

Baseball tidbits newsletter – interesting and random stuff, fodder for bar bets.

5.29.2022

Good morning baseball fans,

We are a quarter through the 2022 season.

Pour yourself some coffee and sit back with Peter Gammons, Jayson Stark on the first quarter of the season, two more tributes to Roger Angell, the Bonura Salute, and of course trivia.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE

Mickey Mantle (1956, 1958, 1960, 1961)

Todd Hundley (1996)

Chipper Jones (1999)

Lance Berkman (2002, 2006)

Mark Teixeira (2005)

Carlos Beltran (2006)

What do the six of them have in common?

(answer at bottom)

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

Pitchers who have started 22 or more games over the past two seasons. Leaders in ERA. **Max Scherzer**. Last year's NL Cy Young winner **Corbin Barnes** of the Brewers. And **Nestor Cortes** of the Yankees at 2.45.

Most games played since 2014:

Carlos Santana, Mets	1186
Paul Goldschmidt, Cards	1158
Eric Hosmer, Padres	1156

MLB says an average game uses 8-10 dozen balls (96-120). 30 teams x 81 home games adds up to just under 300K regular season balls. The Athletic counted them all during a recent Guardians-Tigers game.

115. Let's sketch that math:

- We had 11 games on the schedule Thursday night. That's 1,265 baseballs used in one night.
- Excluding spring training and the playoffs, we get 2,430 games per year. The calculator tells me that's 279,450 baseballs per season.
- The official MLB baseball, made by Rawlings, lists for \$24.95 per ball (a bit harsh, no?), though I have a feeling that MLB gets a decent bulk rate — MLB has co-owned Rawlings since 2018.
- Just for fun, though: By those retail numbers, MLB goes through nearly \$7 million worth of baseballs every regular season.

Which team was the last to go an entire season without being shut out--the 2000 Reds (163 games)

Speaking of the Reds, shortstop **Karl Farmer** went 4-for-4 with a pair of home runs and collected five RBIs as the Reds pounded out a 20-5 win at Great American Ball Park to gain a split of the four-game series with Chicago. It was Cincinnati's most runs scored in a game since 1999. It was also the most runs the Cubs had given up in a game since 1999.

Name the MLB player that played under **Casey Stengel** on two (2) different teams, neither of which was the Yankees--**Warren Spahn**- Boston Braves (1942) and NY Mets (1965)

Joc Pederson had a night this week against the Mets—3 HRs, 8 RBI in Giants 13-12 win. Pederson became the second Giant to register a three-homer game at Oracle Park, joining **Pablo Sandoval**, who accomplished the feat in Game 1 of the 2012 World Series against the Tigers. Pederson's career-high eight RBIs also matched the San Francisco-era Giants record previously held by **Willie Mays, Orlando Cepeda and Brandon Crawford**.

By scoring 12 runs and losing the Mets dropped off the list of teams that had never scored 12 runs and lost—now the Rays and Diamondbacks are left.

Speaking of 13-12 games, May 26, 1977: An 18-year-old **Rickey Henderson** helped the Modesto A's tie a California League record with 15 stolen bases in a 13-12 victory over the Fresno Giants. Henderson himself swiped seven bags, matching a league record set by **Lee Mazzilli** one year earlier.

Aaron Judge leads the Majors with 17 home runs this season while no other player in baseball has hit more than 12 home runs. Judge is just the fifth player (sixth time) in franchise history to hit at least 17 home runs in the Yankees' first 45 games of a season, joining **Mickey Mantle** (20HR in 1956), **Babe Ruth** (19HR in 1928 and 1930), **Alex Rodriguez** (18HR in 2007) and **Tino Martinez** (17HR in 1997).

Dodgers' **Cody Bellinger** was the last rookie to hit for the cycle-- July 15, 2017.

Mike Trout joined **Willie Mays** and **Alex Rodriguez** as the only players with at least 1,000 runs, 300 home runs, and 200 stolen bases by their age-30 seasons. Trout went into the weekend with 1,002 runs in 1,329 games with the Angels. The team record of 1,024 runs was set by **Garret Anderson** in 2,013 games

A few fun facts from a Joe Posnanski piece on **Zack Grienke**. There have been 436 high school pitchers selected in the first round since the MLB draft began in 1965. Two hundred and six of them — 47% — never won a big-league game, at least not yet. About 64% did not win 10 big league games.

Yes, there have been some success stories . **Roy Halladay**, a first-round pick in 1995, emerged in 2002 after spending some time trying to figure things out; he's in the Hall of Fame now. **CC Sabathia**, a 1998 first-round pick, overcame some early issues, became an All-Star for the first time in 2003, and became one of the best pitchers of his generation — he will end up in the Hall of Fame too.

In 2006, the Dodgers drafted a high school pitcher named **Clayton Kershaw**.

In 2007, the Giants drafted a high school pitcher named **Madison Bumgarner**.

In 2008, the Yankees drafted a high school pitcher named **Gerrit Cole** (but he didn't sign).

From 1990 through 2002, there were 78 pitchers who either won 100 games or saved 100 games. Exactly zero of them were high school pitchers taken in the first round.

Grienke won a Cy Young Award, he almost won another, he's picked up six Gold Gloves, and he has hit nine home runs, including one off Clayton Kershaw.

The sons of **Manny Ramirez**, **David Ortiz**, **Gary Sheffield** and **Keith Foulke** are playing for the same summer league team in Brockton, Mass.

11 years/210 starts, The Red Sox **Nathan Evoldi** threw his first complete game this week.

Having known each other and competed as teammates since they were 4 and 5 years old while playing National Youth Sports T-ball in the Phoenix area, **Nolan Gorman** has had numerous games in which he's smashed home runs while lefty **Matthew Liberatore** has starred on the mound.

But never, ever, they both said on a feel-good Saturday full of Major League firsts for the duo, could they have imagined something as monumental and downright unthinkable as what occurred for them in the Cardinals' 8-3 defeat of the Brewers.

On the same day Gorman smashed the first home run of his young career, Liberatore pitched well enough over five innings to notch his first career victory.

Gorman, who entered in a 0-for-11 rut with seven strikeouts, got surprisingly moved up to the No. 2 spot by manager **Oliver Marmol**. Gorman, the No. 2 prospect in the Cardinals' system per MLB Pipeline, responded by going 4-for-4 with a home run, a double, two singles and four RBIs. The home run left the bat at 110.6 mph, and the others were also hard hit -- 107.7 mph on his third-inning single; 96.9 mph on his fourth-inning double and 107 mph on his sixth-inning single when he needed a triple for the cycle.

Liberatore, who fell short of five innings in his first start last week in Pittsburgh, was strong throughout Saturday. This time, the 6-foot-4 left-hander struck out three of the first five batters he faced by mixing his top pitch, his 12-to-6 curveball, and his 93-mph fastball.

When we think of insane, back-and-forth, high-scoring games, the one that likely comes to mind first for many people is the Phillies' epic 23-22, 10-inning victory over the Cubs on May 17,

1979. **Mike Schmidt**'s solo homer in the top of the 10th off fellow Hall of Famer **Bruce Sutter** finally proved to be the difference at Wrigley Field on that unforgettable afternoon.

But that game has nothing on the one between NCAA Division I titans Oregon State and UCLA on Saturday afternoon. The No. 4 Beavers and No. 20 Bruins combined for 47 -- yes, 47 -- runs in a 25-22 walk-off victory for UCLA in the first game of a doubleheader to determine which team would advance to play Stanford in Sunday's inaugural Pac-12 Baseball Tournament championship game.

The Bruins, down to their final three outs in the ninth inning, rallied for nine runs to tie the game at 21.

47 combined runs

53 combined hits

527 pitches thrown by 16 pitchers

5 hours 44 minutes

9 run, 9th inning come back by UCLA.

Game tying balk in extra innings

45 minutes later the two teams played again, winner to advance to the PAC-12 finals against Stanford...Oregon State won 8-7.

According to ESPN Stats and Info, the last time 47 or more combined runs were scored in a Major League game was on Aug. 25, 1922. That game featured 49 runs between -- of course -- the Cubs and the Phillies, with Chicago winning it, 26-23.

Walk off 3 run HR by **Tommy Beres** (Beres didn't even start the game -- he came in as a defensive replacement behind the plate in the sixth inning and went 3-for-4, also singling home two runs in the eighth.)

WHATS THE STORY?

Trevor Story's 5 HRs in three games for the Sox made this piece from Joe Posnanski more relevant. Second baseman **Trevor Story** reeled in American League Player of the Week honors Monday after batting .360 (9 for 25) with 10 runs scored, a double, six home runs, 14 RBIs, five walks, two stolen bases and a 1.120 slugging percentage in seven games played.

He didn't stop there. On Thursday Story started his night by driving in a run in the first inning on an RBI single. One inning later, he belted a three-run shot off **Dallas Keuchel** to give Boston a 6-0 lead. The blast was Story's seventh homer in the past seven games and eighth over his last 10.

Those four RBIs by Story gave him 21 over his last seven games. It's the most by any Red Sox player over a seven-game span within a single season since 1920 -- the year RBIs first began being tracked -- and the most in MLB history since **Edwin Encarnación** plated 21 from Aug. 23-30 in 2015, per Elias Sports Bureau.

Story also extended his month's total to 32 RBIs, which is tied for seventh-most all-time in May. He needs 10 RBIs over the next five days -- six games -- to break **Ted Williams'** record for most RBIs in the month of May (41).

Story finished Thursday's game going 2-for-4 with one home run, four RBIs, one walk and one stolen base. The 29-year-old continues to see the ball well, batting .333 (13-for-39) over his last 10 games, with eight home runs, 22 RBIs, six walks and three stolen bases.

On May 8, Story was batting .194 with 35 strikeouts -- which was more than three times his RBI output (10) -- and zero home runs. Since then, the slugger has nine home runs, 27 RBIs and 18 strikeouts.

The record for most home runs in a seven-game span is 10, accomplished by three players--The Dodgers' **Shawn Green** (2002). Cleveland's **Albert Belle** (1995) and Washington's **Frank Howard** (1968) also did it.

And more Posnanski...

OK, so the essential Baseball-Reference has yet another incredibly cool new feature called "Spans," which allows you to take a look at a player or team over a span of games. It's incredibly useful for something small, such as "Who hit the most home runs over five games?*"

Answer: **Shawn Green, who in 2002 hit nine home runs in a five-game span against Arizona and Milwaukee. This included his four-homer game on May 23, and also two other two-homer games. Six other players hit eight homers over a five-game span:*

- **Kyle Schwarber**, 2021
- **Josh Hamilton**, 2012
- **Barry Bonds**, 2001
- **Manny Ramirez**, 1998
- **Frank Howard**, 1968

- **Ralph Kiner, 1947**

But I think it's especially fun to look at the greatest 162-game spans in baseball history:

Most home runs

Barry Bonds, April 2001-April 2002 — 80 homers.

Yeah, that's right, over 162 games, Bonds hit .353/.545/.924 with, brace yourself, 80 home runs. That's right. Barry Bonds hit 80 home runs over 162 games. Now, we obviously know that Bonds was using performance-enhancing drugs. So you can disqualify him for that if you want (and I'm sure some of you already have).

But I will say that even if you want to take Bonds' remarkable performance at something close to face value, there is still a reason to mark this down. Yes, Bonds is the only player in baseball history to hit 80 home runs in a 162-game span, but only barely. **Mark McGwire**, from May 1999 to May 2000, hit 79 home runs.

