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BayStars' Gourriel could be in line for rare honor

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The Yokohama BayStars don't look like they're going to do much winning this season. The team can, however, be associated with at least one historic victory at the conclusion of the season.

It was reported last week that the BayStars want to put Cuban import Yulieski Gourriel up for consideration for the Central League Rookie of the Year Award, which will be given out after the season.

It's still early, but the infielder is shaping up to be a viable candidate.

Gourriel has made an almost seamless transition into Japanese baseball since joining the BayStars last month. He picked up three hits in his first game in Japan and has had at least two hits in eight of his games. Overall, he's hitting .316 with four home runs and 11 RBIs in 20 games for Yokohama.

He's off to a much better start in Japan than countryman Frederich Cepeda, who is struggling to find his way and hitting just .177, though with five home runs, 15 RBIs and a .726 OPS, in 33 games for the Yomiuri Giants.

If the BayStars succeed in getting Gourriel on the ballot, and he wins, the infielder would be the first foreign-born player to claim the award.

There have been many foreign MVPs, Golden Glove winners, and Best Nine Selections in both the Central and Pacific Leagues in the past, and Hanshin Tigers pitcher Gene Bague won the Sawamura Award in 1964. There still has yet to be a foreign-born player selected as the top rookie, though mostly because so few are eligible in the first place.

A foreign player can be considered for the award provided he hasn't played in a professional league such as MLB or the Korean Baseball Organization before signing with a Japanese team. That alone disqualifies many, if not most, foreign players.

It doesn't mean foreigners can't win the award if they meet the criteria. Since the rules for foreign players were adopted in 1976, three players have been in the running — the last being Yomiuri Giants pitcher Wirfin Obispo in 2007 (helpfully pointed out by Kozo Ota, a contributor to the website Tsubamegun) — though none have won the hardware.

For what it's worth, Gourriel is no typical rookie.

While, for instance, Hiroshima Carp rookie Daichi Osera was pitching in high school and college before turning pro, Gourriel was playing in the National Series, Cuba's top league. He was a career .332 hitter with 258 home runs, 1,044 RBIs, 138 stolen bases, and an OPS of 1.001 in 1,225 games over 13 seasons there, according to the website Cuban-Play.

The spirit of the rule is likely meant to honor a deserving player who has a standout first season against other professionals. Given the number of quality ballplayers Cuba churns out, Gourriel probably doesn't really fit the mold. That's even with the understanding that the level of the Cuban league isn't generally considered as high as that of NPB and MLB.

Still, the rules are the rules, and if he's deemed eligible, he should win the prize if the numbers warrant it.

There still may be some who would question his past experience which, ironically, would mirror the situation some Japanese players have encountered in the majors.

Unlike NPB, MLB deems a player a rookie as long as he hasn't accumulated 130 at-bats or pitched 50 innings in previous seasons at the MLB level or spent 45 or more days on a 25-man active roster.

This was questioned when Japanese stars with NPB experience, such as Hideo Nomo, the 1995 National League Rookie of the Year, and Kazuhiro Sasaki, the 2000 American League Rookie of the Year, began to win the award.

It was a hot-button topic again during Ichiro Suzuki's whirlwind debut season in 2001, when he took home not only the AL Rookie of the Year Award but was also named AL MVP after spending the previous nine seasons in Japan with the Orix BlueWave.

There was no shortage of controversy in 2003, when the Kansas City Royals' Angel Berrera edged the New York Yankees' Hideki Matsui in what was the closest vote in 24 years.

Two voters left Matsui off their ballots that season, citing his past experience in Japan. This infuriated Yankees owner George Steinbrenner, who called the vote a "farce." The Bronx Bombers could be at the center of the storm again if Masahiro Tanaka carries his brilliant start into the second half of the season.

For Gourriel, it's still a little early to really think about being the CL's top rookie.

He's off to a good start, but Japanese pitchers are gathering more information about him each day, and it won't be long before they begin to make adjustments.

If he continues to play at a high level after that, then the BayStars infielder could very well break new ground for foreign players in Japan.