How Shohei Ohtani Visualized His Baseball Success

The Japanese two-way sensation turned to a personal-growth technique called the Harada Method to help him achieve his goals.

Following the Harada Method, Shohei Ohtani identified eight key areas in which he felt he needed to develop, both as an athlete and as a person. PHOTO: JOHN CORDES/ZUMA PRESS

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By
Jared Diamond
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As a sophomore at Hanamaki Higashi High School in the Iwate Prefecture of Japan, Shohei Ohtani set a goal for himself: to become the nation’s premier baseball prospect by the time he graduated.

To achieve it, he turned to the Harada Method, a personal-growth technique created by Takashi Harada, a former middle school teacher in Japan. Following the method’s guide, Ohtani identified eight key areas in which he felt he needed to develop, both as an athlete and as a person. From there, he narrowed his focus even further, pinpointing eight specific ways he believed would allow him to make the necessary improvements, all in service of his larger aim.

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Some were obvious: He wanted to increase his fastball velocity to 99 mph by strengthening his shoulder, bolstering his lower extremities and adding weight to his wiry frame. He hoped to refine his control by stabilizing his windup and finding a consistent release point in his delivery.

Others were a bit more esoteric. For instance, Ohtani thought he would have better luck if he read more books, cleaned his room better and picked up litter. He wrote all of this down on an 9-by-9 grid that Harada calls the 64 Chart.

Ohtani wasn’t alone in following Harada’s teachings. Over the past two decades, Harada has trained more than 90,000 people in his method, working with managers from companies like the clothing retailer Uniqlo and the Japanese brewery Kirin. He also taught Hiroshi Sasaki, the high-school baseball coach who passed it on to Ohtani.
A 64 Chart filled out by Shohei Ohtani in high school. PHOTO: NORMAN BODEK

Since then, the 24-year-old Ohtani has accomplished considerably more than he outlined on his first 64 Chart eight years ago. He has emerged as a sensation in his rookie season with the Los Angeles Angels, establishing himself as a potentially historic talent capable of doing something unseen for a century: thriving simultaneously as a starting pitcher and an everyday hitter.

Before an elbow injury sidelined him in June, Ohtani posted a 3.10 ERA in his first nine outings, striking out 61 batters in 49 1/3 innings. The health issue hasn’t slowed him down at the plate, where he entered Tuesday with a .294 batting average, a .970 OPS (on base plus slugging) and 19 home runs in 262 at-bats. Ohtani will likely undergo Tommy John surgery after the season, which would keep him from returning to the mound until 2020, but the Angels expect him to serve as their designated hitter next season.
Before Ohtani, no major-league player had thrown 50 innings and blasted 15 home runs in a single season since Babe Ruth in 1919. Now, Harada considers him one of his greatest success stories.

“I believe this was a big pillar for Ohtani to become what he is now,” Harada said in an interview. “And he’s still continuing to use it.”

Harada devised the method while working at Matsumushi Junior High School in Osaka, where he served as a physical education teacher and a counselor. He was inspired by a trip he took to Europe in 1994 as part of an educational delegation, where he saw the teaching philosophies of countries like Finland.

At that time, he said, Japan’s educational system “heavily focused on memorization and testing memory,” whereas Finland “focused more on visualizing your future and working toward that visualized goal.” That became the basis of the Harada Method,
which he used to help transform a struggling school in a poor neighborhood into a track and field powerhouse, before opening the Harada Education Institute in 2001.

“This is a method to become a self-reliant person,” Harada said.

Angels officials confirm that Ohtani practiced the Harada Method. But the extent to which he still does, if at all, is difficult to nail down—because almost nobody will talk about it. Ohtani declined to comment for this article, sticking with his season-long policy of turning down one-on-one interviews.

Sasaki, Ohtani’s old high-school coach who first introduced him to the method, refused an interview request. So did Yukio Motomura, who instructed Ohtani in the Harada Method on his Japanese team, the Hokkaido Nippon-Ham Fighters. (In an email, a member of Harada’s staff said, “We have no idea why Sasaki sensei declined an interview,” adding that, “Director Motomura has taught Harada Method not only to Shohei [Ohtani], but every single player in Nippon-Ham!”)
Harada said that Ohtani filled out about 15 more 64 Charts after his initial one, to reflect his updated goals. Ohtani was even more captivated by the Harada Method Long-Term Goal Form, which has students come up with tangible and intangible reasons for pursuing a goal, both for one’s self and for society. It also has sections to write daily tasks and routines to achieve the goal, as well as a place for anticipated obstacles and potential countermeasures.

For now, the Harada Method remains mostly unknown outside of Japan, though one man wants to change that. Norman Bodek, a disciple of Harada who initially shared Ohtani’s first 64 Chart with The Wall Street Journal, is currently working to create a smartphone app dedicated to teaching the Harada Method in English and Japanese.

“Ohtani is our superstar,” said Bodek, who used to teach a class at Portland State University on Japanese management practices. “Everybody can’t become the best baseball player in the world, but everybody can become the best that they can become.”

Write to Jared Diamond at jared.diamond@wsj.com