And **Sammy Sosa**, from May 1998 to May 1999, hit 76 home runs.

So while 80 home runs in 162 games looks like an optical illusion now, in context it was not entirely out of the ordinary in his time, before drug testing, when the strike zone was wallet-sized, when ballparks were scaled for home runs, etc.

In case you are wondering (and I know you are) here are the most home runs over 162 games for a few of your favorite all-time sluggers:

- **Babe Ruth** (1927-28): 71 homers
- **Ken Griffey Jr.** (1997-98): 66 homers
- **Roger Maris** (1961-62): 64 homers
- **Jimmie Foxx** (1931-33) 61 homers
- **Mickey Mantle** (1960-61): 61 homers
- **Mike Trout** (2019-2021): 59 homers
- **Henry Aaron** (1969-70): 57 homers
- **Willie Mays** (1964-66): 57 homers
- **Albert Pujols** (2005-2007): 55 homers

Most hits

Napoleon Lajoie, April 1901-June 1902 — 281 hits.

George Sisler, May 1920-June 1921 — 281 hits.

I really expected to see Ichiro at the top here, but he's actually nowhere near the top. In Ichiro's remarkable 2004 season, when he set the record with 262 hits, he played in 161 games. His best 162-game span was from May 1 that year to April 30 the next, at 272 hits — that's the most hits for the span over the last 90 or so years (it's below Lajoie, Sisler, **Lefty O'Doul** (280) and **Ty Cobb** (275)).

I would take Lajoie's record less seriously than the rest — that was in 1901, the first year of the American League, when the level of competition was exceptionally low. Lajoie that year hit .426/.463/.643 and basically led the new league in everything — runs, doubles, homers, RBIs, etc. He was just that much better than everyone else.

During Sisler's span, he hit .421/.469/.675 with 58 doubles, 23 triples, 22 home runs and 47 stolen bases. That will play. But you know what stands out for me in that? The .469 on-base percentage. Sisler was no fan of walking.

Most Stolen Bases

Rickey Henderson, August 1981-August 1982 — 141 stolen bases.

Well, you knew the answer here would be Rickey. The only real question was if anyone else would be close.

And the answer is: No. Nobody else is even close. **Vince Coleman** (1986-87) and **Lou Brock** (1973-74) had 123 stolen bases over the span. Rickey was a man apart.

The most stolen bases over the span in this century is 89 — **Billy Hamilton** and **Scott Podsednik** both did that.

Here, by the way, are the Molina leaders:

- **Yadier Molina**, 2012-13, 15 stolen bases.
- **Jose Molina**, 2010-12: 6 stolen bases.
- **Bengie Molina**, 2006-08, 1 stolen base.

NOT EXACTLY CHEAP ENTERTAINMENT

The annual MLB Fan Cost Index, produced since 1991 by Chicago-based sports business intelligence firm Team Marketing Report, came out Tuesday and it reflects how much it costs to take a family or group of four to a ballgame, including tickets, parking, and concessions.

As you might expect, the big-market teams in expensive places like New York and Los Angeles sit atop the list, while clubs in the far-flung provinces are a bit less harsh on the wallet – something increasingly acute for some fans as inflation bites into family entertainment budgets.

The average baseball FCI this season is \$256.41. That's up 1.9 percent, or about \$3, over 2021 and is the smallest year-over-year increase in three seasons. The average non-premium ticket across baseball is \$35.93 – an increase of 94 cents over 2021, per Team Marketing Report's data.

The Boston Red Sox topped the list at \$386. Cubs, Astros, Dodgers, Nationals and Giants all topped \$300.

At the bottom of the list Diamondbacks \$152, Marlins \$186, Rays 196 and Pirates \$199 all under \$200.

The Sox have an average non-premium ticket price of \$61.71. But with dynamic pricing, four premium seats and all the rest for a weekend game in the summer is easily \$1,000-plus. NFL games average out to a Fan Cost Index of \$568.18. The NBA is \$444.12 and the NHL \$462.58.

MLB hitters have always sought fastball counts. But what if there's no longer any such thing?

Eno Sarris, The Athletic

Baseball has been turned on its head. It used to be that pitchers would get ahead with a well-located fastball, then get the batter to chase soft stuff outside of the zone for strike three. The hitter would take pitches in order to get a hitter's count and force the pitcher to come inside the zone with a fastball in order to avoid the walk. That was the time-honored, well-worn script for the hitter: step one, get a hitter's count; step two, get a hittable fastball; step three, profit.

Not anymore. Around ten years ago, the ratio of fastballs thrown in all hitters' counts dropped below two thirds and never recovered — it's now at the lowest point in the pitch-tracking era at

57 percent. And that's even propped up by the 3-0 count, when some hitters still take (for some reason) and pitchers still throw the fastball nearly 90 percent of the time. In non 3-0 hitter's counts, the fastball rate is at 55 percent and dropping.

The reason why? The slider.

"Hitters count is not a hitters count anymore," said Giants infielder **Wilmer Flores**, who is now facing the same amount of sliders as four-seam fastballs for the first time in his career. "I heard that on television, 'this guy is working into a hitter's count,' and I was like no, that's not a thing. Most of the time you're going to see ... another slider. And then another slider."

It's true that the slider is largely replacing the fastball — breaking ball rates are at an all-time high and fastball rates in all counts are down.

"It's my best pitch, that's why I throw it so much," said **Jakob Junis**, who leads starting pitchers in slider usage. "There's not so much science behind it, I want to get beat by my best offerings."

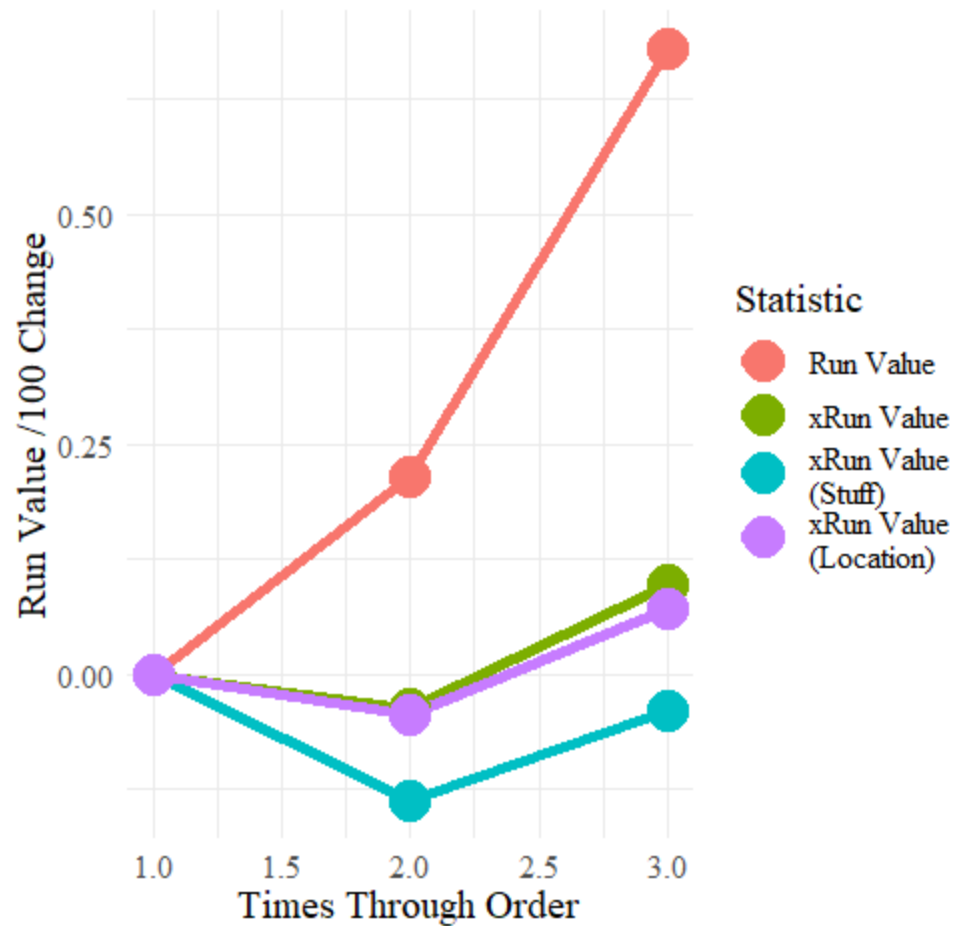
We're also now seeing more and more sliders on the minor-league level, and to an even to a more extreme level, introduced and preached by organizations that are having a lot of success with the slider-heavy plan.

The Mariners' minor leaguers led the minors in slider percentage last year, and now they are throwing nearly three out of every five balls with wiggle. So why aren't hitters sitting breaking ball if they are seeing as many breaking balls as fastballs these days?

"If you sit slider and you get it, you're going to hit it," acknowledged the Twins' **Carlos Correa**, who is seeing the most sliders of his career this season. "It doesn't matter how good the slider is, if you're looking for it. The reason why the slider is so dominant is that we're geared up for 98, 99, 100 nowadays, and then you get 85, 88, you get fooled a little bit. Back in the day when it was 90, 91 for starters and then 82, 83 mph slider, you could still adjust to it, now it's a lot harder."

But one would think there would be a point of no return, when there are so many sliders that their effectiveness starts to drop as hitters begin expecting them.

There is evidence that this *should* happen at some point. Consider the third time through the order effect, that hitters start to see the advantage once they see a pitcher the third time. The research suggests that this effect is true not because of fatigue, but because of the hitter's familiarity with the pitcher. Basically, the results change much more than you'd expect them to based on the physical characteristics of the pitches and their locations at the plate suggest they should.

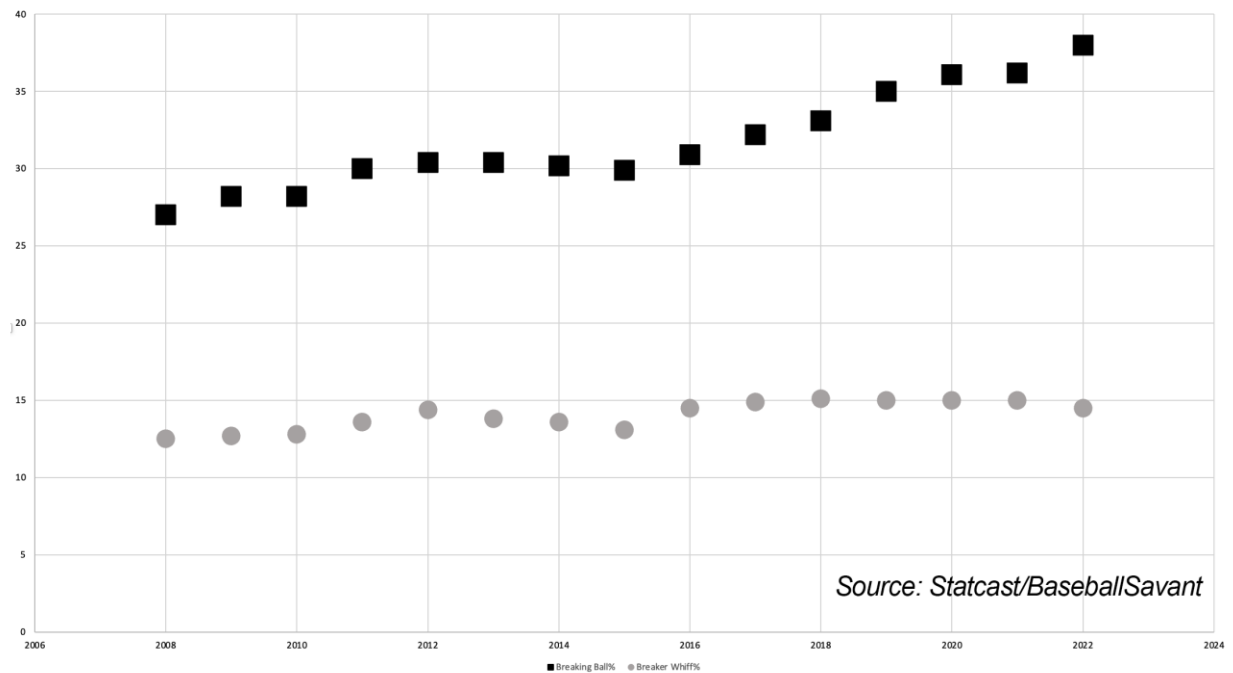


Amazingly, this effect is true from game to game in a playoff series, too. All in all, this research suggests that theoretically, if pitchers just kept throwing more and more sliders, hitters would eventually get used to those shapes, familiar with their stuff, and able to hit the sliders better.

