

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

6.5.2022

Good morning baseball fans,

Virtual reality as a training aid, Gene Tenace's amazing 1972 World Series, lots of miscellaneous stuff and of course, trivia. Grab a coffee and enjoy.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE

The answer:

Max Scherzer

Andy Pettitte

Greg Maddux

Jack Morris

Jim Palmer

Juan Marichal

Warren Spahn

Hal Newhouser

Left Grove

What's the Question?

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

Subscriber submission of the week:

<https://mlbpickle.com/>

Like wordle but baseball players. Give it a go.

If you have time on your hands, a link to the top 100 baseball blogs and websites:

https://blog.feedspot.com/baseball_blogs/

Red Sox 3B **Raphael Devers**' May was otherworldly — .381/.421/.712 with 13 doubles, a triple and eight home runs in 28 games. He leads the American League in at-bats, runs, hits, doubles and total bases.

Meanwhile, **Jose Altuve** got off to a slow start. But he led the league in hits four years in a row, won three batting titles, stole 56 bases in a season, hit 31 home runs twice, took home an MVP award. In May, though, he hit .320/.376/.650 with nine homers in 26 games. He just turned 32, and he's closing in on 2,000 hits.

Mookie Betts hit 11 homers in May. The all-time record for the most in May--**Barry Bonds** (17 in 2001)

When Betts won the MVP award in 2018 — hitting .346/.438/.640 with a league-leading 129 runs, 32 homers, 30 steals and otherworldly defense — there were really two parallel trains of thought. One was that Betts had moved into the **Mike Trout** best-player-in-baseball stratosphere. The other was that he might never have a season quite THAT good again — I mean 10.7-WAR seasons almost never happen. Only 13 players in baseball history have done it, and the only two to do it this century are Barry Bonds (of course) and Mookie Betts.

Trout's never done it. **Henry Aaron** never did it. **Ted Williams** never did it. Etc.

Josh Hader of the Brewers has made 18 appearances and has not given up a single run. The league is hitting .073 against him with one — yeah, that's right, ONE — extra-base hit all season.

And you have to say — he's been pitching under some pretty extreme conditions. He's only entered games in save situations — 18 appearances, 18 saves — and he's come into one-run games eight times already. The Brewers are three games up in the NL Central in large part because of their shiny 12-5 record in one-run games (the Cardinals, in second place, are 7-5 in one-run games).

On Memorial Day, the Cubs and Brewers played a doubleheader. The pitcher who saved Game 1: Josh Hader. The pitcher who saved Game 2: Josh Hader 2.0.

Complete list of closers who have saved both ends of a Memorial Day doubleheader (since the dawn of the modern save rule in 1969)?

2022 — Josh Hader (Brewers) vs. Cubs

1977 — Rollie Fingers (Padres) vs. Giants

1972 — Sparky Lyle (Yankees) vs. Tigers

Speaking of double headers-- **Shohei Ohtani** was the starting pitcher in Game 1 of a doubleheader against the Yankees on Thursday and the DH in the second game. The last player to start both games of a doubleheader, one as a pitcher and the other at a different position, was Hall of Famer **Jimmie Foxx** on Sept. 2, 1945, for the Phillies. Foxx was 37 at the time; in the final month of his career and playing for a team that lost 108 games.

Bryce Harper is now a two-time MVP winner who should pass 300 homers before he turns 30. That's rare air.

Here are the other multiple-time MVPs who had 300 home runs by age 30:

— **Jimmie Foxx**

— **Mickey Mantle**

— **Albert Pujols**

— **Juan Gonzalez***

— **Mike Trout****

**Juan Gone always looks so odd on lists like this, right?*

*****Frank Robinson and Miguel Cabrera** also won multiple MVPs and had 300 homers by age 30*

— but they did not win their second MVP award until AFTER they turned 30.

For the last 10 seasons, Cards 1B **Paul Goldschmidt** has finished top six in the MVP balloting five times, he's led the league in homers, RBIs, walks and slugging percentage. He's pretty close to a career .300/.400/.500 hitter (.295/.390/.525).

And yet, most of the baseball world never seems to think about him.

He clearly doesn't mind. He just keeps going along. This year he's threatening to have his best-ever year — he's hitting .352/.418/.626 with a league-leading 64 hits and a league-leading 1.044 OPS. Look at Goldschmidt's May--had the highest May slugging percentage (among players with at least 75 at bats) at .817. The AL leader was the Red Sox' Rafael Devers at .712. Goldschmidt led the NL in hits with 42, the majors in RBI with 33, led the majors in extra base hits with 23, hit 10 HRs and batted .404 for the month.

Speaking of hot. **Aaron Judge** has hit 20 HRs in his last 38 games. 4th player in Yankee history joining **Babe Ruth** (5 times), **Roger Maris** (1961) and **Mickey Mantle** (1961).

Last year, after June 30, **Juan Soto** hit .347/.517/.616 while walking more than TWICE AS MUCH as he struck out (98 walks against 48 strikeouts).

Xander Bogaerts further established himself as an all-time Red Sox great Friday evening at RingCentral Coliseum in the Sox' 7-2 win against the Athletics.

The three-time All-Star became the team's leader in games played at shortstop (1,094), passing **Everett Scott**, who played 1,093 games at the position from 1914-21.

Bogaerts entered the day hitting .323/.393/.473 with five homers and an .866 OPS.

Want a record that likely won't be broken? Most career triples by a catcher--**Buck Ewing** 178 triples, 1880-1897. Ewing hits .303 in his 18 year career, also stole 354 bases. He began his career with the Troy Trojans, also played for the Reds, the Cleveland Spiders and the New York Giants and one season in the short lived Players League.

Kody Clemens, the 26-year-old son of seven-time Cy Young Award winner **Roger Clemens**, was brought up by the Detroit Tigers Monday. **Kody Clemens** played 325 minor league games and another 28 in independent ball before he made his major league debut with the Tigers this past week. His father played 18 games in the minors before the Red Sox called him up in 1984. Roger Clemens has four sons and three played professionally. Kody was the first to make the majors

Lou Gehrig's 23 grand slams stood as a record for 70 years until **Alex Rodriguez** broke it in 2013. Active player with the most grand slams is **Albert Pujols** with 15.

Gehrig is the only Yankee to hit 4 HRs in a game. The Iron Horse homered in four consecutive at-bats on June 3, 1932 against the Philadelphia A's, leading the Yankees to a 20-13 victory at Shibe Park. Gehrig hit a two-run homer in the first inning, a solo shot in the fourth and another in the fifth off **George Earnshaw**, then slugged a solo blast in the seventh facing reliever **Roy Mahaffey**.

Garrett Whitlock offered a unicorn: An outing where he pitched brilliantly yet struck out no one in a 7-1 Red Sox victory over the Reds, Whitlock's first victorious start in the big leagues.

Whitlock's line for the ages and the aged: 6 innings, 1 run, 0 earned runs, 0 walks, 0 strikeouts, a win. Whitlock was the first pitcher in the majors this year to log six innings without a strikeout. He became the first to have zeros in the earned run, walk, and strikeout columns in an outing of six or more innings since 2014 (appropriately authored by Whitlock's favorite pitcher, **Rick Porcello** – then with the Tigers). He joined **Aaron Cook** (2012) and **Curt Schilling** (2007) as the only Red Sox pitchers this century to post six innings without an earned run or strikeout.

Whitlock needed just 70 pitches to cruise through his six innings. All five of the hits he allowed were singles. Seven Reds hitters recorded groundball outs, including inning-ending double plays in the first, second, and fifth innings.

The modern version of the MVP Award was first presented by the BBWAA in 1931, with one winner in each league. In the 1920s, the American and National Leagues each had a League Award. However only one player per team was listed on the ballot, and the AL version of the League Award allowed players to win it no more than once. As a result, Babe Ruth was ineligible during his historic 60-homer 1927 season. The League Award in the AL was presented from 1922-28, while the NL version was awarded from 1924-29.

Pete Alonso's 16 homers are tied with the Dodgers' **Mookie Betts** for the most in the National League. He also moved into a tie for 10th place on the Mets' all-time home run list with 122 for his career.

The Yankees are an MLB best 38-15, .717. **Aaron Judge** hit his MLB-best 21st homer on the game's first pitch Saturday and the Yankees won their fifth straight and for the ninth time in 11 games. The Yankees have outscored opponents, 33-3, in their winning streak. And they got some decent pitching. Over their last 4 starts:

Nestor Cortes 7 IP 5 H 0 Earned Runs 7 K

James Taillon 8 IP 2 H 0 Earned Runs 5 K retired first 21 batters

Gerrit Cole 7 IP 2 H 0 Earned Runs 9 K retired first 20 batters

Luis Severino 7 IP 1 H 0 earned runs 10 K

Severino's outing marked the ninth straight time a Yankee starter pitched at least six innings, their longest since also doing it in nine straight starts May 18-27, 2016. It also was the MLB-best 13th time a New York starter finished at least seven innings.

Southpaw Cortes went seven scoreless, his 19th start in a row—dating back to last summer—with three earned runs or fewer. That's historic on its own, the longest streak of that type in over a century (**Russ Ford** went 20 outings in a row with three runs or fewer from 1910 to 1911).

Albert Pujols had his 22nd career walk off RBI on Tuesday with a sacrifice fly to beat the Padres. Only **Frank Robinson** (27) and **Dusty Baker** (25) have more. Pujols had been tied with Clemente, Henderson, and **Stan Musial**. And Pujols played in his 3,000th game this week.

The Dodgers' attempt to give up Saturday night was against the rules.

Trailing the Mets 9-4 entering the ninth inning, Los Angeles manager **Dave Roberts** tried to bring in position player **Zach McKinstry** to finish out the game and save his bullpen. But the umpires didn't allow McKinstry to take the hill, because position players can only appear in regulation when the margin is at least six runs.

The rule was put in place ahead of the 2020 season but, because of pandemic alterations to roster sizes and constructions, wasn't enforced until the first week of May this year. The suite of new rules for the 2020 season have been officially implemented at diverse times. The three-batter minimum was enforced from the start of the 2020 season despite the pandemic; limiting rosters to 13 pitchers won't be enforced until later this month.

