to put things

together. Still, no franchise is completely free of expectations in the draft. Miami has arguably fewer building blocks than any other organization, with Sullivan having identified four players – running back De’Von Achane, center Aaron Brewer, left tackle Patrick Paul and linebacker Jordyn Brooks – as essential to the team’s core. Wide receiver Jaylen Waddle was among that group, but he was dealt to the Denver Broncos in March to secure the second first-rounder of the draft.

Now, Sullivan could go in any number of directions in his first draft. Moving Waddle rendered Miami perilously thin at receiver, leaving new quarterback Malik Willis with few legitimate threats on the perimeter. Restocking the pass catching crew would be a natural move, but addressing the position early wouldn’t be in keeping with the Packers approach Sullivan followed for the entirety of his career to date. Cornerback is sure to be circled given the dearth of trustworthy options on the back end, and the offensive line and edge rush each could stand for significant upgrades as well. For Miami, however, the directive is clear: Restock the roster with as many viable rookie starters as possible.

2. Kansas City Chiefs

Brett Veach has never held a draft pick as early in the order as this year’s No. 9 overall choice. He might not again, either. The Chiefs’ calamitous 6-11 season left plenty of residual pain, but it also put the franchise in the rare position to add a blue-chip talent capable of helping expedite a return to form. Veach then doubled down by trading Trent McDuffie to the Los Angeles Rams for a package that netted him the No. 31 overall pick.

While Kansas City will still be looking to maximize value, no team in the top 10 will face more scrutiny around what its top choice can offer right off the bat.

Two of the Chiefs’ more persistent woes are likely to be points of focus. Veach has too often missed the mark with his early selections of edge rushers and wide receivers, with both deficiencies coming to the forefront during last season’s unraveling. The former position might take priority, though Rueben Bain Jr. might test the team’s openness

to diverting from its past prototype for rangier defensive ends for Steve Spagnuolo. While reloading at cornerback could help the team cover for a newly created vulnerability, Veach might try to bring along 2025 third-rounder Nohl Williams for his latest development success story at the position.

1. New York Jets

Midway through a debacle of a debut season at the helm, Gang Green’s new regime moved the goalposts. In selling off defensive linchpins Sauce Gardner and Quinnen Williams at the trade deadline, new coach Aaron Glenn and general manager Darren Mougey conceded that a much longer timeline than initially envisioned was required to orchestrate a turnaround. With four picks in the top 45, it’s time to cash in on the accumulated chips.

With the Nos. 2 and 16 selections, New York might face a more straightforward framework than many other teams in the draft. Value and need would seem to align for the Jets to start things off with an edge rusher and follow up with a receiver. The bigger mystery might be in how Mougey decides between marquee prospects at each position. The choice between Bailey and Reese could end up one of the defining moves of the draft – and of Mougey and Glenn’s tenure. Meanwhile, the job of alleviating pressure on Garrett Wilson in the passing game could come down to several stylistically different targets, including Indiana’s Omar Cooper Jr. and Arizona State’s Jordyn Tyson. Of course, an offense that could stand to add a developmental passer behind Geno Smith could throw the draft for a curve by taking Simpson at No. 16 or 33.

After the Gardner and Williams trades, Glenn changed his tone about his group, saying that fans would be proud of the team “at some point.” As things stand, any notion of pride seems far off for an organization that stands alone with the longest postseason drought in North American men’s sports. Hope, however, might suffice for the fan base. Mougey and Glenn can either start to deliver some now or end up shifting the focus even further down the line to 2027, when the Jets are scheduled to have three first-round picks and could again top this list.

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