We're not there yet. Breaking ball rates keep getting higher and higher, and their whiff rates stay the same overall.

More breaking balls every year, same whiff rates

MLB breaking ball (cutter, slider, curve & knuckle curve) percentage (black) & whiff rate (gray) by year



Pitchers who throw more of their sliders also don't see a drop in their swinging strike rate, at least not as a whole, as Carmen Ciardiello found at FanGraphs. So pitchers keep throwing more and more of them.

"Throw more sliders," said one pitching coach.

"Still too many fastballs," said another pitching coach.

"Why not use the stocks in your portfolio that are performing best?" said another.

A new kind of pitcher

When talking about pitch mix, fastball velocity matters, as Correa points out. In fact, fastball velocity and pitch mix go hand in hand. This year, the average starting pitcher is throwing their fastball less than half the time and throwing it 93.7 mph, on average. Pitch tracking started in 2003, and there wasn't a single starting pitcher who came close to doing both of those things until **Randy Johnson** threw his 93.7 mph fastball 45 percent of the time in 2004. But he was alone on an island until you start getting more comps like **Yu Darvish** and **Jake Arrieta** in 2014.

Or go the other way, and it's even starker. When pitch tracking started, the average starting pitcher threw 89 mph on average and threw the fastball 63 percent of the time. The only starting pitcher who has pitched at all like that in the last *eight* seasons was Julio Teheran.

There are basically no pitchers today who pitch like their predecessors of 20 years ago, so hitting strategies that were relevant 20 years ago are also due for an update. Shouldn't hitters train to hit sliders first and foremost as they approach the most-thrown pitch in the big leagues?

It's not quite that simple, Correa said.

"When you hit the machine, you know the slider is coming," said Correa. "What makes hitting so tough is not knowing what's coming and having to adjust to what's coming. We live off of mistakes, especially in this era."

But can't mistakes come from either pitch? This season, 35.6 percent of sliders are not in the bottom third of the zone or lower; some portion of those have to be mistakes. Guess how many four-seam fastballs are in the zone but not in the upper third of the strike zone? 37.6 percent. As the overall four-seam and slider percentages converge, it should make sense to sit slider even if you're looking for mistakes. But from the whiff rates on sliders, it doesn't look like hitters are doing that en masse yet.

Maybe because "breaking ball" is not just one pitch. Even the word "slider" doesn't really capture the essence of how variable that pitch can be, even when thrown by a single pitcher. Jake Arrieta got around two inches more drop in two-strike counts than on zero-strike counts with his slider in his heyday — with the same grip. "I can manipulate the velocity, I can manipulate the break, depending on the situation, depending on the hitter, depending on the count," he told me in 2015.

"It's not the same every time, that depends on location and where it ends up at the plate," agreed Junis, and his assertion that the slider looks different to different parts of the plate is backed by research. "I sometimes throw it harder, sometimes I throw it a little softer. Varying speeds, shapes, looks and locations of it."

Griffin Jax throws twice as many sliders as fastballs for the Minnesota Twins, only a few years after that organization tried something similar with Matt Wisler, the current leader in slider percentage. He speaks similarly to Arrieta about his breaking ball.

"I will throw it with more intent earlier in the count for the called-strike purpose, and it's a little shorter," Jax said.

"But when I really want a swing-and-miss, two-strike," Jax continued, "I'm not trying to do anything different, but I'll get a little more horizontal and depth, and maybe a half-mile or mile off of my other slider, but I don't manipulate the grip at all."

A little tighter for the take, a little bigger for the swing-and-miss. The advent of pitch design and its newest product, the popular sweeper slider that Jax throws, might play into the success the reliever is having, too.

“The combination of the sweep property of it thrown with the velo I’m throwing it with — because most sweepers in the league are low 80s right now, but I can maintain that shape six mph harder — that’s why we’ve seen such a great result with it,” he surmised, and he does throw the third-hardest sweeper in baseball according to this leaderboard at Baseball Prospectus. “My profile as a pitcher is four-seam carry and a curveball, hitters are expecting that north-south and then when you throw something that goes completely lateral in the upper 80s, that goes off the map for them.”

According to research on the “stuff” of pitches, the physical properties of pitches, a breaking ball over 85 mph of any shape is effective. Take a look at that third graph depicting the movement profiles of breaking balls with that sort of velocity, and note how much red (good for the pitcher) is on that graph compared to the first graph showing breaking balls between 79 and 81 mph.

That might be why there are multiple organizations trying to mass-develop hard, low-to-mid nineties slider/cutter hybrids in their minor leagues right now. This new cutter, plus the sweeper, and then some of those pitchers will have the touch to manipulate the movement on their breaking balls from count to count? Yeah, we’re going to see more sliders going forward.

What can hitters do?

If there weren’t always pitchers with that kind of velo on their sliders, there probably have always been pitchers that had this kind of touch on their breaking balls. The raw proliferation of sliders has meant there are more of them now, though. There are almost twice as many pitchers this year who are throwing three distinct breaking balls more than five percent of the time than did the same in 2010. And that’s not even catching the ones which vary within a pitch type like those of Jax and Arrieta.

Put that variation aside. There’s the possible argument that pitchers can manipulate fastballs the same way (Lance Lynn told me he has five distinct fastballs, so anything is possible) and fastballs certainly have good velo. Let’s then envision a future where we’re seeing *more* breaking balls than fastballs. If pitchers were out here throwing breaking balls three out of every five times, wouldn’t things change on the hitter side? They’d have to sit slider then, wouldn’t they?

Consider the case of the Mets’ J.D. Davis.

“When I came up in the big leagues with the Astros in 2017, I got a lot of sliders,” Davis said this week. “In the minor leagues, I was a good fastball hitter, I could do damage on it. So when I came up to the big leagues I got sliders in hitters counts to keep me from not extending, so I

had to make adjustments in 2017, 2018, 2019 where I broke out, I needed to get more in my leagues and get a little shorter to the ball and stay through it. I made that adjustment, so now pitchers are adjusting back to me and I'm seeing more fastballs this year."

Now pitchers have switched it up on Davis again, and he's seeing the most four-seam fastballs and the fewest sliders of his career. Seems relevant.

"Back in the day — when I say back in the day I mean like five years, six years ago — everyone was throwing down in the zone," Davis continued, "so guys started elevating and getting in their legs, so now pitchers are throwing up in the zone ... it ebbs and flows."

John Brebbia with the Giants keeps throwing more sliders, but he may not throw much more than 50 percent going forward. Because he wants to be unpredictable.

"In my mind, however many pitches I throw, in theory they're exactly equal percentage-wise," the Giants reliever said, "so nobody can sit on any one particular thing. At least a perfect split between velocities."

Maybe we won't see sliders go much higher than 30 percent, when they'd theoretically be equal with four-seamers, because pitchers don't want hitters to sit on *any* pitch. **Adam Ottavino**, who has an excellent slider, has never thrown it more than fifty percent of the time in his career.

"The more I throw the slider, the less swing-and-miss I get," Ottavino said. "I can see it in the percentages over time."

Two of Ottavino's three best seasons by slider whiff rate have also been in the three seasons in which he's used the slider the least. But he still considers it his primary pitch.

"Once I became known as a slider pitcher, people were looking for the slider more," Ottavino continued, "and ultimately, it's still an awesome pitch for me for weak contact but not a huge swing-and-miss pitch, especially in the zone. If I throw less of them, I get better swing-and-miss, I've punched some lefties out this year on sliders, but it's been the first one they've seen in the at-bat. If I have to throw three or four, I get diminishing returns."

"I was throwing multiple sliders at one point, but I just never felt comfortable throwing that many," he said. "Mostly I want you to know I'm throwing the slider as my main pitch, I need you to know that so that you're on something 80 mph so my other pitches work. I've always felt like your luck is going to run out if you throw that many sliders. A big part of my entire belief system in pitching is that I'm not trying to throw what they're expecting."

And it's that last element that may rein in the rampant breaking ball usage. Sliders and curveballs are within a couple percentage points of equalling four-seam fastball usage in 2022,

and if you include cutters as breaking balls, breakers are nearly within ten percentage points of equalling all fastballs.

But for now, the league's pitchers are doing a good job playing with the expectations of a hitter — throwing just enough fastballs to keep them sitting fastballs so that they can throw all those breaking balls for whiffs. We'll see if the league keeps pushing it and if that point of no return ever comes. We may see it first in Seattle.

Gammons: While outsiders wonder about the ball, MLB's pitching coaches fret about finding enough innings

Peter Gammons, The Athletic

The night before I was at Fenway, the Astros had hit five home runs in the second inning against Boston's **Nathan Eovaldi**, who in 2021 allowed 15 homers in 182 1/3 innings while finishing fourth in the American League Cy Young Award voting. The next afternoon, around 2:30 p.m. on a clear, dry 65-degree day with a southwest wind blowing out toward Fenway Park's famous Green Monster, balls were flying out as several Red Sox took early batting practice.

"Think the balls are a little different right now?" one player asked his teammates behind the batting cage. "These balls have been flying out of here the last two days. I'd love to have some scientist cut these open, and compare them to the balls we were using back in April."

A day's drive from Fenway, a pitching coach was addressing his pitchers, and speaking to a subject that sometimes becomes as monotonous as talk about the weather in the Villages of Citrus Hills: the baseball. Its juicy-ness. Raised seams, lowered seams. Harder, softer. This is nothing new: In 1987, the year **Matt Nokes** hit 32 homers, Pitching coaches, players and amateur scientists were dropping them out of motel windows to see how they'd bounce.

This particular pitching coach told his pitchers, "do you really think the people at MLB are trying to change the way balls are made just because of the home run or run-scoring rate? They own Rawlings. They may experiment with the surface of the ball, but remember this — both teams are using the same balls. It's crazy to think the New York office wants one team to benefit more than the team they're playing."

"Every city, every region is different," the coach continued, in what essentially was a lecture on worrying about deliveries, command, scouting reports and grips rather than the balls, which they cannot control. You think they notice that in Denver? **Buck Showalter** had to walk from his hotel to the ballpark Friday, May 20 in a snowstorm with temperatures in the low-to-mid 30s. It had been 81 the day before. Have a 10-day homestand in Coors and one night you think you're playing in El Paso, another night you think it's Portland, Maine.

“You play to win,” Showalter said, “in whatever weather the Lord gave you.”

In other words, as Tampa Bay pitching coach **Kyle Snyder** says, “I can’t worry about speculation, about the ball, whatever. What we’re concerned with are preparation, delivery and recovery.”