From the always interesting baseballroundtable.com

Through May, 34.5 percent of the MLB season's 55,041 plate appearances ended in a trot (back to the dugout, around the bases, to first base). We're talking about strikeouts, home runs, walks, hit by pitch and catcher's interference – all outcomes that are, basically, devoid of action on the base paths or in the field. Here's the breakout: strikeouts (22.3%); walks (8.5%); home runs (2.7%); HBP (1.0%); catcher's interference (less than 1%).

Now, to provide a little context (a more detailed post on this topic coming soon). Here are a few selected annual Trot Index scores: 1950 – 22.8 %; 1960 – 25.1%; 1970 – 27.0%; 1980 – 23.1%; 1990 – 31.7%; 2000 – 29.9%; 2010 – 30.3%; 2021 – 36.3%.

Only two teams won 20 or more games in May – the Astros and Dodgers and, no surprise, they each logged their leagues lowest earned run average.

The Astros 21-8 month was fueled included an 11-game winning streak (May 2-13, during which the Houston staff fashioned five shutouts and put up a 0.91 earned run average. During that stretch, they gave up three runs in just one contest. They outscored their opponents 56-12 over the 11 games, outhit them .237-187 and out homered them 18-2. They were the only team with a May ERA of under 3.00 – at 2.26.

The Yankees walked a stringiest 1.91 batters per nine frames (the only team under 2.00) The Royals walked an MLB's highest 4.32 per nine innings for the month.

Only six NL starters picked up four wins in May, and three of those pitchers wore Dodger Blue: **Tony Gonsolin** (4-0, 1.93); **Tyler Anderson** (4-0, 3.09) and **Walker Buehler** 4-0, 3.71).

On May 1, after 11 years and more than 1,000 games in the minor leagues, Giants' LF **Jason Krizan** notched his first MLB base hit. The 32-year-old rookie's wife and two-year-old son were in the stands to share the landmark safety. Krizan's April 29 MLB debut came in his twelfth professional season, after 1,132 minor-league games. Krizan was drafted in the eighth round of the 2011 MLB Draft (Tigers) – out of Dallas Baptist University, where, in 2011, he hit .413-10-81

in 62 games. Over his 1,000+ minor league games, he hit .275-83-541. On his lengthy journey to the “show,” Krizan had several solid seasons – including .293-7-56 at Double-A in 2014; .294-10-65 at Double- and Triple-A in 2016; and .316-16-73 at Triple-A in 2021.

On May 8, the Phillies handed **Max Scherzer** a loss, topping the Mets 3-2 and roughing up Scherzer for three runs on ten hits in six innings. (Scherzer did fan seven New York batters.) This unremarkable fact only makes it here because it was Scherzer’s first loss in 22 days short of a full year (since May 30, 2021). Over that time, Scherzer started 24 games, and went 15-0, 2.55. **Roger Clemens** holds the record for the most starts between losses at 30 (June 3, 1998-June 1, 1999. During that time, he went 20-0, 2.68. **Carl Hubbell** holds the record for the most consecutive pitching victories at 24 (three of those wins came in relief). From July 17, 1936 to May 27, 1937, he went 24-0 in 27 games (22 starts).

On May 17, brothers **Edwin Diaz** (Mets) and **Alexis Diaz** (Reds) both recorded saves. They were just the third pair of brothers to record major-league saves on the same day. More proof of *#InBaseballWeCountEverything*. It was the senior (28-year-old) Diaz’ ninth save of the year and 182nd career save (he led the AL in 2018 with 57 saves for the Mariners). It was the first MLB save, coming in his 17th MLB appearance, for 25-year-old Reds’ rookie Alexis Diaz.

The other pairs of brothers to ramrod a save on the same day? **Todd** (Dodgers) and **Tim** (Padres) **Worrell** on June 13, 1997 and **Ravelo** (Pirates) and **Josias Manzanillo** (Mets), on June 30th 1994. It was Todd Worrell’s 15 save of the season and 236th career save and Tim Worrell’s first save of the season and second career save. Todd pitched 11 seasons and record 256 saves. Tim pitched 14 years and recorded 71 saves. For the Manzanillo brothers, it was Ravelo’s only save (in three MLB seasons, 53 appearances), while it was Josias’ second save of the 1994 season and his fourth of six career saves (11 MLB seasons, 267 appearances.)

In May, 39-year-old Astros’ starter **Justin Verlander** went 4-1, 2.27 in five starts, – giving him a 6-2, 2.03 record on the season.

Through May, the fewest runs were scored by the Tigers at 138. The next fewest was by the Pirates (166). Dodgers led MLB at 270. Just a slight difference.

The Brewers topped MLB with 46 HRs in May, the A’s and Padres had the fewest with 15.

Cubs' 26-year-old rookie **Brandon Hughes** made quite a comeback – one that brought him all the way to Wrigley field – and the baseball record book. At the end of Spring Training in 2019, Hughes – drafted out of Michigan State University, as an outfielder, in the 16th round of the 2017 major-league draft – was on the verge of being released by the Cubs. The strong-armed outfielder, who had hit .237-4-35 in 110 games for A-level South Bend in 2018, was told he would be released unless he was willing to take a shot at finding success as a pitcher (*Side note: Primarily an outfielder over three college seasons, Hughes had made seven relief appearances for Michigan State – as a freshman, in 2015 – putting up a 7.11 earned run average in 6 1/3 innings. As a hitter, he hit .304-13-93 in 159 games in three Michigan State seasons.*)

Long story short, Hughes persevered and on May 17, found himself on the mound at Wrigley Field. He came on in the top of the sixth, with none on and one out and the Cubs leading the Pirates 6-0 and his outing went like this.

Sixth Inning

- 2B **Josh VanMeter**, walk.
- CF **Bryan Reynolds**, strikeout.
- LF **Ben Gamel**, inning-ending strikeout.

Seventh inning

- DH **Dan Vogelbach**, strikeout.
- 1B **Yoshi Tsutsugo**, strikeout.
- 3B **Michael Chavis**, walk.
- SS **Rodolfo Castro**, strikeout.

Hughes was replaced to open the top of the eighth by **Mark Leiter, Jr.**

Oh, that record-book thing? STATS reported that Hughes was the first MLB pitcher since 1900 to record at least five outs in their MLB debut *with all those outs coming via the strikeout*.

This is why they have scouts. Across 2020 and 2021 Tigers lefty **Tarik Skubai** he just kept firing that fastball, and hitters kept bashing it. He gave up 35 home runs in just 149 innings, this one year after he gave up nine home runs in just 32 innings.

That's 44 home runs in 181 innings if you're scoring at home.

But during the offseason, he sharpened his slider (“I just changed one finger, and that’s really been it,” he told *The Athletic*). He’s now a slider-first pitcher and it has suited him well. He has allowed just two homers all year, neither of them off his slider or his fastball. And his confidence remains sky-high. In all, he has a 2.44 ERA, a 2.03 FIP, and he’s struck out 55 against 9 walks.

LUIS CASTILLO (10 K’S), REDS WIN 1ST FENWAY GAME IN 47YEARS, FIRST SINCE 1975 WORLD SERIES.

The right-hander struck out every batter in Boston’s lineup en route to a new season high of 10 strikeouts, powering past his previous high of six. Castillo’s six scoreless innings set the Reds up for a 2-1 win over the Red Sox in the first of a two-game set. The victory was Cincinnati’s first regular-season win at Fenway Park in club history (although they have only played there six times in the regular season) and its first win at the park since Game 7 of the World Series on Oct. 22, 1975.

RUSSELL MARTIN HANGS THEM UP

A 17th-round pick for the Dodgers in the 2002 draft, Martin spent his first five Major League seasons and his final season (2019) in Dodger blue. In between his two stints in Los Angeles, Martin played two seasons apiece with the Yankees and Pirates, and four seasons playing the Blue Jays in his home country of Canada.

He was ninth-place finisher in NL Rookie of The Year voting in his 2006 debut season, and he then crushed the “sophomore slump” by winning a Gold Glove and a Silver Slugger Award in 2007. Martin also earned the first of his four All-Star nods that year, later returning to the Midsummer Classic in 2008, as a Yankee in 2011, and as a Blue Jay in 2015.

Martin no matter where he went, as he appeared in the postseason in 10 of his 14 seasons. He’ll now hang up his cleats after hitting .248/.349/.397 (104 wRC+) with 191 home runs and 1416 hits over 1693 games and 6648 PA in the Show.

IT AIN’T PRETTY IN THE CITY OF BROTHERLY LOVE

The Philadelphia Phillies fired manager **Joe Girardi**, the team announced Friday. Bench coach **Rob Thomson** will be the interim manager.

The Phillies are 22-29 this season, Girardi's third with the club. They are 12 games back of the New York Mets in the National League East and have lost five of their last six games.

The veteran manager went 132-141 in his two-plus seasons in Philadelphia. He previously managed the New York Yankees for 10 seasons.

In addition to Girardi, the team announced that coaching assistant **Bobby Meacham** is being relieved of his duties while quality assurance coach **Mike Calitri** has been promoted to the role of bench coach.

Thomson was a minor-league player in the Tigers' organization from 1985 to 1988, playing catcher and third base. He spent 28 years in the Yankees organization, serving as a coach during all 10 years that Girardi managed them. He interviewed for the Yankees' managerial vacancy after the 2017 season before joining the Phillies as **Gabe Kapler's** bench coach in 2018.

How bad is it in Philadelphia? With apologies to my cousin Steve who is a Phillies fan...

(from Jayson Stark, the Athletic)

You don't blow through the luxury-tax barrier to bury your team 12 1/2 games deep before you flip the calendar to June.

You don't spend \$192 million on free agents — *in two weeks* — to dig yourself a hole eight games below .500 in the first 50 games.

So we know that, for the 2022 Phillies, this definitely was not The Master Plan — not of roster-construction foreman **Dave Dombrowski**, not of manager Joe Girardi, certainly not of the club's principal owner, **John Middleton**.

