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Baseball Star

Ippei Mizuhara's involvement in illegal gambling turned up in a far-reaching investigation by federal agencies including the IRS.

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Shohei Ohtani, right, of the Los Angeles Dodgers speaks to the media with the help of his interpreter Ippei Mizuhara during DodgerFest on Saturday, February 3, 2024. (Photo by Keith Birmingham, Pasadena Star-News/ SCNG)

By Tony Saavedra, San Gabriel Valley Tribune, West Covina, Calif. (TNS)

Baseball superstar Shohei Ohtani's former interpreter has been charged with stealing more than \$16 million from Ohtani's bank account to pay the translator's illegal

gambling debts, federal authorities announced Thursday, April 11.

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At a news conference in downtown Los Angeles, U.S. Attorney for Los Angeles Martin Estrada said Mizuhara, 39, of Newport Beach had impersonated Ohtani in phone calls to the bank to authorize the wire transfers to an illegal bookmaking operation. Estrada said Mizuhara in 2018 helped Ohtani set up the bank account in Arizona to deposit the ballplayer's salary, so he was familiar with the codes and personal information necessary to access the money.

Investigators found recordings of the phone calls between Mizuhara and bank officials.

Mizuhara allegedly told Ohtani's U.S.-based financial professionals, none of whom spoke Japanese, that Ohtani had denied them access to the account, authorities said.

Ohtani knew nothing of the fraud or gambling payments and was purely a victim, Estrada said, adding that investigators reviewed electronic communications between Ohtani and Mizuhara and none included discussions about gambling or authorization to access Ohtani's bank account.

"Mr. Mizuhara used and abused (his) position of trust in order to plunder Mr. Ohtani's bank account," Estrada said, adding that Mizuhara was feeding an "insatiable appetite" for gambling.

Authorities added that up until March, Mizuhara also used Ohtani's account to buy about 1,000 baseball cards for \$325,000 through eBay and Whatnot. Mizuhara allegedly used the alias "Jay Min" and had the cards sent to the Dodgers' clubhouse.

Mizuhara's involvement with the Orange County bookmaker turned up in a far-reaching investigation by the IRS, Homeland Security and FBI into illegal gambling in Southern California and the laundering of proceeds through Las Vegas casinos, according to an affidavit filed with the federal complaint. To date, the probe has led

to 12 convictions and what authorities called “non-prosecution agreements” with

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Estrada said winnings from Mizuhara's gambling ventures went straight to his account, not Ohtani's.

Mizuhara was fired by the Dodgers in late March while the team was in Seoul, South Korea, for two major league games with the Padres after published allegations tied him to an estimated \$4.5 million in payouts from Ohtani's bank account to the alleged illegal bookmaking operation.

At the time, Ohtani's attorneys issued a news release that the Dodgers superstar was the victim of “massive fraud” and that they were turning the matter over to authorities.

Mizuhara, a graduate of Diamond Bar High School, told ESPN that he had paid the money through Ohtani's account to an associate of alleged bookie Mathew Bowyer, a former exterminator and commodities trader who now operates a Brazilian jujitsu studio.

Bowyer's attorney, Diane Bass, has said Bowyer dealt only with Mizuhara and never with Ohtani. But a source affiliated with Bowyer said the bookmaker allowed his associates to believe that Ohtani was doing the betting as a way of drumming up business.

In a later news conference in Seoul, Ohtani told a worldwide gathering of reporters that he never gambled and that Mizuhari had lied to him and stole from him. Ohtani told the media that he was “very saddened and shocked.”

The source said Mizuhara bet on international soccer and professional football and basketball, not baseball, which is disallowed by the league.

Mizuhara was a fixture in Ohtani's life during the ballplayer's meteoric rise in the big

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as cited in news stories and the Angels media guide. The Athletic reported that Mizuhara never attended or graduated from UC Riverside as stated in his bio and that he did not interpret for players in Boston and New York.

— *Staff writer Scott Schwebke contributed to this report.*

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