And depth.

Oakland pitching coach **Scott Emerson**: “When we’re down to 13 pitchers, over the long season we’re going to have to be very careful about injuries.”

Since A’s owner John Fisher set out to clear as much payroll as possible with no concern about the Oakland A’s on-field product, they had to move nearly 330 innings in **Sean Manaea** and **Chris Bassitt**, and **Frankie Montas** and his 179 1/3 innings will be gone too, in time. Cole Irvin was hurt early. **Matt Olson**, **Matt Chapman**, **Starling Marte** and **Mark Canha** are gone, no deposit, no return.

There are many factors in play, between making velocity programs more important than learning to *pitch*, leading to multiple operations by the age of 22, to misguided deliveries. Fractured seasons, beginning with 2020, stretching to the HO-scaled 2021 season, and this abbreviated spring training necessitated by the lockout and the belief that playing close to 162 was more important than the physical ramifications of building up pitchers. And, remember, players can only be optioned to the minors five times in a season, which will further add to the physical stress. In mid-May, several stories were justifiably written about how the Padres would utilize the depth of their starting pitching depth; on May 22, **Mike Clevinger** went on the injured list.

That same day the Brewers’ **Freddy Peralta** was put on the IL with shoulder weakness.

Coming off the 60-game 2020 season, **Matthew Baker** of MLB Network Research found that in 2021, 489 pitchers went on the IL — 424 for injuries, 65 for COVID-19. As of May 20, 2022, 196 pitchers had been on the injured list, 170 to injuries, 26 to COVID. Stretch this year’s numbers to a full-season schedule and at the present rate 764 pitchers will go on the injured list, 663 for injuries, 101 for COVID. Add that by May 20 there were 102 pitchers who’d been on the injured list both seasons. It doesn’t take Dr. James Andrews to figure that there will be postseason slots determined by days on the IL. Perhaps next to ERA+, FIP, WHIP and SO/BB on Baseball-Reference and Fangraphs pitching stats line, we have DIL (Days on the Injured List).

A look at each division, spotlighting the pitchers on the IL.

National League East

Of course, one starts with the Mets. Two great pitchers, **Matt Scherzer** and **Jacob deGrom**, are out until close to midseason — hopefully. Face it, we don’t really have a schedule on deGrom. They’ve had injuries to **Tylor Megill**, **Taijuan Walker**, **Trevor May**, and that list is through the

quarter pole. They have built depth, but October may demand Scherzer and deGrom or another 120 innings acquired elsewhere, and when and if the A's open the Montas auction, there will be 12-15 teams in it. The man barely makes \$5 million and has two years before free agency. It's not as easy as "scouting" him.

The Braves can get **Michael Soroka** back, and **Alex Anthopoulos** is always a deadline mover. The Phillies see the worst as being over for the **Zack Wheeler/Zach Eflin/Corey Knebel** group. The Marlins' pitching is so good that if they can find a couple of veteran bats, they can be thinking postseason as they pass Labor Day.

National League Central

Jack Flaherty is the marquee name on the IL, and, when healthy, he can impact the Cardinals' pursuit of October. The Cubs have dealt with IL stints for **Marcus Stroman, David Robertson and Adbert Alzolay**, and with the club's ability to trade come July, they have to stay healthy. The key for the Brewers is to keep the depth of that staff healthy, weather the Peralta injury, and be ready to floor the accelerator post-Labor Day.

National League West

On the IL in the first half have been **Clayton Kershaw, Dustin May, Victor Gonzalez, Caleb Ferguson, Blake Treinen, Andrew Heaney, Danny Duffy and Tommy Kahnle**. The Giants have had **Alex Cobb and Anthony DeSclafani** sidelined.

American League East

Without further injuries, **Gerrit Cole, Nestor Cortes, Jameson Taillon, Jordon Montgomery and Luis Severino** could turn out to be the best rotation in the league. They have two of the best 6-8 inning guys in the game in **Mike King and Clay Holmes** in front of **Aroldis Chapman**, and add **Miguel Castro and Jonathan Loaisiga**. The IL is long; **Luis Gil** could be a significant loss, with **Chad Green, Zack Britton and Domingo German** out. They have the system and the money to make one or two impactful acquisitions. If you're in this division, think about Holmes, King and Castro, then remember **Brian Cashman** traded for all three as if they were items on room service.

The Yankees are hardly alone; the Blue Jays had **Hyun Jin Ryu** on the IL early, and **Nate Pearson** has been back on, as they wait for his health and pitchability to catch up to his promise. Boston has no idea when they will get **Chris Sale** back and what exactly they will get in him; what they do know is the effort he'll deliver. Chaim Bloom will try to deal for a closer or late-inning reliever, and in the final four months they will see if **Garrett Whitlock and Tanner Houck** can be a regular starter or closer, then bring in **Josh Winckowski, Kutter Crawford, Connor Seabold** and/or **Brandon Walter**. Or perhaps **Matt Barnes** can find what put him in the All-Star Game last season. They have two eye-poppers in **Bryan Mata**, throwing 99-100 with a nasty slider off Tommy John Surgery, and **Brayan Bello**, their best pitching prospect. New Englanders of a

certain age lie back, listen to The Lovin' Spoonful's "Daydream," watch Mata and Bello on video and dream of **Frankie Rodriguez** back in 2002.

Tampa Bay is yet another team with names on the injured list that could make a September charge. On the IL, likely for the season, are **Tyler Glasnow, Brendan McKay and Robinson Chirinos**. In spring training, two projected stars, **Shane Baz and Luis Patino**, went down with bone chips and an oblique issue, respectively, and both should be back in June. **Pete Fairbanks**, a quality reliever, had a severe lat pull. Recently **Andrew Kitteridge**, also very good, had a back issue. Soon they'll add Luke Bard, off a hip operation, and **Ben Bowden**, whose career medical chart would make for a CBS soap opera. They hope **Corey Kluber** stays off the IL, but **Shane McLanahan** — who Snyder and **Kevin Kiermaier** pledge will win a Cy Young Award — and **Drew Rasmussen** are a power 1-2 combination, while Jeffrey Springs is converting to a starter and his ability to miss bats has convinced them he's legit. The Rays' list of "next up" candidates is endless, so if you see **Colby White** coming out of the bullpen or **Taj Bradley** starting a game, don't be surprised.

American League Central

The two teams who have lost the most to the IL ... are Chicago and Minnesota.

The White Sox have lost **Lance Lynn, Lucas Giolito, Joe Kelly, Aaron Bummer, Garrett Crochet, Codi Heuer and Ryan Burr**. The Twins have been without **Chris Paddack, Jorge Alcala, Bailey Ober, Kenta Maeda, Sonny Gray and Danny Coulombe** at points. The Guardians have had **Cal Quantrill and James Karinchack** on the IL. The Tigers have been decimated: **Eduardo Rodriguez, Casey Mize, Matt Manning, Tyler Alexander, Spencer Turnbull, Michael Pineda, Andrew Chafin**. It makes this season a rickety bridge to where they're headed, and could make 2023 another bridge year, albeit stronger than 2002.

American League West

This isn't too complicated a division, although the Astros, Angels and Mariners are all postseason threats. Houston likely needs **Ryan Pressley and Jake Odorizzi** off the IL. The Mariners need **Paul Sewald** pitching as he did last season. **Logan Gilbert, George Kirby, Robbie Ray, Chris Flexen and Marco Gonzales** make up a deep, flexible rotation, and they're healthy. Their need isn't physical rehab, it's a couple of reliever trades by **Jerry DiPoto**, who loves to make deals.

The injuries to so many pitchers and the expansion of the playoffs means more teams will be trying to trade for pitching, and fewer teams will be sellers. "The cost is going to be very high in terms of expected returns," says Boston's Bloom. Another general manager suggests richer contenders could outbid a smaller-market team going for the same pitcher by eating salary. Do the Reds want to keep **Luis Castillo and Tyler Mahle** to provide soft landings for **Hunter Greene and Nick Lodolo**? They might talk seriously with a team willing to pick up a big chunk of the \$32 million Joey Votto is owed in 2023-24, between his \$25 million 2023 base salary and 2024

buyout. A Canadian future Hall of Famer in Toronto on Rogers Network? Not bad. If the Red Sox are still at single-digit homers out of their first basemen as they roll into Wrigley the last weekend of June and **Triston Casas** is still batting under .250 in Worcester? What do they do then?

“Think about that list of potential pitchers on the injured list — what was it ... close to 800?” said one AL GM. We aren’t close to the Heartbreak Hill of August, which we didn’t have in the 60-game season. Young pitchers will feel the effects of losing so many innings in 2020. We’ve barely had spring training the last two years. Then there are the minor injuries that pitchers couldn’t take to their clubs in December and January. Sellers must scout Double A the way you scout potential playoff teams in September. This September there may be quite a few Double-A arms pitching in the big leagues.

Chase Silseth was in Double A before his successful start for the Angels last week, nine-and-a-half months after being drafted in the 11th round. **Sandy Koufax, Catfish Hunter, Lew Krausse, Eddie Bane, Pete Broberg, Moe Drabowsky, Jim Abbott and Johnny Antonelli** all made their professional debuts in the big leagues.

Could someone be drafted in July and make his debut in the ALCS?

Oh, that’s right, seven of the 10 highest-rated college pitchers in the July draft have had, or are about to have, Tommy John surgery.

MLB season’s first 40 games: 10 things we learned and 5 execs’ takeaways

Jayson Stark, The Athletic

What a season. ... **Albert Pujols** has finished as many games on the mound as **Blake Treinen**. ... **Anthony Rendon** has hit more home runs left-handed than **Austin Meadows**. ... A team learned it was somehow possible to allow no hits but not throw a no-hitter. ... And maybe weirdest of all, the whole sport hit like a guy who was converted into a pitcher!

Baseball in 2022: .237/.309/.382

Anthony Gose’s career: .240/.309/.348

We saw all of that happen in the first quarter of this MLB season. And if you didn’t have columns like this to come to the rescue, you might not know what to make of any of it. But hey, you’re welcome! So here’s what we’ve learned in the first 40 games, now that all 30 teams have made it that far.

1. Lockout hangover is a real thing

Remember that lockout? You know you do. It ended a mere 76 days ago. It just feels like 76 years ago. But we spoke with executives from five teams for this piece, and they're all still feeling the reverberations of the shortened spring and the bizarre offseason. How? We'll tell you how.

SOME PITCHERS STILL AREN'T ALL THE WAY BACK — We knew a three-week spring training wasn't long enough for many pitchers. What we didn't know was that real games, in April and May, weren't the ideal platform for them to finish their buildup back to where they'd normally be.

"The lazy narrative," said a National League exec, "was that three weeks into the season, it would be the equivalent of every other year for most of these guys. I'm not sure it's that simple. We've seen more challenges to it than we were expecting. We've seen it in injuries, but also in guys having a tougher time rebounding from outing to outing."

IS THIS RADAR GUN BROKEN? Here's more evidence of those same issues, from an American League exec who spent April looking at weird velocity readings, from standouts like **Shane Bieber, Robbie Ray and Zack Wheeler**, and wondering: What's up with that?

Early average velo (mph)

Pitcher	2021	2022
Bieber	93.0 mph	91.4
Ray	94.8	93.1
Wheeler	97.3	95.5

"You watch this stuff," this exec said, "and there's this fear or panic, like what's going on? I think it's clear now we've seen unusual velocity patterns, because different guys handled the lockout time differently and the spring training time differently. So it's been really hard to know what to make of players early."