Last three weeks (4-12, with *eight* losses in which the Phillies made various leads disappear

The Phillies went 3-10 at home in May. They're 7-15 at home against teams not named the Rockies. And overall, they closed out May at four games below .500 (11-15) for the season at home.

Seven Phillies relievers have already lost a game. In their 2008 World Series championship season, only seven relievers lost a game all year.

- Thanks largely to those bullpen issues, the Phillies have already lost 14 games after holding a lead. That's more than the Brewers and Dodgers combined (12). It's also as many come-from-ahead losses as the 2011 Phillies had *all season* ... and have we mentioned it's only the first week of June?

- So what's the common theme for teams like that? The games all seem to last too long. And for this team, they have. Heading into Wednesday, the Phillies had a minus-30 run differential from the fifth inning on. (The Mets are plus-51.) The Phillies had a minus-15 run differential from the ninth inning on. (The Mets are plus-18.) Feel free to do that math again on the difference between the Mets and Phillies in the late innings. It explains a lot.

- Oh, and one more thing: The first request any team makes of its relievers is just to throw strikes. But incredibly, the Phillies' *relievers* have walked 20 more hitters this year (93, in 177 innings) than their *starters* (73, in 90 more innings).

Through 50 games, they ranked last in baseball in Sports Info Solutions' Defensive Runs Saved metric, at minus-22. Let's run that through the perspective machine.

- If this keeps up, the Phillies would finish last in Defensive Runs Saved for the third time in the last five seasons (also, 2018 and last year).

- More significantly, that minus-22 DRS puts them on pace to finish at minus-71 for the season. Want to guess how challenging it is to overcome a defense that bad? Well, over the last eight seasons, only one team that finished with minus-70 DRS (or worse) has made it to the postseason. That team: the 2013 Tigers (minus-72). And who built that team? A guy named ... Dave Dombrowski.

More goodies from Jayson

THE FENWAY/WRIGLEY TRIFECTA — So here's a fun thing that doesn't happen much:

May 19 — **Trevor Story** hits three home runs at Fenway.

May 20 — **Josh Rojas** hits three home runs at Wrigley.

Last time we had three-homer games at Fenway and Wrigley within 24 hours: Sept. 15, 1996. Frank Thomas at Fenway and Benito Santiago at Wrigley. Beautiful.

May 22 against the Pirates **Albert Pujols** pinch hit in the fifth inning. He proceeded to hit two HRs. So that's two home runs — in a game he didn't start? Whoa. Not only is that something Pujols had never done before. It's something that ...

Nobody with 600 career homers had ever done before ... or 500 homers ... or even 400 homers. But then Albert, a guy with 681 homers (at the time), worked it into his busy schedule. Cool!

Vlad Guerrero Jr. finished second last fall in the AL MVP balloting — to some hotshot named **Shohei Ohtani**. Last week Vlad homered off Ohtani. *Who's the last MVP runner-up to go deep off the MVP the next season?* But I took it one step further.

I beat them to the answer to this question: Who are *all* the MVP runners-up to go deep off the MVP the following season? Ready? Here's that spectacular list:

Pete Rose off Bob Gibson: June 10, 1969*

Johnny Mize off Bucky Walters, Sept. 25, 1940

Lou Gehrig off Lefty Grove: April 25, 1932**

* Rose's only career homer vs. Gibson

** Gehrig's first at-bat vs. Grove the next season

Mets shortstops then and now: Remember trusty Mets shortstop **Bud Harrelson**? In 1973, he drove in a run *in nine games all season*. Now back to 2022 and current Mets shortstop **Francisco Lindor** ... who just drove in a run *in 10 games in a row*.

Brewers closers then and now: Remember always-entertaining Brewers closer of yesteryear **Derrick Turnbow**? Here's how his last 20 2/3 innings of the 2006 season went: 29 hits, 22 walks, 4 hit-by-pitches, 35 runs, 30 earned runs, 4 blown saves, 6 losses. Now back to 2022 and current Brewers closer **Josh Hader** ... whose last 20 2/3 innings (dating to last September) have looked slightly different! As in: *5 hits, 7 walks, 0 hit-by-pitches, 0 runs, 35 strikeouts, 18 saves, no blown saves*.

Craig Kimbrel then and now: The Craig Kimbrel of yesteryear was something to see. Kimbrel in 2013: Scored on in six appearances all season (out of 68). Now back to 2022 and the current edition of Craig Kimbrel ... who was just scored on *in six appearances in a row*.

CITY OF ERA RUINS — There are baseball days the great city of Chicago will remember forever. Then there are days like May 26.

Cubs: Cough up 20 runs (to the Reds).

White Sox: Give up 16 runs (to the Red Sox).

Times other than that when both Chicago teams gave up at least 16 runs on the same day: Zero!

How about this for 24 hours in the life of a closer:

Last Sunday night in New York, Phillies closer **Corey Knebel** blows a save by allowing a game-tying, ninth-inning long ball to Mets rookie **Nick Plummer**. Phillies lose in 10 innings.

Now fast-forward to the next day against the Giants. Ninth inning again. Tie game this time. Knebel serves up another painful home run — this time a go-ahead shot by **Evan Longoria**. Phillies lose in 10 innings again.

How many other Phillies closers have ever done what Knebel did — given up tie-breaking and/or lead-blowing home runs in the ninth or later, two days in a row? Obviously, that answer is: None!

THE BEST INTENTIONS — I once saw Reds manager **Pete Rose** intentionally walk **Mike Schmidt** *in the first inning of the season*. And I thought that was the ultimate show of respect, until Tuesday ... when Royals manager **Mike Matheny** intentionally walked Guardians masher **José Ramírez** *twice in the first two innings*.

So what do you need to know about that? Oh, only that ...

- Matheny had handed out just two intentional walks in the entire month of May before Ramírez showed up. And ...
- According to the remarkable Sarah Langs, Ramírez then became only the ninth hitter to have that happen in the 49 seasons of complete public play-by-play data. And ...
- One of the other eight was a guy named **Terry Francona**, who happens to be Ramírez's manager in his other life. But ...
- Francona was then a No. 7 hitter, who got walked twice so the Cardinals could face the light-hitting No. 8 batsmith, **Angel Salazar**. And that's very different. So ...
- The only other *No. 3 hitters* to get intentionally walked twice in the first two innings in all that time were three guys you might have heard of: **Dave Parker** (May 21, 1986), **Albert Pujols** (June 16, 2009) and **Freddie Freeman** (April 7, 2021).

THREE FOR ONE — Have you noticed this? **Adley Rutschman** (first pick in the 2019 MLB Draft: Now in the big leagues. ... **Spencer Torkelson** (first pick in the 2020 draft): Started the season in

the big leagues. ... **Royce Lewis** (first pick in the 2017 draft): Now on the injured list in the big leagues.

If you're counting along at home, you know that makes *three* former No. 1 picks making their big-league debut in the same season. And in answer to your questions, Baseball America's Knower of All Draft Things, JJ Cooper, reports ... that is *not* the record.

Most in any season — 4, in 1989 (**Ben McDonald, Andy Benes, Ken Griffey Jr., Jeff King**).

Only other years with 3 — 2007 (**Luke Hochevar, Justin Upton, Josh Hamilton**) and 1987 (**B.J. Surhoff, Shawn Abner, Tim Belcher**).

Only real shot this year could tie the record – Remember **Mark Appel**, the 2013 No. 1? He's unretired and with the Phillies organization. He has a 2.11 ERA at Triple-A Lehigh Valley. The Phillies' bullpen hasn't been what you'd call untouchable. So you never know!

FIELDS OF GOLDSCHMIDT – **Paul Goldschmidt** didn't start being a great player in St. Louis. And he didn't start being a great player in May. But I think he just had the greatest month in Cardinals history. And did I really just type that?

Goldschmidt's May:

.404/.471/.817/1.288 slash line

42 hits

23 extra-base hits

10 homers

33 RBIs

I could find only one other calendar month, by any Cardinal, that included a .390 average with at least 10 homers, 22 extra-base hits and 33 RBIs. It was by a guy named **Stan Musial**. Here's Musial in May 1954:

.390/.486/.772/1.259, with 11 homers, 22 extra-base hits and 40 RBIs

But even that month doesn't quite equal Goldschmidt's month.

The Strange But True case of the Pirates versus the Dodgers.

Pirates vs. Dodgers this season: 5-1

Pirates vs. everyone else: 17-26

Pirates vs. all other teams .500 or better: 3-15

Pirates vs. Dodgers (2017-21): 2-23*

Pirates series won vs. Dodgers in 2022: 2-for-2

Pirates series won vs. all other teams .500 or better in 2022: 0-for-6

The Strange But True magic number: 1,012. And what's so Strange But True about that? Oh, only that it's how many days (since Aug. 11, 2019) the Orioles went between walk-off homers until **Anthony Santander** ended that streak on May 19.

Of course the next night **Rougned Odor** hit another Orioles walk-off. So that's no walk-offs in 1,012 days ... followed by two walk-offs in two days.

Just two other teams ever went three years between walk-off homers – and then walked it off two days in a row:

2014 Cardinals — no walk-offs from June 19, 2011 (**Skip Schumaker**) to July 7-8, 2014 (**Matt Adams and Kolten Wong**).

1925 Tigers — no walkoffs from May 4, 1922 (**Harry Heilmann**) to June 1-2, 1925 (**Frank O'Rourke and then Ty Cobb**, to salvage a 16-15 game in which the Tigers had just blown a 10-run lead).

What goes up must come down. Brewers-Cardinals. Cards ...

- Made seven of their 27 outs *on foul popups*.
- Made nine total outs *on popups to various infielders*.
- Hit *five* foul popups to the first baseman (**Rowdy Tellez**) alone.
- Had one player (Juan Yezpez) who went 0 for 4, *with four popouts*.

Seem kind of Strange But True to you? It did to me — and Steve. So I put my friends from STATS on the case. Not surprisingly, that chewed up hours of somebody's previously enjoyable life. Sorry!

