

Suzuki wins tightest MVP race in four years

NEW YORK (AP) — Ichiro Suzuki won his fourth Most Valuable Player Award, just like Barry Bonds. Only the first three came in Japan.

"There's no way I can compare the MVPs in the two countries," Suzuki said Tuesday after he became only the second rookie MVP in the major leagues. "No matter how many times I won MVP in Japan, that does not mean I could play with total confidence."

Suzuki, who came to the major leagues after nine seasons in Japan's Pacific League, received 11 first-place votes and 289 points to win the American League MVP in balloting by the Baseball Writers' Association of America.

Jason Giambi, last year's AL MVP, got eight first-place votes and 281 points. It was the tightest MVP race

since Juan Gonzalez defeated Alex Rodriguez 290-287 for the 1996 AL award and tied for the 10th-narrowest victory margin since MVP awards began in 1931.

"I didn't expect I would be the one to win," Suzuki said through a translator.

The only other rookie to win the MVP was Boston's Fred Lynn in 1975. Last week, Suzuki received 27 of 28 first-place votes in balloting for AL Rookie of the Year.

The 28-year-old outfielder, the first rookie to win a batting title since Tony Oliva in 1964, led the AL with a .350 average and topped the major leagues with 56 stolen bases, impressing voters with his speed and his strong arm. His 242 hits were a rookie record, the most for anyone since Bill Terry's 254

for the 1930 New York Giants.

Suzuki was the Pacific League's MVP in 1994, 1995 and 1996, and won seven batting titles before joining the Mariners and becoming the first Japanese non-pitcher in the major leagues.

"A year ago, we made a bid, gasped and held our breath, wondering what this guy really was going to give us," said Lee Pelekoudas, the Mariners' vice president of baseball administration. "Doing it this quickly is amazing. He's done it with dignity and professionalism."

Past AL MVPs include Lou Gehrig, Ted Williams, Joe DiMaggio and Mickey Mantle, icons for baseball players in Japan as well as North America.

"To be among those great legends, great players, I cannot be a regular,

ordinary player anymore," Suzuki said. "I just need to play to make fans happy ... make my team, maybe opposing teams, enjoy my play."

He knows he's raising his profile in the United States, but it's still nowhere near its level in Japan.

"Since the season, I went into a hamburger shop and nobody bothered me," he said with a smile at a news conference in Seattle.

Suzuki said it's his variety of skills that make him an MVP-caliber player. "I think balance is very important to me," he said. "If even one element is missing, I can't be a good player."

Giambi batted .342 with 38 homers and 120 RBIs for the Oakland Athletics, then became a free agent after the World Series. He is expected to be one of the most sought-after free agents,

and the New York Yankees intend to aggressively court him.

Seattle second baseman Bret Boone, who hit .331 with 37 homers and 141 RBIs, was third in the balloting with seven first-place votes and 259 points, followed by Cleveland second baseman Roberto Alomar (165), Gonzalez (156) and Rodriguez (141).

"I thought both Boone and Ichiro were very deserving," Mariners manager Lou Piniella said. "I'm pleased to see Ichiro won. He had an outstanding season. He led the league in hitting, stolen bases and was outstanding in right field. But I'm disappointed for Boone. He had an MVP-type season also."

Boone also is a free agent, and it's unclear if he will stay with the Mariners. "For the 2002 season, I hope we could eat rice balls together again,"

Suzuki said.

He isn't bothered by rumors that Seattle may trade for or sign another leadoff hitter and drop him down in the batting order. It wouldn't change Suzuki's style.

"If I start to hit with only power, I would get lost with who I am," he said.

Seattle paid the Orix Blue Wave \$13,125,000 after the 2000 season for the rights to Suzuki, then gave him a three-year contract that guaranteed him \$14,088,000. It turned out to be a bargain.

Suzuki, who got a \$75,000 bonus for winning the rookie award, gets a \$150,000 bonus for the MVP. Giambi gets \$75,000 for finishing second, Alomar \$100,000 for fourth, Gonzalez \$100,000 for fifth and Rodriguez \$50,000 for sixth.



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