INJURIES — All teams worry about health. That's true in every spring, every season. But especially this year. And not only because the spring was so short, but also because teams spent three months wondering whether their players were working out or working on their pitching wedge. The funny thing is, the injury info we've seen so far is mostly just confusing.

According to Derek Rhoads, who monitors injury data for Baseball Prospectus, the total number of players landing on the injured list is down from last year, when baseball was coming off the shortened 2020 season — but the average time they’ve spent on the IL is up, indicating many injuries are deeper and/or more significant.

Non-COVID IL placements, first 47 days

2021	349 placements	8047 days lost	23.1 average days
2022	286 placements	7890 days lost	27.6 average days

(SOURCE: Derek Rhoads, Baseball Prospectus)

Beyond that data, front offices are finding an uptick in the types of injuries that seem directly related to the short spring: quads, hamstrings, calves, obliques and assorted soft-tissue issues: “I think what we’re seeing,” said an AL exec, “is what happens when guys are just not fully built up.”

SO BEWARE OF THOSE FIRST 40 GAMES — Remember that old adage that you don’t jump to conclusions about your team until you’ve played 40 games? Front offices we spoke with say they’ve pushed that number upward this year. Guess why.

“We’re looking at trends in really small samples,” said one of the execs quoted earlier, “and trying to figure out which is the real version of our own players. How good are we? Plus, you also have a situation with the shortened spring that involved free agency and trades occurring at a rate that we’ve never really seen in spring.

“Usually, there’s one player every spring who signs late and has to rush to get ready for the season. This year there are dozens. There are so many players in new places who are still trying to adapt to their environment ... that I think we have to make more allowances for people getting used to a new schedule, a new environment, a new hitting background, new coaching staffs and new routines. Those things really matter.”

2. Presto — we made the opposite-field homer disappear!

I still remember writing one of these What We’ve Learned columns around this time in 2019. Batting practice looked like the driving range at the Masters. Home runs were flying. And all anybody could talk about was the proliferation of opposite-field home runs that looked like outs off the bat — and then landed in somebody’s popcorn box, 10 rows up in the bleachers.

There were more than 700 of those opposite-field homers that year — the most in history, according to Baseball-Reference. And why do we mention that? Oh, maybe because we’re on pace this year to see that number *almost cut in half*.

Opposite-field homers

2019	715 HRs
2021	547 HRs
2022	390 HRs *

(-projected over full season)*

(SOURCE: Baseball-Reference)

Need any more proof that the 2022 baseballs are flying slightly differently than those 2019 rocket balls?

“We’ve done a ton of work on the humidor effect,” one AL exec said. “And one of the things we’ve looked at is the spin of batted balls, because the spin on the baseball has a big impact on how far it goes. ... When you’re hitting a home run to the opposite field, it’s impossible to topspin it. You have to backspin it. And when you hit the ball with backspin, it has more humidor effect.”

Most teams expect the overall home-run rate, and the opposite-field home-run rate, to tick up as the weather heats up, based on what they’ve been told by MLB about the humidor effect. But let’s take a step back from that and ask a much more essential question:

Does it make sense to apply the humidor the way it’s been implemented this season if it means you have a sport in which baseballs travel differently on the West Coast than the East Coast, or in some climates than in others, or on some days versus other days? Imagine what we’d all be talking about if the NBA had a “basketball humidor” — and all the three-point shots on the East Coast kept clanking off the rim?

“We have to figure out how to adjust the humidor, based on different weather, and make it more adaptive,” an NL exec said. “We just need more consistency in the ball, month to month, season to season and ballpark to ballpark.”

3. Anybody have a humidor that could suppress the strikeout rate?

It’s not that hard to understand the concept behind trying to “normalize” the baseball. But does anyone have an invention lying around their basement that could also “normalize” the strikeout rate? Because if you want a sport with more action, that would actually accomplish something.

“We can keep talking about all these other ways to solve the (action) problem,” one AL exec said. “But I don’t really know that you’re solving that problem until you address the strikeout problem.”

The good news is, strikeouts have ticked down slightly this season — to 8.5 per nine innings (from 8.9 last season). The bad news is, strikeouts continue to be the One True Outcome that is devouring action. Nearly one in every four plate appearances in a major-league game ends in a strikeout. As recently as 2007, it was closer to one in every six.

And here's why that's a bigger problem now than ever before: As home runs plummet, it means the rate of strikeouts to home runs is suddenly way out of whack.

2022	8.47 K/HR	4.22 runs/game
2021	7.09	4.53
2020	6.76	4.65
2019	6.32	4.83

(SOURCE: Baseball-Reference)

At this pace, we're going to see approximately 36,000 more strikeouts than homers this season — the largest difference ever. And "is that good for our game?" one exec wondered. "I don't think so."

"But here's the question no one can answer," another exec said. "If we want less home runs, we know how we can do that. But if we want less strikeouts, what's the answer to that?"

4. The heck with limiting where infielders can stand. How about where outfielders can stand?

All right, do you mind if we drive down this road for one more exit? Thank you. Because we can't help but mention that if baseball doesn't take some sort of action, the extra-base hit could become practically as extinct as the Tyrannosaurus rex.

Doubles — Approaching their lowest rate (1.58 per game) in 30 years.

Triples — Tied for their lowest rate ever (0.13 per game).

What that means — Let's say this keeps up. If we project those rates of doubles and triples over a full season and compare it to 15 years ago, we'd see *1,500 fewer doubles* and *300 fewer triples* than we did as recently as 2007 — which would give us the lowest gapper rate (doubles plus triples) in nearly half a century.

"There's no doubles. There's no triples," an AL exec said. "We've got bigger, stronger, faster athletes who cover more ground. We're seeing more sophisticated defensive positioning on top of it. We're seeing less homers, so that's less of the Three True Outcomes. But we're not seeing more runs. We're just seeing a lot more outs."

Yes, the theory behind a deadened baseball might be: *Fewer homers = more gappers = more action*. But that is *not* how it's worked out, because outfielders are now positioned so deep that most of those fly balls that used to leave the premises have turned into outs, not doubles. And that was the whole idea.

Why do teams play their outfielders that deep? For the same reason they play infield shifts. They don't care if you hit a single, because you're not going to hit three of them in an inning off **Max Scherzer**.

So as baseball ponders limiting infield shifts, is it also time to think about limiting where outfielders hang out? Correct answer: Obviously!

And how do we know that? Because the sport has already started testing out that very premise.

We've seen it just in the last few weeks, in extended spring training, with an informal experiment in requiring outfielders to position themselves from 10 to 25 feet more shallow than in the big leagues. By all accounts, it produced enough doubles and triples that you shouldn't be surprised if you see this idea tested more extensively in the near future.

But would big-league front offices rebel against limits on both infield and outfield positioning? Don't bet your **Andruw Jones** bobblehead on it. The growing sense we get is that modern front offices are increasingly resigned to the idea that these changes are inevitable, so it makes more sense to adapt than resist — as long as it makes the game better in a meaningful way.

"In general," one exec said, "I'm for allowing teams to do whatever they want to do. But I also know that front offices across the game know we're just going to lose that argument. That is a commissioner's office/ownership level decision. And if they feel strongly about limiting shifting both in the infield and the outfield, just tell us what the rules are and we'll adapt. We're not going to try and fight a fight that we can't really win."

5. It's never been harder to be a rookie

Everyone loves a good top prospects list. Just be prepared to cover your eyes when you look at the numbers next to the names on those lists, because this just in: These guys are not in the Pacific Coast League anymore.

We present the names of Keith Law's top 100 prospects who have made their big-league debuts this season, plus a few other assorted top prospect names. We left out players who have only a handful of at-bats. These were the real-life stats of everyone else in The Show through Thursday:

POSITION PLAYERS

- **Bobby Witt Jr.** — .223, 5 HR
- **Spencer Torkelson** — .179, 41 K, 22 hits
- **CJ Abrams** — .182
- **Julio Rodríguez** — .267, but 55 K, 12 walks, 5 HR
- **Josh Lowe** — .188, 27 K, 12 hits
- **Joey Bart** — .165, 43 K, 13 hits
- **Bryson Stott** — .119, 23 K, 8 hits

PITCHERS

- **Hunter Greene** — 2-6, 5.89 ERA
- **Reid Detmers** — 1-2, 5.97 in games he didn't throw a no-hitter

Good thing there's **Jeremy Peña** (who didn't make Law's top 100)! So what should we make of all that? Baseball is hard. That's what.

"It takes time," one longtime NL exec said. "It still takes the same amount of time to figure it out. I don't give a damn what round they were drafted in or how much money you gave them. Just because you pay them more don't mean the apple is going to turn red any quicker."

But this isn't only about how much time it takes. When you add in the lost development season of 2020, the relative inexperience of most top prospects and all the information opposing teams already have accumulated on every young player who arrives, "the layer of separation between the big leagues and Triple A is just enormous right now," an AL exec said.

"The pitching in the big leagues is so much better," another exec said. "The defense is so much better. And the info teams are using is crushing it. I'll give you an example. Say **Bobby Witt Jr.** arrives in Kansas City and the Royals roll into Chicago. He's never dealt with the four people who have spent hours and hours breaking down every one of his at-bats, and see everything he's susceptible to, and have spent hours on a game plan just on how to get Bobby Witt out. None of these kids have ever seen anything like that in Omaha. I'll tell you that."

The best of these prospects will figure it out. Rodríguez has hit .315/.351/.522 this month. Witt has a .956 OPS over the last two weeks. Greene took a no-hitter into the eighth two starts ago.

"But they're the unique ones," one exec said. "They are the very clearly the exception to the rule right now."

After the Mariners sent **Jarred Kelenic** (hitting .140/.219/.291 at the time) back to the minors earlier this month, their assistant GM, **Justin Hollander**, used an old Bill James term — the "transition tax" — to describe to reporters how long it takes nowadays for even the best prospects to adjust to life in the big leagues.

"And I think that transition tax," he said, "is as high as it's ever been right now."

6. Uh-oh. Is that a Subway Series ahead?

Is it time to stock up on subway tokens and figure out where that No. 7 train stops? It just might be, because we're about to witness something seen only once before:

Both the Mets and Yankees in first place on Memorial Day.

Of course, the only other year that happened, 1988, it turned out that neither of them made the World Series — and the Yankees actually wound up in fifth place in the seven-team AL East. But are both teams capable of a deep run this October? Why wouldn't they be?

They have two of the top five run differentials in the sport. The Yankees are off to their best start since 1998. The Mets hold their biggest May lead in franchise history.

Yankees hitters lead the league in hard-hit percentage, average exit velocity and home run percentage. Mets hitters rank top two in the NL in average, on-base percentage, OPS+ and contact rate.

Yankees pitchers rank top two in the AL in strikeout rate, opponent OPS and FIP. Mets pitchers rank top two in the NL in WHIP, strikeout rate and strikeout/walk ratio.

So these are two teams full of star power, dollars and many of the right ingredients. On the other hand, we heard all these concerns from the surveyed execs — first on the Mets:

"I'd be *more* confident with Scherzer and deGrom." ... "They obviously need Max back. Their whole playoff dynamic depends on Max Scherzer starting Game 1." ... "The second half will be interesting because they're one of the oldest teams I can ever remember."

And as for the Yankees concerns: "They definitely need to patch up their bullpen and upgrade center field." ... "Can they sustain a starting pitching injury? And can **Nestor Cortes** keep doing what he's doing when he's never thrown 120 innings in a season?" ... "They need some injury luck on the mound — and, probably, to add somebody that's a difference-maker in the rotation at the deadline. But I don't know if there are enough of those to go around."