At least they found three other games in the last 49 seasons in which a team had at least seven foul-ball popups and at least nine popouts. But they discovered only one other game in which all of those things happened:

Diamondbacks-Dodgers, Sept. 20, 2001. On their way to winning the World Series, the D-Backs ... hit 11 infield popups ... and seven foul popups ... and five popups to the first baseman ... and had **Matt Williams** pop out four times.

The Marlins definitely weren't the first team to find out this week that Coors Field is still America's No. 1 home for crooked numbers. So here was the good news: They scored 14 runs in Game 1 of a Coors doubleheader Wednesday and then 12 more in Game 2.

Ready for the bad news? They scored all those runs and did *not* sweep that doubleheader, which is Strange But True, even by Coors standards.

Thanks to the miracle of Baseball-Reference/Stathead, we can report that only two other teams in the modern era have put up at least 12 runs in both games of a doubleheader but managed to avoid sweeping it:

- The first was hard-hittin' **Mark Whiten's** 1993 Cardinals on Sept. 7. Lost a *seven-lead-change* 13-12 whopper to the Reds in Game 1. But then rode four memorable Whiten home runs (and 12 RBIs) to a 15-2 win in Game 2.
- The other was **Gabby Hartnett's** 1935 Cubs on Aug. 21. Blew an 8-2 lead in Philadelphia during a 13-12 Baker Bowl special in Game 1. But had slightly more fun winning a 19-5 wipeout in Game 2 that included a 12-run sixth inning in which 17 *Cubs batted*.

And that was the whole list ... until the Marlins arrived at Coors Field, where the numbers get more crooked every day.

NO HITTERS

Your fearless editor scours the web for interesting stuff. From nonhitters.com a few tidbits:

There have been 316 no-hitters tossed in MLB history (294 in the N.L. and A.L.), with the last thrown 20 days ago. The record for most game days between no-hitters is 535, connecting **Bobby Burke's** August 8, 1931 no-hitter for the Washington Senators to **Paul Dean's** September 21, 1934 no-no for the St. Louis Cardinals.

The Cubs had the longest streak of avoiding a no-hitter dating back to **Sandy Koufax** in 1965 until **Cole Hamels** got to them in 2015.

Every major league team has been no-hit at least two times. The Chicago Cubs had gone nearly 50 years without falling victim to a no-hitter until the Philadelphia Phillies' Hamels zapped them in 2015. That leaves the Oakland Athletics with the longest streak of avoiding a no-hitter, having last been no-hit 30 years, 10 months, 17 days ago back in 1991.

The **Cleveland Guardians** franchise owns the longest current no no-no streak among teams that have thrown a no-hitter. It has been 41 years, 0 months, 16 days ago since **Len Barker** tossed a perfect game against the Toronto Blue Jays at Cleveland Stadium.

The **Oakland Athletics** haven't fallen victim to a no-hitter for 30 years, 10 months, 17 days ago, the longest current streak in the majors. Baltimore no-hit the A's throwing:

Bob Milacki (6 inn.)

Mike Flanagan (1 inn.)

Mark Williamson (1 inn.)

Gregg Olson (1 inn.)

Baltimore Orioles

JUNE 1 STANDINGS—WHAT WILL THEY LOOK LIKE IN FOUR MONTHS?

Mlb.com

It's Memorial Day, which has traditionally been a good time in baseball to take stock of how teams are doing so far in the season. This year, there's a new twist: A new postseason format that will feature a third Wild Card team in each league, as well as a first-round bye for the two division winners with the best records in each league.

With the introduction of another Wild Card spot and two first-round byes, the new playoff format brings exciting possibilities. Winning the division becomes even more vital now that there is a bye and home-field advantage at stake. And playing for the best record -- or at least the second-best record -- in the league is even more important, too, meaning even clubs with big division leads can't let up. And, of course, more clubs will be in the race later into the season, setting up the potential for a tremendous finish around the Majors.

While there's still a long way to go, here's a look at how the postseason picture would look through Sunday, with win-loss records and seeding in parentheses:

American League

AL East winner: Yankees (33-15, No. 1 seed) – First-round bye and berth in Division Series

AL Central winner: Twins (29-19, No. 3) – Host lowest-seeded Wild Card team in Wild Card Series

AL West winner: Astros (30-18, No. 2) – First-round bye and berth in Division Series

Wild Card teams: Rays (28-19, No. 4), Blue Jays (27-20, No. 5), Angels (27-22, No. 6)

On the outside looking in: White Sox (23-23), Rangers (22-24), Red Sox (23-25)

Wild Card Series (best of three)

Angels (6) at Twins (3)

Blue Jays (5) at Rays (4)

Division Series (best of five)

Blue Jays/Rays at Yankees

Angels/Twins at Astros

National League

NL East winner: Mets (32-17, No. 2) – First-round bye and berth in Division Series

NL Central winner: Brewers (30-18, No. 3) – Host lowest-seeded Wild Card team in Wild Card Series

NL West winner: Dodgers (33-14, No. 1) – First-round bye and berth in Division Series

Wild Card teams: Padres (30-17, No. 4), Cardinals (26-21, No. 5), Giants (25-21, No. 6)

On the outside looking in: Braves (23-25), D-backs (23-26)

Wild Card Series (best of three)

Giants at Brewers

Cardinals at Padres

Division Series (best of five)

Cardinals/Padres at Dodgers

Giants/Brewers at Mets

Looking back on 2021, on June 1 the Cubs, Gants and Mets were division leaders—Mets and Cubs failed to make the post-season. Rays, White Sox and A's were division leaders. The A's didn't make the post-season.

INTERESTING THOUGHTS FROM JOE POSNANSKI

We are a little more than one-quarter of the way into the season ... and already these are the teams with a less than one percent chance of making the postseason:

Baltimore Orioles

FanGraphs 0.0%; Baseball-Reference 0.2%

Washington Nationals

FanGraphs: 0.1%; Baseball-Reference 0.3%

Pittsburgh Pirates

FanGraphs: 0.2%; Baseball-Reference <0.1%

Kansas City Royals

FanGraphs 0.3%; Baseball-Reference 0.3%

Cincinnati Reds

FanGraphs 0.4%; Baseball-Reference 0.4%

Detroit Tigers

FanGraphs: 0.5%; Baseball-Reference 0.8%

Those are the six teams that BOTH FanGraphs and Baseball-Reference give a less than one percent chance. In addition to that, FanGraphs adds Oakland (0.1%), Colorado (0.2%) and puts Arizona JUST over 1 percent (1.1%). Baseball-Reference, meanwhile, writes off the Cubs (0.1%) and the Marlins (0.6%).

So, that is a total of 11 teams that are basically out of it already. I don't think it's much of a stretch to put the Rangers and Mariners on that list too, no offense to either club, and being

brutally honest, Cleveland is probably not going to be there in October, either. And, even as I send all my love to Ellen Adair, it's a long road back for Philadelphia too.

So, that means before we even get to June, 15 out of 30 teams are more or less playing for next year already (or, in most cases, for two or three or four years down the line). And, more to the point, it means that 16 teams are fighting for 12 playoff spots.

Do we really need 110-plus more games to choose 12 teams out of a 16-team pot?

Baseball's long season has always separated the sport from everything else. It is America's only every-day game. This builds from the idea that you cannot determine greatness in baseball over one game or a few games or even 81 games like in the NBA and NHL. No, you need to see the teams play over six months, in cold weather and hot, through hot streaks and slumps and injuries, at home and away, in day games and at night, against righties and lefties, in close games and blowouts.

Now, though, you don't need to be a great team to win. You don't even need to be a good team. At this moment, there are 12 teams with winning records, and, as mentioned, 12 teams will make the postseason, with a more-or-less equal opportunity to win it all.

TWO DAYS LATER HE FOLLOWED UP WITH:

The other day I wrote about how we already, more or less, know how this regular season will go, and I think it came off as much more depressing and dispiriting than I intended. That wasn't my point at all, and I am not in any way depressed or dispirited about the state of baseball. I love it as much as ever.

No, my point was that in my view, too many teams make the playoffs and that has altered the beautiful rhythm of the baseball season. There is simply not very much at stake for the best 10 teams, and there's not very much hope for the worst 10 teams, and so the baseball people have focused the season's attention on the middle 10 teams and which two of those squeeze into the playoffs. I don't think that's where the eye should go. I don't think that's anywhere close to where the drama of baseball lives.

No, the drama of baseball is that the Pirates can sweep the Dodgers, and we all can marvel for a moment, and then we move on. Why do we love baseball? I'll give you one reason: Tomorrow.

Costello: You don't want to tell me today?

Abbott: I'm telling you now.

Costello: Then go ahead. The pitcher's name?

Abbott: Tomorrow.

Costello: What time?

Abbott: What time what?

Costello: What time tomorrow are you gonna tell me who's pitching?

Abbott: Now listen. Who is not pitching.

Costello: I'll break your arm, you say who's on first. I want to know what is the pitcher's name?

Abbott: What's on second.

Costello: I don't know.

Abbott and Costello: Third base!

No, I'll tell you now — one of the reasons we love baseball is tomorrow. Because tomorrow anything can happen — surprises, upsets, triples, cycles, a no-hitter, an unlikely hero, a jaw-dropping catch, a hilarious twist, a joyous turn, a 500-foot homer and who knows, maybe a kid will catch a foul ball.

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PETER ABRAHAM, BOSTON GLOBE

"Summer of '49" by **David Halberstam**. A famed pennant race comes to life with Halberstam's relentlessly detailed reporting. This book offers deep insight into **Ted Williams** and **Joe DiMaggio** and is required reading to truly understand the greatest rivalry in sports.

“Dollar Sign on the Muscle: The World of Baseball Scouting” by **Kevin Kerrane**. This 1984 book was out of print before Baseball Prospectus published an updated version in 2013. This is a fascinating look at the world of scouts going back to the days of **Branch Rickey**.

“**Sandy Koufax**: A Lefty’s Legacy” by **Jane Leavy**. Koufax last pitched in 1966. In 2022, fans still stop dead in their tracks and stare when he takes in a game at Dodger Stadium. Read this book to understand why Koufax remains a superstar all these years later.

“The Catcher was a Spy: The Mysterious Life of **Moe Berg**” by **Nicholas Dawidoff**. Not even the greatest of fiction writers could have invented a character like the real-life Berg, a light-hitting catcher from 1923-39 (including five seasons with the Red Sox) who also helped win World War II.

“Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball’s Last Hero” by **David Maraniss**. You know **Roberto Clemente** was a great player. Maraniss takes you into what made him a great man.

Maraniss also wrote the definitive biography of **Vince Lombardi**, “When Pride Still Mattered.”

Here are a few new baseball books:

“In Scoring Position. 40 Years of a Baseball Love Affair” by **Bob Ryan** and **Bill Chuck**. You know Ryan as the greatest NBA writer there ever was. He’s also a passionate baseball fan who keeps score at every game he attends and used his old scorebooks as a resource to delve into the game.

“Rickey: The Life and Legend of an American Original” by **Howard Bryant**. **Rickey Henderson** is one of the greatest players in history. This comprehensive biography puts into focus how that happened.

“The Franchise: New York Yankees. A Curated History of the Bronx Bombers” by **Mark Feinsand**. Here’s a collection of essays offering a fresh look at the key people and moments in Yankees history.

The Red Sox version of this series, written by **Sean McAdam**, comes out on July 12.

“Swing and a Hit: Nine Innings of What Baseball Taught Me” by **Paul O’Neill** and **Jack Curry**. The former Yankees outfielder dives into hitting and what it was like to be one of the dynasty Yankees under **Joe Torre**. No water coolers were harmed making his book.

AS VIRTUAL REALITY TRAINING SPREADS TO YOUTH BASEBALL, WHAT’S THE BEST WAY TO USE IT?

Eno Sarris, The Athletic

When virtual reality first arrived in baseball as a training tool, it was big and expensive. A couple of years back, the Dodgers needed to install an entire room near the clubhouse so their players could practice virtually against that night's starting pitcher. But now the technology is getting smaller, easier to transport, and less expensive. As this more portable and affordable virtual reality spreads through all of the different levels of baseball, the question begins to shift from "how good is this" to "how can players best use it?"

One of the leaders in baseball virtual reality training, WIN Reality, announced Wednesday an infusion of \$45 million of investment from Spectrum Equity as they transition from helping major leaguers to training kids up and down the baseball experience. Their new products will focus on young amateur baseball players, and the commercial experience of their app, as they add coaching modules and social media aspects to a baseball product that major leaguers have already begun taking advantage of for their own training.

"The release of the Oculus Quest 2 crushed the cost curve on VR," said WIN COO Chris O'Dowd. "We went from installing what was a \$150,000 piece of equipment in a number of major league clubhouses, to a backpack system that had stands and sensors and still required an operator, to a headset that is more affordable than a baseball bat at \$299. That put us in a position to go from only working with major league teams and a few top-tier collegiate customers — Vanderbilt won the college World Series the first year we worked with them — to now having a product that can really fit the entire life cycle of a baseball player."

But a major leaguer will want different things than an 8-year-old just getting used to standing in the box.

The theoretical impact of VR at the major league level is huge, and companies like WIN, Monsterful VR and others have been looking for ways to seamlessly incorporate that tech at the professional level. "Imagine being able to step in against tonight's pitcher and really face them?" said Monsterful VR's CSO, Jarett Sims. "We've really worked on the technology, and also the artificial intelligence driving the experience so that you really could see what a **Corey Kluber** at-bat would be like before you step up to the plate."

He said that back in 2018, but it's become even more vital in the past few years, as we now know that the third time through the order penalty — when hitters suddenly have the advantage on the pitcher — is based not on a drop-off in stuff, but on familiarity with the pitcher, and any technology that can improve a batter's familiarity with the pitcher can help the hitter jump ahead to the second time through the order. With the knowledge that there are more breaking balls than ever before and that the more a single hitter sees a single breaking ball, the better the hitter gets, it makes sense to then see those breaking balls virtually before you ever really step in the box.

“If you’re a guy that definitely focuses on timing after the pitcher breaks his hand, then this will help, no question,” said the Rangers’ **Marcus Semien** of VR’s value to a major leaguer. “It can help you get on time.”

There’s a little difference forming here, though: familiarity with pitch shape, and familiarity with the pitcher’s timing. Not every major leaguer gave rave reviews of the way the pitches looked in the air, saying the velocity didn’t quite track with their real-world experiences.

“The downfall is the velocity doesn’t feel real,” said Rangers catcher **Mitch Garver**, who worked with VR tech this past winter. “The guys that are throwing mid-to-upper 90s, it’s completely unhittable, but if you’re in the box and feeling good, you can time up 95 to 100. It goes by you so fast it’s unrealistic. So what I did was I went up against high school pitchers throwing 85 to 88, and it seems more realistic to me.”

O’Dowd thought what was missing was some of the context around the situations in which baseball players normally see a 99 mph fastball.

“When you stand in the batter’s box in VR and you’re not in your stance and fully emotionally ready to see a 96 mph fastball, and it’s more of a passive watching, it’ll sneak up on you,” O’Dowd said. “When the crowd is loud and you have that adrenaline, then 95 slows down. If you’re really trying to put yourself in a position to be successful even in the app, it needs to be met with the same emotional intent as you would have the game.”

For the younger set that’s now gaining access to the WIN technology, any added exposure to shapes is probably helpful, because they aren’t working with the same baseline of experience.

“At the amateur level, their experimental library and database is a blank slate,” O’Dowd said. “So we’re just trying to give them any impressions. They may never have seen a low three-quarters left-handed slider before and we don’t want that happening for the first time in a game. It’s that same developmental concept but in broader buckets — I want to see a sharp breaking ball that breaks late versus a rolling breaking ball. Letting kids start to define what it looks like out of the hand, what different tempos and deliveries look like — building that experience library on a very much accelerated and condensed timeline is really hard.”

A technology like this can have a great impact even if the batter chooses to focus only on timing, though. Research from cricket suggests that hitters get much more information before the release of the ball than they do after. Also, Garver pointed out that major league hitters aren’t trying to hit all of the pitches all of the time.

“When I work on a machine, I’m trying to master a single move, to learn a new move,” Garver said. “Like, if I want to hit a left-handed back-door cutter, what do I have to do to get my body positioned to hit this ball, where do I want to hit, which way do I want my hands to go. Hitting is about taking one pitch shape and trying to do damage off it. I’m hunting a zone and a pitch and that’s what I’m trying to damage on. I’m not looking for the fastball and the slider down and the

heater up and the breaking ball in. I'm not looking for all those things. We're all trying to simplify the approach, not have one swing that can hit everything."

That could be a difference in the usage cases between major leaguers trying to hit homers off the best pitchers in the world, and young kids just trying to add to their database of shapes. The one thing that every major leaguer agreed was missing from their experience with VR was the immediate feedback that the bat itself gives a hitter.

"The mindset of having to see the ball and actually hit, make physical contact with the ball, having to react to where the ball is coming in — it is different than actually watching it," said Oakland's **Jed Lowrie**. "There are no stakes, there are no consequences for mis-hitting the ball."

"I just feel like you're gonna do what you do there, and then the game's completely different," the Dodgers' **Cody Bellinger** told *The Athletic*. "Maybe you just hit it and the game reacts and tells you where you hit it and if you were late or early."

Getting real-life physical feedback is important. Consider the difference between this and "MLB: The Show," a more conventional video game, where it's much more fun to swing than to take. That's already had some real-world consequences for Semien, back when he made his minor league debut, and compiled the lowest walk rate of his minor league career, thanks to, he believes, the video game.

"(In) 2011, guess it was 'MLB: The Show,' just had gotten drafted, played a ton of 'MLB: The Show,'" Semien said. "You just want to swing, you don't want to take pitches, then you get to the plate in your real-life game and you just want to swing. That doesn't work in Low A."

So bat-based or at least batted-ball-based feedback would be something useful for the kids then, too.

"There's nothing the kids do in life that replicates the bat to ball," said UC Berkeley assistant baseball coach **Noah Jackson**. "They're on their phones and their games, but the physical act of hitting an object is very difficult we don't do anything else like that, so when they get out of the simulator or out of the practice, they find that real-life competition is nothing like the soft-tossing coach or the game they were playing."

Over at WIN, the newest tech rollouts are centered around improving just this facet of the VR experience. Every six weeks in the coming years, consumers can expect to see more sophisticated batted ball projections and metrics so they can better judge if their swing correctly timed that pitch. There should be the opportunity to add diagnostics that can provide specific feedback about each part of the swing in real-time.

The biggest difference between the professionals and the kids might be the level of coaching, though. When did Mitch Garver take up VR because he didn't have a coach to talk to or a

facility to visit? In late February, in the middle of a lockout. Otherwise, he'd have plenty of people to help him improve. Kids don't always have that.

"Let's bring better coaching to amateur players," O'Dowd said of the next step in the process for VR. "We have a team of hitting coaches and we want to deliver really personalized training tracks and programs that are much more robust than what we have now. We want to deliver on a more comprehensive training system. (Make) the accessibility to training more often and easier. Offseason plans are about a longitudinal approach to building a full skill set that can be put on autopilot and it's a couple of days a week, and you can see 20 pitches in less than eight minutes on the app. That provides consistency and checkpoints for feedback."

That's exciting for most kids in the sport, but not necessarily all. A \$299 headset and \$30 a month charge is still a barrier for many young players, and goes hand in hand with other trends in the sport.

"Baseball has become the ultimate country club sport," said Jackson, who is also the co-founder of the First Base Foundation, which helps kids afford travel baseball, which can be expensive. "Kids have hitting coaches and fielding coaches and pitching coaches and private coaches and, increasingly, private games as travel ball replaces Little League. There are no backyard Wiffle ball and stickball kids, they don't have time to develop that competitive ability."

Considering that these specific tools have gone from six figures to three in just the last few years, though, it seems right to say at least VR is trending toward affordability. And even if it's not a panacea for all major leaguers, it's become an accepted part of a healthy diet of technological tools for many hitters, with some upside left to boot.