So are we sure that adds up to a Subway Series? "They're both headed for the playoffs, and that's good for baseball," one AL exec said. "But we know how unpredictable the playoffs are. So they'll get there. Then we'll see what happens."

7. Coming to October: It's a Trout/Ohtani sighting!

The Angels are a playoff team. Oh, it's true that we can't officially ignore those last 116 games they still have to play. But we can see the October future, and the Angels are a part of it.

Baseball Prospectus projects them as a playoff team. FanGraphs projects them as a playoff team. Baseball-Reference projects them as a playoff team. So what could possibly go wrong, especially in an American League overstuffed with clear non-contenders?

All right, so the execs we surveyed had some thoughts on that. They see real depth questions beyond this team's stars. We heard concerns about **Taylor Ward's** unsustainable .425 batting average on balls in play, and about Noah Syndergaard's worrisome plunge in strikeout rate (6.9 per nine innings) and velocity (from 98 mph to 94 mph). There were also concerns about Patrick Sandoval's staying power and about bullpen depth.

Still, it feels like their time. Time for **Mike Trout** to finally win a playoff series. Time for Ohtani to work his magic on the October stage. Time for what, potentially, could be a must-see attraction for the sport.

"What they do at the deadline, I think, will determine how far they go," one rival exec said, "because they're going to have to almost create a second layer of starting pitching to get through the season. ... But they obviously are really talented. There's a reason that everybody wants to believe that this is the year of the Angels."

8. The Dodgers are a historic behemoth

The largest run differential in baseball history is 401, by Joe DiMaggio's 1939 Yankees. So why would that come up in a column we're typing 83 years later?

Possibly because *the Dodgers are on pace for a plus-420 run differential*. And even though they're "only" at 114 now, with 118 games to play, there's no reason 420 is out of the question. Seriously.

This might be the best, most complete Dodgers team in their ridiculous run of 10-year excellence. And that's quite a pronouncement. Regardless of how close the Padres may lurk in the standings, this is the most dominant team in the NL by any measure.

Offense — They rank first in the NL in runs scored, on-base percentage, slugging percentage, OPS, hard-hit percentage, percentage of base runners scored, extra-base-hit percentage, strikeout/walk ratio and, well, you get the picture.

Pitching — They rank first in the NL in ERA, starters' ERA, bullpen ERA, lowest opponent hard-hit rate, lowest opponent OPS and ERA+ (where they're currently sitting at an unreal 156, which would blow away the franchise record).

Fielding — They rank No. 1 in the NL in Defensive Efficiency. They have plus defenders, according to Sports Info Solutions' Defensive Runs Saved metric, at seven positions. And they're tied for the NL lead in Sports Info Solutions' Good Fielding Plays Above Average.

Now here is what's really terrifying. They've done all that in a season in which **Tony Gonsolin** has been their best starter, in which **Max Muncy and Justin Turner** have combined for a 71 OPS+, and in which **Cody Bellinger** has a sub-.300 OBP and 17 more strikeouts than hits. None of which you probably would have projected.

But they make it work because they have star players all over the diamond. ("Name me a better 1-2-3 in anybody's lineup than **Mookie Betts, Freddie Freeman and Trea Turner**," said one NL exec.) And they regularly show that they're way more than the sum of their star power.

"They're so good at building star-level talent, and then surrounding those players with pieces that make sense," another exec said. "And that encapsulates what I think all of us aspire to do in terms of building a complete team. When you catch the ball, when you throw strikes, when you dominate on the mound and you play offense like that, that's impressive. Plus they have the kind of depth that, when somebody gets hurt, they just plug someone else in and they don't really miss a beat. I know we're only 40 games in, but that's pretty special."

9. Justin Verlander is the Nolan Ryan of the 21st century

We use the term "ageless" carefully, and for good reason: Because it turns out nobody is ageless — sadly, not even Betty White. But there's a whole separate category of agelessness in baseball. And Justin Verlander has entered the discussion.

What he's doing is something nobody has ever done. He had Tommy John surgery at age 37. Now he's the AL Cy Young of the first quarter, at age 39. Eight starts. Seven runs allowed. Amazing.

According to the invaluable research of Tommy John surgery historian Joe Roegel, just two other starting pitchers in history are known to have had the procedure at age 37 or older. One was **Bronson Arroyo**. The other was **Jamie Moyer** — at 47! But only Verlander has come back from Tommy John surgery, at this advanced age, to be exactly what he was before: a dominator.

Nolan Ryan was a threat to no-hit you into his mid-40s. Verlander has plans to do the same. I asked an AL exec, whose path crossed his once upon a time, how long Verlander can pitch like this. He laughed.

"As long as he wants to," the exec said. "At some point, Father Time will catch up to him because it catches up to everyone. So of course he's not going to do this till he's 50. But I guarantee you, nobody is working harder to be as good as Justin Verlander as Justin Verlander is. So he's the last guy I'd ever bet against — to do anything."

10. That ticking you hear is the pitch clock coming

It's still the game without a clock. Um, for four more months anyway.

But when 2023 rolls around, that'll change. Book it. There's not much we can safely predict about 2023. But here are a few things: **Aaron Judge** will be tall (and well-compensated). Steve Cohen will have plenty of dollars in the checking account. And a pitch clock is coming to your nearest big-league ballpark.

We're confident of that because hardly a day goes by that we don't hear from somebody, raving about the impact the new 14-second pitch timer (18 or 19 seconds with runners on base) has had on life in the minor leagues.

Average game time: *Down 28 minutes* since last year (from 3 hours, 3 minutes to 2:35).

Strikeouts and walks: Both have declined since the minor leagues began enforcing the pitch clock about five weeks ago. (Strikeout rate: from 27.1 percent to 25.3 percent; Walk rate: from 11.4 percent to 10.6 percent.) In other words ... less dead time, more action.

"We love the pitch clock," one AL exec said. "The game is much better with the pitch clock. I cannot see a future that does not have a pitch clock in the big leagues."

We have heard a few complaints from people in player development. Their hitters feel rushed, they've said, and they're struggling because of it. It's a reminder that, contrary to popular wisdom, these clocks actually affect hitters more than pitchers. But the response, even from big-league front offices, is practically unanimous: Better get used to it, because the clock isn't going away.

There is still a major question hovering, though. It's hard to envision big-league players signing off on a 14-second pitch clock. So what *is* the right number, at that level? The early consensus is 20 seconds with nobody on, 25 to 30 seconds with runners on base. But one exec balked at the idea that a big-league clock needs to be increased by that much.

"Honestly," he said, "we need to get as close to that minor-league clock as possible, because everything we're trying to do with pace of game, this clock is achieving that. If we can get as close as possible (to 14 seconds), it'll be just like every other change. Everybody complains. Then they get used to it."

"The two best things we could do," another exec said, "is get rid of the three-batter rule and bring on the pitch clock. I love it. And I'm pretty sure the people who televise baseball will love it — because when you turn on your TV and it says, the Cubs are on at 7 and 'SportsCenter' is on at 10, guess what? 'SportsCenter' will actually start at 10."

A Writer Who Was Around the Game, and of the Fans

In his decades at The New Yorker, Roger Angell never lost sight of the fact that baseball players were just grown-ups who happened to have fascinating jobs.

Tyler Kepner, NYT

Roger Angell helped me survive college midterms. Late at night, studying in the library at Vanderbilt University, I'd make a deal with myself: When these are over, when you're settled into your seat for the flight home, Roger will take you back in time. I would find The New Yorker archives, photocopy his year-end essay from a favorite childhood season, and wait to savor it. He never let me down.

Reading the masters like Angell, who died on Friday at age 101, made me want to be a baseball writer. He was a singular voice — curious, clever, clear-eyed. Enduring, too: He was older than Jack Kerouac and Truman Capote, **Stan Musial** and **Gil Hodges**. There was comfort in knowing that Roger was still here.

"More sad than I thought I'd be," **Ron Darling**, the Mets broadcaster and former pitcher, said in a phone interview on Saturday. "He was 101 years old, but I don't know — you feel like baseball lost its Hemingway. That's how it feels."

I knew Angell from his visits to Yankee Stadium, new and old, in this century. He would sit on the dugout bench or in the press box, taking it all in calmly, no oncoming deadline, no laptop with endless distractions. He was always happy to chat, but always watching.

His notes, as I recall, would sometimes be doodles of a player's swing or pitching motion. He had a knack for describing movement in colorful, relatable ways nobody else could conjure.

Here's Angell in 1985 on **Dan Quisenberry**, the right-handed relief ace of the Kansas City Royals, whose best pitch looked harmless: "His ball in flight suggests the kiddie-ride concession at a country fairgrounds — all swoops and swerves but nothing there to make a mother nervous; if you're standing close to it, your first response is a smile."

And here he is, nearly a quarter-century later, on **Chase Utley**, a Philadelphia Phillies second baseman with surprising power from the left side: "Utley, who has slicked-back, Jake Gittes hair, possesses a quick bat and a very short home-run stroke; he looks like a man in an A.T.M. reaching for his cash."

That was in Angell's dispatch in 2009 from that year's World Series, an event he first attended in 1941 as a student at Harvard. He had gone to Philadelphia with friends for the Harvard/Penn football game, he told me, and stopped at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn on the way back.

For all the history he saw and chronicled, Angell did not receive the writers' award at the Hall of Fame until 2014. The New York chapter of the writers' association had never nominated him — Angell was a magazine guy, the thinking went, so he had not earned it by slogging his way through the daily grind, season after season.

It took Susan Slusser, a longtime writer for the San Francisco Chronicle, to correct the oversight by nominating Angell through the Bay Area chapter. He sailed to an easy victory and got his day in Cooperstown, N.Y.

"There's nobody, in my mind, who's ever challenged him as the greatest sportswriter of all time, and in fact one of the greatest writers of all time," Slusser said over the weekend. "He wrote plenty of things that weren't sports that were equally elegant and perfect. It actually makes me angry sometimes: His writing was so beautiful and precise and evocative that you think, how does a human have this kind of ability? But you can't be jealous of Beethoven or Shakespeare. It's just beyond what most people are capable of."

Angell's writing skill could carry any piece, but he was also an extraordinary interviewer — which, of course, made his writing that much more powerful. When Angell visited the Yankees in the early 2000s, **Joe Torre**, the team's manager, would remind the beat writers of why he respected Angell so deeply. Nobody, Torre said, had captured the essence of his proud but wary friend, **Bob Gibson**, the way Angell did in a 1980 profile.

Angell visited Gibson at his home in Omaha; they swam in his pool, admired Gibson's model train collection, talked about baseball and race and life. Gibson, retired only five years, seemed to Angell to be searching for a purpose. He seemed sad.

"No, I'm not sad," Gibson told Angell. "I just think I've been spoiled. When you've been an athlete, there's no place for you to go. You're much harder to please. But where I am right now is where the average person has been all along. I'm like millions of others now, and I'm finding out what that's like. I don't think the ordinary person ever gets to do anything they enjoy nearly as much as I enjoyed playing ball."

Angell's famous 1981 essay, "The Web of the Game," embodied the old Branch Rickey line about luck being the residue of design. Angell took **Smoky Joe Wood**, then 91 years old and living in Connecticut, to a nearby college game between Yale and St. John's. It turned out to be a classic; Darling, pitching for Yale against another future star, **Frank Viola**, took a no-hitter into the 12th inning and lost, 1-0.