"What I've seen in San Francisco and here, guys are starting to replace what used to be traditional reps with the swing and now taking neural reps with the VR," said Rangers offensive coordinator **Donnie Ecker**. "Guys are using that to see shapes, to find timing, to practice their game plan model. One of the key things is how do we rethink repetition so we can get our highest speeds, highest capacity at game time. Instead of taking 100 swings, maybe it's just 35 reps on the VR and 35 reps with their swing. As you warm up that part of the brain, we need to also then create a stimulus that activates the body, where it gets a little uncomfortable and has to solve fast problems in space."

So for the kids trying to get better at baseball, competitive play will still be key, the coaches and major leaguers themselves maintain.

"At the end of the day, we still have to honor that if you want to get better at swimming, you better jump your ass in the pool," laughed Ecker.

But on the cold days, when the pool is closed, it looks like VR is making the play to be the technology that will be there to help the kids keep swinging.

THIS WEEK'S HISTORY LESSON I

My childhood friend and legendary stickball opponent George Bacso was a big Oakland A's fan. We took our dads to Yankee stadium to see **Vida Blue** pitch. He gladly traded better baseball cards for Oakland A's. I remember this World Series well.

GENE TENACE RECALLS HOMERS, DEATH THREATS AS A'S WELCOME BACK 1972 WORLD SERIES CHAMPS.

Daniel Brown, The Athletic

There are conflicting accounts regarding the death threats.

Gene Tenace, the A's catcher who wound up under FBI protection during his torrid 1972 World Series, says the danger surfaced on the day of Game 2, and scattered media reports over the years jibe with that timeline. But archives at the Baseball Hall of Fame offer several contemporary newspaper accounts of the ensuing court proceedings that all point to Game 6 as the time of a man's open-air threat on Tenace's life.

According to those articles, that's when a woman in the ticket line at Riverfront Stadium in Cincinnati overheard a stranger say: "If Gene Tenace hits a home run today, he won't walk out of this ballpark."

Elwood F. King, who was arrested with a loaded revolver and an open bottle of whiskey in his possession, said in court that his actual words were: "Somebody ought to kill that SOB because he's killing the Reds."

Fifty years later, and with a reunion of the A's '72 champs set for this weekend, Tenace still marvels at the absurdity of it all. His lava-hot World Series performance was surreal enough, an out-of-body experience in which he sometimes lost his hearing as well as his ability to feel the bases under his feet. "For seven games," Tenace says now. "It stayed that way for all seven games."

The FBI escorts to and from the stadium in a bulletproof town car only added to the odyssey of a man who, up until a few weeks prior, had been an obscure backup catcher who batted .225 with five home runs during the regular season.

"They had to bring me all kinds of secret ways. They would never take me the same way twice, you know?" the World Series MVP recalled by phone from his home in Oregon. "Never got to ride the bus with the guys until we finally won in Cincinnati."

It's been 50 years since the underdogs toppled the Reds, barely enough time to process it all. Expect Tenace to get an extra-loud ovation at the golden anniversary celebration before the A's play the Red Sox on Saturday at the Oakland Coliseum. **Vida Blue** will be there too, as will **Rollie Fingers, Joe Rudi, Dick Green, Campy Campaneris** and the other assorted Technicolor characters who triumphed over a demo version of the Big Red Machine. It was the first of Oakland's three consecutive titles.

Reggie Jackson is expected to attend the reunion, even though a hamstring injury during the ALCS kept him out of that '72 Fall Classic.

But at the heart of it will be the player who served as the unexpected understudy to Mr. October by belting a record-tying four homers and amassing a 1.313 OPS in the seven-game classic. Tenace's .913 slugging percentage at the time broke the World Series record of .900 set by a slightly better-known player: **Babe Ruth**.

Along the way, Tenace also inspired the wrath of that armed and inebriated Reds fan, whom Tenace now refers to as "that schmuck."

On the phone this spring, Tenace reflected on the saga, and his recollections of each game remained so absurdly vivid that it's as if he'd just returned to his locker after the world's longest postgame shower.

"It was fun," Tenace said, chuckling, "but it was weird, lemme tell you."

In a way, the story continues to take weird turns. Because with a half-century of hindsight, the unlikely hero was actually pretty likely after all. Perhaps no batter has benefited more from the evolution of sabermetrics over the past few decades than the one born Fiore Gino Tennaci. Just take a look at where the stealthy '72 hero ranks on some of the all-time catcher leaderboards.

Tenace's bWAR of 46.8 ranks 14th all-time at the position. The next five behind him, in order, are **Thurman Munson, Buster Posey, Bill Freehan, Jorge Posada and Yadier Molina**.

Ranking catchers by WAR7, which represents the sum of a player's seven best WAR seasons, Tenace stacks up at No. 12, sandwiched between **Bill Dickey and Roy Campanella**, two of the faces on any Mount Catchmore. Perhaps most staggering is that Tenace had an .817 career OPS, exactly the same as **Johnny Bench**.

Tenace simply made the mistake of arriving too early with his power-and-patience approach.

"No question with that," he says. "My on-base percentage, my walk ratio, getting on base: I'm proud of a lot of that, you know? I had a decent career. Not a great career. But I know what I accomplished."

Obscured back then was that Tenace drew a megaton of walks. He topped 100 base-on-balls in a season six times and led the league in that category twice. He also finished in the top 10 for on-base percentage six times and amassed a career OBP of .388, tied for second with Joe Mauer among catchers since 1960.

Tenace also hit 201 career home runs. He is, in short, the sort of player who today would make **Billy Beane** drown in an ocean of his own drool. But no one appreciated Tenace's skill in the early 1970s, not even his own pops.

Fiore Tenace, a former semipro player, used to stay up until the wee hours listening to A's games back home in Lucasville, Ohio. That usually meant driving up a mountain to find a radio signal whenever the A's played a Midwest opponent like the Tigers or White Sox.

"He'd stay out there till 2 or 3 in the morning," Tenace said. "Then he would call me the next day and just air me out for not swinging the stinkin' bat."

Jay Jaffe, the sabermetrician who invented the JAWS system for gauging Hall of Fame worthiness, raised the caveat in his book "The Cooperstown Casebook" that Tenace caught more than half of his team's games just four times and was frequently used at first base. Jaffe also took the sensible view that "a unicorn will be made commissioner of baseball before (Tenace) is elected to the Hall of Fame."

Still, his review of Tenace's case for Cooperstown concludes: "His 136 OPS+ trails only **Mike Piazza** among catchers with at least 5,000 plate appearances, and even with slightly subpar defense (-8 overall, -6 at catcher), his peak score clears the bar, and his JAWS is higher than six elected backstops. Just sayin'."

No one knew Tenace's OPS+, his JAWS or his WPA in October 1972.

In fact, people barely knew him at all. He was a 20th-round pick in the first MLB Draft in 1965, and as a minor leaguer, his claim to fame was that he once played all nine positions in a single game. He was not wholly converted to catching until his third season, in 1967, a decision, he once told Sports Illustrated, that "turned my life around." Tenace got the hang of the catching thing by late in the '72 season, when he wrested the starting job away from **Dave Duncan** just in time to set the world on fire.

But anyone getting their introduction to Tenace during the ALCS against the Detroit Tigers would hardly have envisioned what came next. Tenace went 1-for-17 over the five games against Detroit. Oh, and he got caught stealing and dropped a double-play ball while filling in at second base in the fourth game.

"The funny thing about that was I was hitting the stinkin' ball," Tenace said. "I just couldn't get any love. I couldn't buy a hit."

His lone knock against the Tigers was a tiebreaking single in the fourth inning of Game 5 to propel the A's to a 2-1 win and the pennant.

Almost imperceptibly, that dramatic hit set the stage for a World Series barrage that ranks among the greatest in the history of Octobers.

The player who tormented the Reds grew up in Southern Ohio, about two hours from Cincinnati. He went to a **Pete Rose** baseball clinic as a kid.

When Tenace stepped into the on-deck circle before his first at-bat in Game 1 of the World Series, he soaked in the sight of 52,918 fans and more than a dozen family members. Then he heard something he'll never forget.

Nothing. Not a single peep.

"I went deaf!" Tenace said. "I'd see people's mouths moving, but I could not hear a stinkin' thing. And I'm sitting there thinking, 'Did I just lose my damn hearing or what?'"

That shocking silence followed him into the batter's box. As Tenace walked up to the plate, he could see Bench talking to him, but it looked like an actor delivering lines on a muted TV. Tenace looked at umpire **Chris Pelekoudas**, who was also talking without speaking. The hitter was so freaked out that he took a breath and tried to gather himself.

"I stepped out of the box," Tenace said, "and said, 'God, this is weird.'"

Reds starter **Gary Nolan** no longer had the blazing fastball that once struck out **Willie Mays** four times in a game, but he was coming off a regular season in which he went 15-5 with a 1.99 ERA. So Tenace's first reaction was sympathy when he saw a fastball sputter past as if on a conveyor belt. Tenace instantly deduced that Nolan blew his arm out in the delivery. He waited for a beat, expecting Bench or Reds manager **Sparky Anderson** to race to the mound and check on their injured ace.

"Well, that didn't happen," Tenace said. "So I figured maybe he just threw me a first-pitch changeup, which would be about as weird as it can get.

"But it turned out it *was* a fastball! That's how slowed-down it was for me. It looked just like a batting practice fastball. And Gary threw in the low 90s."

Tenace crushed Nolan's fourth pitch, another fastball that appeared in slow-mo, into the left-field seats for a 2-0 lead. It was at this point that Tenace began to realize he was a sensory-deprivation tank dressed in a No. 38 jersey. Floating around the bases, he could have sworn he

missed the first-base bag and turned back to retouch it. But first-base coach **Jerry Adair** confirmed with a wave that he should keep going.

Tenace made a point of stomping more forcefully on the second-base bag, but it still felt ghostly under his cleats.

"I never could feel my foot hit that damn bag," Tenace said. "It was the same thing at third base, and I'm going, 'Are you kidding me?' It's like I'm stepping on a pillow. So that gives you an idea of what kind of mindset I was in."

Tenace came to the plate again with nobody on in the fifth inning of a 2-2 game and belted another one off Nolan, this time on a curveball, into the second deck in left field. That made him the first player to homer in his first two World Series at-bats.

Steve Vucinich, the A's longtime equipment manager, was standing behind **Sal Bando** in the dugout for that blast.

"I just remember Sal screaming, "*Genoooo!* What are you *doooooing?!'*" Vucinich said in a phone interview.

Some athletes live in "the zone" only fleetingly. Maybe for a moment. Maybe for a day.

Tenace had established long-term residence. After one of his at-bats in Game 2 — he can't remember which one — he got back to the dugout, and Bando and Rudi approached him quizzically. They'd just checked a replay monitor and wanted to know if Tenace knew the location of the pitch he'd hit hard.

Tenace told them, sure, it was right down the middle of the plate.

"They looked at one another, turned around and walked away from me," Tenace said. "Turns out, the pitch I hit was not only down and away but off the plate. And I hit a direct square in the middle of the bat.

"From that point on, they never said another word to me. 'We don't understand it, but just don't wake him up! Whatever he wants, just leave him alone!'"

He hit his third homer of the series off **Don Gullett** in the fifth inning of Game 4, hooking a first-pitch fastball near the bottom of the zone into the left-field seats in Oakland.

"There's a long drive ..." Curt Gowdy, the NBC play-by-play man, said before running out of time to describe the full flight. "Goodbye! And the A's are in the lead. Gene Tenace has hit another one."

Monte Moore, the NBC analyst for the games in Oakland that series, sensed the disbelief from Gowdy, and perhaps from the national viewing audience as well.

“Curt, that’s a typical Gene Tenace blast,” Moore, the longtime A’s play-by-play man, explained. “I know a lot of baseball fans are wondering: Where in the world were these home runs all year? But he hasn’t played much this year, Curt. We feel if he would have played all year, he would have been a 20- or 25-a-year man.”

Tenace added another home run in Game 5, off **Jim McGlothlin**. That one was a three-run shot, and it marked the last of his power barrage. With his fourth home run, he tied the World Series record shared at the time by Ruth, **Lou Gehrig, Duke Snider and Hank Bauer**.

“They’re no Geno Tennaci, that’s for sure,” Tenace joked.

The record for most home runs in a single World Series now stands at five, with Reggie Jackson (1977), **Chase Utley** (2009) and **George Springer** (2017) accomplishing the feat. The short list of others to hit four since Tenace did it includes **Willie Aikens** (1980), **Lenny Dykstra** (1993) and **Barry Bonds** (2002).

By the end of the series, however, Tenace was keeping a different kind of company. FBI agents stationed themselves outside his room at the Stouffer’s Inn, where the A’s stayed while in Cincinnati. Whenever Gene and his wife, Linda, ordered room service, the feds first inspected the meals for signs of foul play, like food-testers protecting royalty.

The agents remained vigilant, even after the arrest.

“I thought: ‘OK, you got the guy. So why would they have to do this?’” Tenace recalled. “But then the FBI explained it to me. They said he might have been a scapegoat. They said: ‘He might have just been a guy popping off. There might be another guy in the stands that’ll shoot you.’”

Tenace let out a low grumble over the phone.

“Oh, well, this is getting better and better! Are you kidding me? It’s becoming ridiculous now. It got to the point I couldn’t wait to get out of Cincinnati.”

The police quickly arrested King, 31, on a concealed weapons charge. In Hamilton County Pleas Court, King later denied making a direct threat on Tenace’s life.

King told the court that he brought the gun for self-protection because he slept outside the stadium before the game to get a good place in line, as reported in the March 9, 1973, edition of the Greenville (Ohio) Daily Advocate. The Cincinnati Enquirer’s account of his statement

added that King did so in part because he once was robbed while camping out for tickets to the Indianapolis Speedway.

Though the precise timeline for the threat remains unclear, it was widely known by the end of Game 6. Tenace was asked about it by the press in the aftermath of an 8-1 loss that forced a decisive Game 7.

"It's something I can't shove aside," Tenace told reporters. "I'm a little scared, but what can I do? Tell the manager not to play me?"

Not everyone was so restrained. The Associated Press story after Game 6 noted that Reggie Jackson, after listening to Tenace being questioned about the threat, cracked: "If you got to go, Gene, at least it will be on national television."

Mike Epstein, who was 0-for-16 at the time, chimed in with his own gallows humor: "No one would even bother shooting me."

Tenace indeed played in Game 7, delivering a run-scoring single in the first inning and a run-scoring double in the sixth as the A's captured the crown with a 3-2 victory.

But his brush with King wasn't over. A decade later, when Tenace was an aging backup for the St. Louis Cardinals, he received a letter at Busch Stadium before Game 1 of the 1982 World Series against Milwaukee.

Over the phone this spring, Tenace recalled opening the envelope and reading the memorable opening line:

"I want to apologize. I'm the guy that threatened to shoot you if you hit another home run ..."

That's about as far as he got.

"This is 10 years later. Are you kidding me? That dude is writin' me a letter?" he said. "And he was apologizing for what he did, saying he paid his dues and blah, blah, blah and all this."

Tenace, who knew the drill by then, stopped reading and immediately passed the letter on to the stadium security staff, who made sure it was added to the FBI file.

"It's over with," Tenace says by way of changing the conversation topic. "He is gone and forgotten."

Tenace batted .348/.400/.913 in his memorable World Series and had nine RBIs. Nobody else on the A's had more than one. It's a performance that has rarely been topped in the 50 years

since. Baseball-Reference's metric for measuring batting performance on the big stage — Championship Win Probability Added — pegs Tenace's barrage as the sixth-best Fall Classic by batters with at least 20 plate appearances:

Championship Win Probability Added

Single World Series, minimum 20 PA

1. **David Freese**, 2011 — 68.3
2. **Bucky Harris**, 1924 — 55.4
3. **Tris Speaker**, 1912 — 55.4
4. **George Springer**, 2017 — 55.4
5. **Max Carey**, 1925 — 53.9
6. **Gene Tenace**, 1972 — **52.9**
7. **Lance Berkman**, 2011 — 51.7
8. **Harry Walker**, 1946 — 46.2
9. **Dwight Evans**, 1986 — 43.4

Alas, Tenace's stats over the past few years are less glittering: one triple-bypass heart operation, one gallbladder removal, one knee replacement. They're still the Swingin' A's, all right, but some of them will also be Hurtin' as they make their way to Saturday's reunion.

"We usually end up talking about surgeries when we get together," Tenace said, laughing. "We forget about baseball, and we just talk about how we're dealing with the pain."

Tenace remains eager to point out he was hardly a one-man show in that '72 series. The A's pitching staff had a 3.05 ERA over seven games against a ferocious lineup. Spectacular defense by Joe Rudi, **Mike Hegan** and others helped save the day.

Still, Tenace also understands he was in rarefied air.

"I found out years later, they called it 'the zone.' I heard **Michael Jordan** talk about that famous shot he made at the key and how the ball was just floating out of his hand," Tenace said. "I can honestly relate to that, because it's exactly what I experienced."

THIS WEEK'S HISTORY LESSON II

Ernie Shore once threw a quasi-perfect game ... after Babe Ruth punched an umpire
The no-hitter thrown after Babe Ruth punched an ump

While there are 11 combined no-hitters in Major League history, I think we can safely say that the one tossed by Babe Ruth and Ernie Shore on June 23, 1917, is unlike any of the others.

Babe Ruth took the mound for the Red Sox against the Washington Senators and quickly got himself ejected. After walking the leadoff man, second baseman Ray Morgan, Ruth began jawing with the umpire, Brick Owens. According to the Boston Globe, Ruth thought the umpire had missed two strikes during the at-bat and told him to "Open your eyes and keep them open." After the ump threatened to eject Ruth if he didn't be quiet and get back to pitching, Ruth yelled, "You run me out and I will come in and bust you on the nose."

Sure enough, Ruth was ejected and the fracas was on. I'll let the newspaper tell the story:

"Then in rushed Ruth. Chester Thomas tried to prevent him from reaching Owens, who had not removed his mask, but Babe started swinging both hands. The left missed the arbiter, but the right struck him behind the left ear.

Manager Barry and several policemen had to drag Ruth off the field. All season Babe has been fussing a lot. Nothing has seemed to satisfy him."

Oddly enough, this wasn't the first time that season that violence had broken out on the field. What *was* odd is that, to some, this was "Great stuff!"

Found on Newspapers.com

Once Ruth had been lifted, Ernie Shore came on in relief. No slouch himself, the 6'4" Shore (at that time, only 30 Major League pitchers had ever been that tall or taller in Major League history) entered the game with a 1.97 ERA in 12 starts (compared to Ruth's 2.35 in 16). After Morgan was caught stealing at second base, the hurler retired the next 26 batters, despite striking out only two. That's probably thanks to the "nifty" defensive play of Shore, the Globe saying he "was ready for any of those cantankerous bunts that the opponents might try to lay down."

With one out to go and the Red Sox leading, 4-0, the Senators' Mike Menosky tried to get on with a bunt single, but Boston's second baseman/manager Jack Barry threw him out to preserve the no-hitter. Looks like those unwritten rules of baseball were not yet, um, unwritten.

While it was first viewed by many as a perfect game, today it is recorded in the annals as a no-hitter. But hey, the newspaper headline wasn't perfect either. Enjoy the fact that there is a very small chance that any of your email typos will live on for close to a century:

Found on Newspapers.com

In case you're wondering, that should read *1908* -- Cy Young (1904) and Addie Joss (1908) were the two previous pitchers in the modern era to throw perfect games.

But this wasn't Shore's only great start.

Beyond going 58-33 with a 2.12 ERA for the Red Sox from 1914-17, Shore was the Game 1 hurler for both the 1915 and '16 World Series Champion Red Sox. Across the two series, Shore went 3-1 with a 1.82 ERA in 34 2/3 innings. That includes three complete games, including the clinching Game 5 in 1916 when he allowed only one unearned run.