Darling treasured the connection and became friends with Angell. If his broadcasting duties took him to Yankee Stadium, Darling would drive to Angell's home at 90th and Madison and bring him along. Angell shared something powerful with baseball lifers like Darling: a reverence for the game as it is, without some kind of mystical, deeper meaning. He understood that players were grown-ups who just happened to hold fascinating jobs.

“He reminded me of **Bartlett Giamatti**, just the purest form of fandom — loved the game, loved players,” Darling said, referring to the former Major League Baseball commissioner and Yale president. “Very few people are like that. They might like the game, but they’ll criticize it. They may like the players, but they rip them for how much they’re making. There’s a lot of different ways of being a fan, and he and Bartlett were fans of the aesthetic and beauty of what baseball is at its best, at its core.”

Angell was not a gauzy romantic — he hated “Field of Dreams” — but he saw enough baseball to know when something seemed off. The last time I spoke with him, on the phone last spring, he mentioned that his eyesight was failing but that he still tuned in daily to the games. One new wrinkle appalled him: the runner placed on second base to begin each extra inning.

“It violates everything in baseball,” Angell said. “You put a runner on second who hasn’t earned it, you’re trying to shorten the game. Every effort now is to shorten the game instead of letting it go on. The man on second is the first in baseball history to never earn what he got.”

In baseball, I agreed, there should always be a how and a why.

“Absolutely,” he replied. “There’s an accounting for every space. It balances, as we know. That’s one of the fascinating, great things about the game. It balances so evenly and has so many astounding events in the middle of it.”

Yet beyond all the games, Angell held a special fondness for his essays on fans. He told me that he always thought he knew less about baseball than the regular writers, so he pushed himself to find different kinds of stories. His writing conveyed both intimacy with the sport and detachment from its conventions.

His favorite piece, I thought, was telling.

“I think the story I loved most was the one about a semipro pitcher and his girlfriend in Vermont, called ‘In The Country,’ in 1981 — Ron Goble and his girlfriend who was a poet,” Angell said. “She wrote to me when they were out in Montana playing ball; I went to see them in Vermont and spent a lot of time in Burlington and different places, watching these weird games during the baseball strike when the players had local businesses’ names on their back on their uniforms.”

Roger Angell was *around* the game, *around* the press box, and we were all better for it. But he was always *of* the fans.

There have been many fine baseball writers, but there was only one Roger Angell

Bob Ryan, Boston Globe

He would have been the 1962 Rookie Baseball Writer of the Year, had there been such a thing. He would also have had a shot at beating **Fred Lynn and Ichiro Suzuki** to the punch by concurrently winning that year's Most Valuable Writer (MVW) Award.

He was Roger Angell. He lived to be 101, and it has always seemed as if he were just getting started. After all, "This Old Man," his rumination on aging, was written when he was a mere 95.

There have been many fine baseball writers, but there was only one Roger Angell. Ask yourself: Have there been any other winners of the Baseball Writers Association of America's Career Excellence Award who were also members of the American Society of Arts and Letters (our version of the Académie Française, in case you're wondering)? The answer to that will be no, and so it will remain in perpetuity.

I'm sure there will be sport phobes out there who had no idea that the longtime fiction editor of The New Yorker magazine, a man who edited the likes of Vladimir Nabokov, Donald Barthelme, Ruth Jhabvala, V.S. Pritchett, and — are you ready? — John Updike, had a lifelong passion for baseball. But it wasn't until New Yorker chief William Shawn sent Angell out to monitor spring training in 1962 that he was able to act on his love and understanding of the sport.

We who love baseball thus became the beneficiaries of his private passion. And by "we" I mean not just the fans and readers from the general public, but baseball insiders themselves. Roger Angell cultivated numerous friendships in the baseball community. He loved dedicated baseball people, and he was seldom happier while covering baseball than he was during spring training, when he had the opportunity to pick the brains of lifers such as **Bill Rigney**.

Angell was born in 1920, the year **Babe Ruth** ushered baseball into a new age with a record 54 homers and .847 slugging percentage. But Angell said his true blossoming as a baseball fan came while following the mid-'30s New York Giants of **Carl Hubbell and Mel Ott**.

His life took a very interesting turn at age 9 when his mother, Katherine, having divorced Ernest Angell, a New York attorney, married famed essayist and author E.B. White (Does "Charlotte's Webb" ring a bell?). Oh, have I mentioned that his mom had been a New Yorker editor since its birth in 1925? He was destined to work at the magazine, but that didn't happen until 1956, after he had spent years at Holiday.

I mentioned John Updike. It so happens that Angell's inspiration to write about baseball for his magazine had indeed been Updike's landmark 1960 essay on **Ted Williams's** last game entitled "Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu." If so, we all should be thanking Updike, for Angell brought a fresh perspective and eye to the game.

"He had a 'gentleman's wealth' of baseball," says Peter Gammons, the finest baseball writer the Globe has ever known. "He had great powers of observation, and he saw the game differently

than anyone else. It was as if he were looking at the game from a hot air balloon. He would take notes, but he often didn't need them. Things stayed as a picture in his mind."

Gammons was privileged to become a friend. "There was a time I lived in New York at 88th and York," he explains. "Roger then lived at 90th and Madison. He came to dinner one night and he brought with him letters his stepfather, E.B. White, had written to his mother. I said to myself, 'What world am I living in?' "

I fondly recall sitting with Angell at a Red Sox exhibition game when rookie Roger Clemens put on a dazzling display. "Have we just seen the beginning of a Hall of Fame career?" I asked him. Oops. We're not going *there*.

Angell was the opposite of the modern analytics nerds, who seem to forget the game is played by living, breathing human beings. For him, the game was about artistry and people, and I offer as Exhibit A his fascination with **Luis Tiant**.

After explaining that with men on base "his stretch consists of a succession of minute downward waggles and poises of the glove, and a menacing, sidewise, slit-eyed, Valentino-like gaze over his shoulder at the base runner," Angell offers six categories for Looie's actual delivery.

"Out of the Woodshed" was one of them. "Just before releasing the ball," Angell informs us, "he steps over a raised sill and simultaneously ducks his head to avoid conking it on the low doorframe."

Of course, you want more. Hence, "The Slipper-Kick." In this one, Angell tells us that "in the mid-kick, he surprisingly decides to get rid of his left shoe."

Now tell me you wouldn't pay cash money to see Looie take the mound again.

Angell loved characters. One of his favorite subjects over the years was iconoclastic Royals closer Dan Quisenberry. Angell also loved drama, and no one better explored the rise and fall of Pirates righthander **Steve Blass**, who went from being a 1971 World Series hero and 19-game winner to a state where he was unable to throw strikes, and thus has given birth to a condition known as "Steve Blass Disease."

Some think Angell's crowning journalistic achievement was his retelling of a classic NCAA Tournament duel between Frank Viola of St. John's and Ron Darling of Yale, a game he watched in the company of the legendary Smoky Joe Wood. At any rate, there's a lot of journalistic greatness to pick from.

It didn't take long before Angell's annual New Yorker essays on the postseason became must-reads. It was as if nothing had actually happened until Roger Angell had recorded it for posterity. All this prose led to a succession of compilations. I'm sure I won't be the only baseball

fan revisiting “The Summer Game,” “Five Seasons,” “Late Innings,” “Season Ticket,” and “Once More Around the Park.” Wait, there’s more. He collaborated with David Cone on “A Pitcher’s Story.” Still more: His memoir, “Let Me Finish,” is compelling, as is the aforementioned “This Old Man.”

He famously warned us never to assume that athletic ability and character were always a package. “They are what they do,” he cautioned.

Roger Angell was what he was: a towering intellect who, fortunately for us, thought baseball was pretty cool.

Ex-Brooklyn Dodgers catcher, Mets coach Joe Pignatano dies at 92

Ben Walker, AP

NEW YORK — As a big leaguer, **Joe Pignatano** had a career that was more noteworthy than notable: He played in the last game at Ebbets Field, he homered off three future Hall of Famers, and he hit into a triple play with his final swing in the majors.

It was out in the bullpen at New York’s Shea Stadium, where he tended relief pitchers and tomatoes for the 1969 Miracle Mets, where Mr. Pignatano’s legacy really grew.

“He was fairly committed to taking care of his tomatoes,” said former Mets pitcher Jim McAndrew.

Mr. Pignatano had been the last living coach from the 1969 Mets, who made a remarkable run under manager Gil Hodges to reach the World Series and then startled Baltimore and the baseball world for their first championship.

He remained as their bullpen coach through 1981.

“To me, he was Uncle Joe. He loved the city and loved talking about his days with the Dodgers and with Gil. He was a baseball lifer,” former Mets outfielder **Lee Mazzilli** said.

Mr. Pignatano made his major league debut with Brooklyn in 1957. On Sept. 24, he took over for future Hall of Famer **Roy Campanella** and caught the final five innings in a 2-0 win over Pittsburgh. It was the Dodgers’ last home game before bolting Brooklyn for the West Coast.

In 1959, Mr. Pignatano got his biggest hit. In the second game in a best-of-three playoff against Milwaukee for the NL pennant, his two-out single in the bottom of the 12th at the Coliseum set up the winning run scored by Hodges as Los Angeles earned a World Series spot.

The Dodgers went on to win the championship in six games over the Chicago White Sox.

After stints with the Kansas City Athletics and San Francisco Giants, he joined the 1962 expansion Mets in midseason. The Mets were awful, setting a modern major league record for losses in going 40-120.

In their final game of the season, at Wrigley Field against the Cubs, they trailed 5-1 when **Sammy Drake** led off the eighth inning with a single and took second on a single by **Richie Ashburn**.

Mr. Pignatano was up next and sent a liner toward right field — “that ball was labeled base hit from the moment it left the bat” is how it was described on Mets radio.

Instead, Chicago second baseman **Ken Hubbs** went back and caught the ball and threw to first baseman **Ernie Banks**, who relayed to shortstop Andre Rodgers for a triple play.

It was Mr. Pignatano’s last at-bat in the majors.

A career .234 hitter, he played 307 games and hit 16 home runs. Among the pitchers he tagged for homers were **Robin Roberts**, **Warren Spahn**, and **Jim Kaat**, all Hall of Famers.

In 1965, Hodges was managing the Washington Senators when he asked Mr. Pignatano to join his coaching staff. In 1968, he went with Hodges to the Mets.

During the 1969 season, Mr. Pignatano discovered a stray tomato plant growing in the right field bullpen at Shea and kept it healthy. As the Mets continued to win, the plant became something of a good-luck charm and Mr. Pignatano’s garden took root.

“It was his home away from home,” McAndrew recalled Monday. “He had five or six hours a day down there with his tomatoes. He really took care of them. When we were on the road, the grounds crew helped out.”

Over the years, the ripe, red tomatoes grew and so did the stories about Mr. Pignatano’s green thumb. He was always glad to talk about his garden.

THE BONURA SALUTE

Subscriber contribution of the week

The answer to more than one Trivia Questions: (what was the Bonura Salute, RBI leader with 12 HR’s, worst fielder to obtain a golden glove)

A leading slugger of the 1930s, **Zeke Bonura** was “one of baseball’s best-loved figures.” He was a colorful first baseman with the White Sox with an indomitable spirit, and his great enthusiasm resonated with fans. In seven major-league seasons, he hit .307 and averaged 100 RBIs per season. This extended career was ended as a result of military service.