Though he also has at least one other claim to fame: Protecting the Babe from a fight. Yes, a different fight.

During an exhibition game with Yankees in 1920:

"... Ruth went into the stands after a heckler who had called him a "piece of cheese." The man pulled a knife, whose length and lethality varied in the telling. "There was no blood shed," the Brooklyn Eagle reported. "Pitcher Ernie Shore, of the Yankees, who was close by in his street clothes, stepped between as peacemaker." (Ruth wrote in his autobiography that Yankees co-owner Til Huston had jumped between him and the fan. Likely, both Shore and Huston had stepped in.)"

That makes a lot of sense given Shore's future career: After his car dealership went under following the Great Depression, Shore became the sheriff of Forsyth County in 1936 -- a position he held for 34 years.

BASEBALL PLAYERS DON'T DANCE? THE SAVANNAH BANANAS BEG TO DIFFER

TikTok choreography, dancing umpires, a ballet-trained first-base coach: This collegiate summer league team has amassed a following by leaning into entertainment.

Margaret Fuhrer, NYT

How does a dance writer from the Northeast end up fixated on a collegiate summer league baseball team from Savannah, Ga.?

A few months ago, a video of a baseball coach dancing to "Waltz of the Flowers" — concluding with a virtuosic series of pirouettes — showed up in my Twitter feed. Before long, I started seeing choreographed content from the team on TikTok: an umpire doing 'N Sync's "Bye Bye Bye" dance after calling a strikeout. A batter "hitting the Quan" before scoring a base hit. A pitcher, second baseman, shortstop and center fielder dancing the "Cool for the Summer" TikTok challenge during an at-bat. And there was more ballet.

Everywhere I scrolled, there were the Savannah Bananas — dancing.

Whatever your connection (or lack thereof) to baseball, the Bananas are here to entertain you. While major-league games are getting longer and slower, frustrating even devoted fans — **Don**

Mattingly, the manager of the Miami Marlins, recently said the sport “sometimes is unwatchable” — the Bananas are focused squarely on fun. For viewers like me, they’re the most watchable team in baseball.

When the Bananas aren’t dancing, they’re wearing stilts, crowd surfing to the plate or singing karaoke on the field. A cast of 120 entertainers adds to the circus, including a pep band and a “dad bod cheerleading squad.” The baseball part of the game can look different, too. The Bananas’ collegiate team, a summer harbor for student athletes, plays by conventional rules. But the organization also has a professional division that stages exhibition “Banana Ball” games, featuring a two-hour time limit and rule changes designed to make play faster and livelier.

The Banana method is working, on multiple fronts. While the Oakland Athletics games sometimes attract fewer than 3,000 fans, the Bananas have sold out every home game at Savannah’s 4,000-seat Grayson Stadium since the team’s founding in 2016. On TikTok, @thesavbananas have upward of 2.5 million followers, more than the Yankees and Mets combined. This summer, the streaming service ESPN+ will air “Bananaland,” a series about how the team created what a promo calls “the greatest show in sports.” And oh, by the way: The team won the 2021 Coastal Plain League championship.

“Most baseball doesn’t put fans first, so we went all in on that,” said Jesse Cole, 38, the team’s owner (and its on-field host, easy to spot in his yellow tuxedo). “We want people who used to say ‘I don’t like baseball’ to say, ‘I have to see the Bananas.’”

Cole’s style of baseball evangelism predates the Bananas. At 23, he was made general manager of the Gastonia Grizzlies, a failing Coastal Plain League team in Gastonia, N.C. Trying to drum up fan enthusiasm, he started experimenting with zany promotions, inspired by the showmanship of P.T. Barnum and Walt Disney. “I didn’t want to learn from the baseball industry,” he said. “I wanted to learn from the greatest entertainers out there.”

Dance came to play a starring role in his baseball show. “People loved it because it was totally unexpected,” Cole said. “Baseball players don’t dance.” Though some team members balked when asked to learn choreography, a core crew started performing simple routines between innings. “The third Grizzlies game, I’m walking through the crowd and a husband and wife are talking, and the wife goes, ‘Shut up, honey — they’re about to dance!’” Cole said. “That’s when I was like, All right, we’ve got something here.”

After several years honing a fans-first entertainment strategy with the Grizzlies, Cole and his wife, Emily, heard that Savannah’s minor league team was leaving the city’s historic Grayson Stadium. In 2016, they secured a lease on the ballpark and made it the home of their second collegiate franchise. The notice-us name, from a fan contest, set the tone for the venture: Savannah Bananas became a trending topic on Twitter after it was revealed as the winning entry.

“With the Bananas, we just kept pushing — or, as Walt Disney would say, ‘plusing’ — the dance experience,” Jesse Cole said. One of the earliest additions was the Banana Nanas, a line-dancing group of women over 65, which offers a tongue-in-cheek twist on the conventional dance team. Later came dancing ushers — who perform to “Yeah” by Usher — and, for Banana Ball games, dancing umpires. (Collegiate games require league-provided officials.)

Dancing first-base coaches have become an especially beloved Bananas tradition. “The field is a stage,” Cole said, “and the first-base coach is on that stage a lot, so that’s who I want dancing.” The original dancing first-base coach would give signs to the players between dances. Now the role is almost pure performance: It’s currently filled by **Maceo Harrison**, 27, a charismatic hip-hop dancer and teacher who’s never played baseball. Harrison, who also choreographs most of the players’ dances, is becoming a TikTok star in his own right for his impressive acrobatics and smooth grooves on the sidelines.

The star of the viral “Waltz of the Flowers” clip, however, is **Zack Frongillo**, 25, the Bananas’ director of entertainment and Harrison’s occasional substitute. A former baseball player with a B.F.A. in dance from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Frongillo brings a dancer’s perspective to Bananaland shenanigans, scripting out the entertainment components of each game and supervising the cast of performers.

Videos of Frongillo’s performances have earned millions of views on TikTok and Twitter. “It was cool to watch the brand find this new group of people, because the TikTok algorithm isn’t usually serving baseball videos to ballet dancers,” he said in an interview. After seeing one of the clips, the director of Savannah Ballet Theater reached out to Frongillo, asking if he would be willing to replace a dancer in a coming production. Frongillo has now appeared as a guest artist with the company several times.

Social media has become a crucial marketing tool for the Bananas, helping make them the rare collegiate team with a national fan base. And dance has been important to their success on TikTok in particular, where the team posts new content almost daily.

“We try out everything, and I mean everything, on TikTok, but the videos that get hundreds of thousands or millions of views, they’re all dancing,” Cole said. Frongillo and Cole have started to design dance content that will play as well online as it does on the field — like having players attempt a TikTok dance challenge in the middle of an at-bat, which now happens during the third inning of every Banana Ball game.

As the Bananas’ antics have attracted more attention, the team has started to draw players who are excited about doing choreography on the field. Frongillo said he’s had emails from prospective Bananas advertising their willingness to dance. “At this point, the guys coming in know when they get into Bananaland, everything gets a little weird,” Harrison said. “They’re ready for it.”

Getting weird hasn't hurt the Bananas' game. Curtis Sproul, an assistant professor of management at Georgia Southern University, studied the Bananas over multiple seasons to see how their approach might affect player performance. His data revealed that Bananas players were the only ones in the Coastal Plain League to show a demonstrable improvement in their average on-base percentage and slugging percentage each year.

Kyle Luigs, 24, who pitched for the Bananas as a college student and now plays for its professional division, said the team's emphasis on fun helps him cope with the demands of a game that can be intensely psychological. "I always threw way better during my summers down here than I did during the school year," he said. "If I'm more focused on not screwing up my dance routine than I am on not giving up three home runs, I end up pitching better."

You probably won't see a dancing first-base coach in a big-league ballpark anytime soon. But Major League Baseball officials are aware that many fans want more excitement. The average major-league game now lasts well over three hours, with rising strikeout rates and frequent pitching changes slowing the pace of play. To speed and stimulate action on the field, the organization has begun implementing experimental rule changes — from pitch clocks to automated ball-strike systems (a.k.a. robot umpires) — in its minor and independent leagues.

"I think putting the fans first is something we and every league try to do," said **Morgan Sword**, executive vice president of baseball operations at Major League Baseball. "But we are obviously also putting on a competition of the very best athletes on the face of the earth. So we try where we can to balance entertainment and competition."

The league's rule changes have irritated some baseball purists, including Alva Noë, author of the book "Infinite Baseball" and a professor of philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley. Noë — who was philosopher in residence for the choreographer William Forsythe's former company — argues that the sport's seemingly tedious moments are often full of quiet drama. "In baseball, so much detail and nuance and intelligence can be embedded in what looks like a glacier," he said. "I think it's very similar to dance in that way."

Noë doesn't dislike the Bananas. "I can see why there's a desire to have the experience be more lively," he said. "I guess the question is, can you do the dancing on the sidelines, just have a riot of a good time, and then also really see the baseball?"

Cole is largely unconcerned with baseball traditionalists' opinions. "I've heard it all — that the Bananas are a joke, that we're ruining the sport," Cole said. "I think it's important to know who you're for and who you're not for. Do I think we've converted some purists? One hundred percent. But we're *for* the folks who just want to have fun."

For them, the Bananas are planning even more dancing. Frongillo hopes to mount a "Dancing With the Stars"-style competition this summer, pairing players with professional dancers from Savannah Ballet Theater and other local ensembles. He's also put together a children's dance team to complement the Banana Nanas.

Cole is considering adding a halftime show. “I know, it’s baseball, so that doesn’t make any sense!” he said. “But we could have everybody dancing — the whole team, all the characters. Can we get the entire stadium to dance?”

THIS WEEK’S TRIVIA CHALLENGE ANSWER

Most wins in MLB by decade...

Max Scherzer	161	2010-2019
Andy Pettitte	148	2000-2009
Greg Maddux	167	1990-1999
Jack Morris	162	1980-1989
Jim Palmer	186	1970-1979
Juan Marichal	191	1960-1969
Warren Spahn	202	1950-1959
Hal Newhouser	170	1940-1949
Lefty Grove	199	1930-1939

HOUSEKEEPING

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