Before **Albert Belle** went and ruined all the fun, Bonura was an answer to a fantastic trivia question: "Who holds the White Sox single-season record for RBI?" He drove in 138 runs for the White Sox in 1936, and that record stood for 62 years before Belle shattered it with 152 in 1998

Bonura drove in 138 runs on only 12 homers, which is by far the most RBI for any 12-homer season in baseball history, another answer to a trivia question. (**Goose Goslin** is second with 129, if you care).

But his defense was equally laughable -- at least for everybody but his manager, **Jimmy Dykes**. Despite his physical talents, he showed little range at first base, mostly due to a lack of effort. He lazily waved his glove at passing grounders so often that the *Chicago Tribune* named the move "**The Bonura Salute.**" (another trivia question)

Bonura was indeed LOUSY at first base. Sports editor, Otis Harris wrote in 1946: “It was never established beyond a shadow of a doubt that Bonura was the worst fielding first basemen in the majors, but the consensus was that he would do until another one came along.” In fact, many believe that Bonura was the 1st unofficial designated hitter 40 years before its official designation.

So, how could Bonura win the title of best defensive first basemen in both 1934 and 1938 and yet be considered such a bad defensive player? Another answer to a Trivia Question)

Simple. He didn’t try.

Zeke made the brilliant discovery that you can’t be charged with an error if you don’t touch the ball. So, he let easy grounders roll into left field and waved at them with his “Mussolini (due to his Italian Decent) or Bonura salute.”

MLB Regression Report: Identifying the 'dead ballparks'

Adam Burke, VISN

The start of every baseball season presents challenges because of all the roster turnover and the adjustments that players make, but what really increases the degree of difficulty with MLB is that the playing object is fundamentally different year in and year out.

The big change this season was that Major League Baseball installed humidors for the baseballs in all 30 parks. What started with Coors Field and then expanded to Chase Field went up to five parks, then 10 and now all 30. John Shea of the San Francisco Chronicle wrote in his May 15 article that “the humidor is designed to store 200 dozen balls for at least 14 days at 70 degrees Fahrenheit and 57% relative humidity averaged over a 24-hour period. The exception is the Coors Field humidor, set at 65% humidity.”

Let’s start with the fundamental flaw of this idea from MLB. While the humidor standardizes humidity for the storing of the balls, it does not account for the differences in climate and environment around the United States. The humidity and atmospheric conditions in Atlanta are much different than Boston, which are different from the conditions in Seattle, San Francisco, Kansas City, Tampa, etc.

We are about six weeks into the MLB season and temperatures are warming up across the country, but we’ve seen offensive numbers in cold-weather cities dramatically affected by the new baseballs and the humidor. The thought from a lot of people that are more in tune with the science than I am is that offense should pick up as it gets warmer and more humid across the country. Baseballs generally travel better in the summer months, and the effects of the humidor should be lessened. That is not a guarantee, but we have seen the league-wide HR/FB% go up from 10% in April to 11.2% in May, so that may be an indication of more power.

Statcast data from BaseballSavant.com provides a lot of outstanding insight into what is happening on a pitcher and team level. In this week’s Regression Report, rather than look at teams and individual pitchers, I thought it would be fun to look at ballparks.

Across the league, the difference between actual stats and expected stats is down. Statcast uses historical data on exit velocity, launch angle, batted-ball type and other factors to determine the expected batting average and slugging percentage of a batted ball. This season is an outlier with the humidor and a “dead ball,” but the data (through Sunday’s games) is quite significant.

Batting averages

Actual BA: .236

Expected BA (xBA): .254

Difference: -.018

Slugging percentages

Actual SLG: .380

Expected SLG (xSLG): .437

Difference: -.057

To give you an idea of how big of a difference this season is, here are the BA-xBA and SLG-xSLG numbers for the other Statcast-era seasons dating to 2015:

2015: .009 / .015

2016: .007 / .012

2017: .006 / .012

2018: .006 / .010

2019: .005 / .011

2020: .000 / .002

2021: .001 / .003

2022: -.018 / -.057

This is the first season in the Statcast era in which the actual BA and SLG are lower than the xBA and xSLG. Also, as you can see, this year's discrepancies are also the largest of the data set by a big margin. With five previous seasons' worth of data and expectations, you can see that in 2020 and 2021, Statcast data was extremely accurate, but 2022 has been the outlier of all outliers.

Speaking of outliers, some parks have been bigger culprits than others. There are only four ballparks in which the BA-xBA is on the positive side and those are in Cincinnati, Denver, San Francisco and Los Angeles (Dodgers). The only park on the positive side in SLG-xSLG is in Cincinnati. Not surprisingly, Coors Field has the smallest discrepancy on the negative side at -.016.

My focus in this week's Regression Report is to look at "barrels." A barreled ball has an xBA of at least .500, an xSLG of at least 1.500 and is hit at least 95 mph with an optimal launch angle range based on the exit velocity. Basically, think doubles, triples, home runs and deep fly balls.

Most barrels end up with those outcomes, and that type of contact is the most hurtful for pitchers. This season, even with offense depressed around the league, a barreled ball has still yielded a batting average of .690 and a slugging percentage of 2.252.

Here's the problem — this season's barreled balls have an xBA of .801 and an xSLG of 2.770. If you want to know why runs and offense are down, this is a big reason.

Certain ballparks are larger culprits in this equation and you'll notice a pattern with those are on the list:

Highest Difference in BA-xBA on Barrels

Comerica Park (DET) -.265

Progressive Field (CLE) -.223

Oriole Park at Camden Yards (BAL) -.198

PNC Park (PIT) -.188

Minute Maid Park (HOU) -.185

Highest Difference in SLG-xSLG on Barrels

Comerica Park: -1.123

Progressive Field: -.906

Oriole Park: -.903

Yankee Stadium -.797

PNC Park -.778

The first thought is that a lot of those offenses are pretty bad, right? The Tigers and Pirates are awful, the Orioles aren't very good and the Guardians don't make a lot of quality contact despite some of their early-season offensive explosions. The Astros and Yankees are big outliers on this list given their contact quality and talent.

Remember, though, that this is by venue, which means we're also looking at the visiting teams, too.

Detroit, Cleveland, Baltimore, Pittsburgh and New York are all cold-weather locales early in the season. Fenway Park was pretty high on this list until the Red Sox had some offensive

breakouts. Not all cold-weather cities have been affected the same. For example, Target Field in Minneapolis has the 10th-lowest gap. Wrigley Field is in the top five, but the wind plays a huge role there.

But my read on this situation is that we have some teams perceived to be bad offensively that should see an uptick in offensive production as the weather warms up. Similarly, some teams perceived to be good, like the Astros and Yankees, could also see gains. The humidors have affected offense as a whole but have done so disproportionately to this point in the season.

Sportsbooks have adjusted their totals downward to account for the new environment but may not be as quick to adjust with some teams and some ballparks as the weather warms up, so keep that in mind.

My keys for live-betting MLB

Adam Burke, ViSN

(logical betting tips from Vegas information sports network bankrolled by Brent Musberger)

Most sports have unique factors that are conducive to live betting, but none of them compares to Major League Baseball. The fact that a team swaps out far and away the most important player of the game multiple times creates opportunities for astute observers. There are also fatigue factors present in baseball that are not the same nor as obvious in other sports.

One constant with live betting is that you can see how a game looks to be taking shape, regardless of sport. When it comes to baseball, you can see what kind of zone the umpire is calling or how sharp a starting pitcher looks. You can see how the ball is carrying with those first few hard-hit balls in play. These can all be important factors in a game that could be a little bit of a mystery before things get going.

There are a lot of considerations when placing a live bet, but here are five tips for live betting baseball that I subscribe to:

1. Know the TTO

TTO stands for "Times Through the Order." This is crucially important as teams and managers around the league are trying to protect their starting pitchers as much as possible from the "third time through the order" penalty, or 3TTO as I call it. Using "slash lines," which are batting average (BA)/on-base percentage (OBP)/slugging percentage (SLG), we can see how a starting pitcher's effectiveness dwindles during a start.

In 2021, here were the average slash lines when hitters faced a pitcher a first, second and third time during a game:

First: .238/.305/.403

Second: .253/.318/.429

Third: .262/.327/.453

Here are the early numbers in 2022 (through Monday):

First: .231/.305/.367

Second: .233/.298/.369

Third: .273/.336/.458

Admittedly, I was shocked to see nearly identical numbers the second time through the order. That should change as sample sizes increase, but the biggest takeaway is the penalty for the third time through the order in both seasons. Starters fatigue and hitters adjust, so pitchers are more likely to allow runs or be replaced. If you can isolate a pitcher with some bad splits that third time through the order, you might be able to fade him with a live bet. Baseball-Reference and FanGraphs have those kinds of stats for every pitcher.

2. Know the better bullpen

It's the fifth inning and the game is tied 2-2. Does one team have a bullpen advantage over the other? In a one-game sample, anything can happen, but knowing before the game which bullpen is more trustworthy is an important part of the handicap. If you are betting full games and not just the 1st 5 wagers, you are already handicapping this. If you are one of those people that only wants to bet 1st 5 and shies away from the full game, you'll have to be aware if you want to live bet.

I wrote about how to handicap bullpens in last week's Point Spread Weekly, so this is just a continuation of those talking points and how to apply them to live betting. Reliever availability is also a huge part of the equation. You may handicap that the Brewers have the better bullpen, but how rested are Josh Hader and Devin Williams? You may want to take the plus-money price on the Pirates, but are David Bednar and Wil Crowe available? A team may not have the better bullpen if its top options are not going to pitch or won't be as effective because of their workloads.

A deeper bullpen will have more pitchers capable of getting outs to either keep the game close or maintain a lead, even if the top guys aren't there. You really need to zero in on this tip because you have to know what you're getting into when you hit submit.

3. Know the schedule and understand the game state

A team down 7-1 after three innings in the last game of a road trip may not fight all that hard to come back, so it could be a spot for a live Under. The same with a blowout in the first game of a doubleheader.

When it comes to game state, a lot of managers will only use their high-leverage relievers with a lead, so a tie game or a deficit means lesser pitchers will be called upon in hopes of keeping the score where it is. That won't always work out, so the team with a lead may very well be able to add on. It can take a lot of observation and box score study to analyze the managers, but some will be much more aggressive than others, while some will just blindly go with conventional norms. It can make the difference between winning and losing a game, so knowing how those guys react to certain situations and game states is important.

4. Place your bets during commercial breaks ONLY

Sportsbooks are updating their odds in real time with every pitch. Whether you stream or have cable, you are at a disadvantage. The books are ahead of viewers, which means your only course of action should be to place your live bets during commercial breaks when they don't have the advantage. You might be 10 seconds behind a pitch and the batter may have already popped out while you're locking in a wager. Wait until play has completely stopped to place your bet.

5. Stay within your means

Live betting can be a rabbit hole that becomes a canyon for the undisciplined. Make smart, sound wagers and leave it at that. Don't go chasing games because you've had a bad day or start making bets out of spite. Pregame wagering opportunities end when the game starts. Live betting opportunities can really get you in trouble.

Do what you can to make a good investment. Use these tips and others that work for you. Be responsible and cognizant of your bankroll. In the long run, you should find some good money-making opportunities just by watching and analyzing.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE

Mickey Mantle (1956, 1958, 1960, 1961)

Todd Hundley (1996)

Chipper Jones (1999)

Lance Berkman (2002, 2006)

Mark Teixeira (2005)

Carlos Beltran (2006)

What do they all have in common?

They are all switch hitters who hit 40 or more HRs in a season.

HOUSEKEEPING

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