

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

8.21.2022

Good morning baseball fans. As Yankee fans can attest, slumps may be part of the game but they can impact your mood and not in a good way. Pushing through that, my quick coffee this morning is at a Marriott Courtyard in NJ on the fun moving adventure from NC Maine. Grab yours and enjoy.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE

50 HR seasons—41 times by 27 players. Some obvious like **Barry Bonds, Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa**. Some famous like **Roger Maris, Babe Ruth, Mickey Mantle, Willie Mays**. Some old guys like **Ralph Kiner, Jimmie Foxx, Hank Greenberg**. Some you may not have guessed like **Brady Anderson, Andruw Jones, George Foster, Albert Belle, Jose Bautista, Chris Davis and Luis Gonzalez**.

All three active MLB players who have hit 50 HRs in a season currently play in NY. Name them.

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

The San Diego Padres have replaced a planned **Fernando Tatis Jr.** bobblehead night with a **Juan Soto** T-shirt giveaway after the All-Star shortstop was banned 80 games following a positive test for a performance-enhancing drug, the team announced.

Juan Soto is on pace to finish this season with at least 500 walks over his five years in the majors. That would be more than **Cecil Cooper, Dave Henderson, Kevin Mitchell, Kirby Puckett**, and **Matt Williams** had for their entire careers, among many others. At 23, Soto has walked in 19.08 percent of his plate appearances. **Ted Williams** had a walk rate of 18.92 through his age-23 season

The Dodgers' longest winning streak since 1976 ended at the hands of the Royals in a 4-0 loss on Sunday afternoon at Kauffman Stadium.

Los Angeles (79-34) fell one win shy of tying the franchise record of 13, which had previously been done twice (1962 and '65). It's been a remarkable stretch for the Dodgers, who suffered just their sixth loss since June 29.

The Dodgers are 46 games over .500, on a 37-wins-in-45-games streak. They have an 18-game lead in the division. They're on pace to win a team-record 113 games. They have scored the most runs in the Majors. They have allowed the fewest runs in the Majors. The Dodgers have to go 37-10 in order to break the all-time regular-season record of 116 wins set by the 2001 Mariners.

When the Dodgers win the NL West this year, and they will, it will be their ninth division title in the last 10 seasons. The one time they didn't, the one massive failure in the last decade ... was last year, when they won a franchise-record-tying 106 games and avenged their second-place finish in a playoff defeat of the Giants anyway.

Since the start of this run in 2013, they've won 70 more games than the second-place Yankees, and *266 more* than the last-place Marlins. (Yes, you can read that as saying if Miami had a full extra season in that time, and they went 162-0 in that season, they'd still have 100 fewer wins.)

The Dodgers also have a real shot at leading the NL in runs scored and allowing fewest runs scored for the fifth year in a row. Five straight would be a record, breaking a tie with the 1936-39 Yankees.

The Dodgers team ERA is 2.73 compared with the league team average of 3.99. That is the second largest gap since 1945 behind only Cleveland's 2017 club.

Framber Valdez's streak of quality starts keeps rolling. On Wednesday he held the White Sox to two runs and seven hits in seven innings to lead the Astros to a 3-2 win at Guaranteed Rate Field. In the process, Valdez tied **Mike Scott's** club record from 1986 with his 20th consecutive quality start, which is defined as throwing at least six innings and giving up three earned runs or fewer.

He'll go for the club record of 21 next week in Houston.

Valdez is the fifth pitcher since 2000 to record 20 consecutive quality starts. **Jacob deGrom** recorded 26 from 2018-19 for the Mets, **Jake Arrieta** had 24 from 2015-16 for the Cubs, **Chris Carpenter** had 22 in 2005 for the Cardinals and **Johan Santana** had 21 in 2004 for the Twins.

Valdez (12-4) is 11-3 with a 2.53 ERA and 1.10 WHIP during the streak of 20 consecutive quality starts, which are the most in the Major Leagues this year. He's thrown two complete games in the streak and pitched at least seven innings nine times, including Wednesday's 100-pitch effort.

MLB's combined WAR leaderboard (per FanGraphs)

Through Saturday

1. Aaron Judge (NYY): 7.5 WAR
2. **Nolan Arenado (STL): 6.0 WAR**
3. Shohei Ohtani (LAA): 5.9 WAR
4. **Paul Goldschmidt (STL): 5.6 WAR**
5. Manny Machado (SD): 5.2 WAR

Collectively, Cardinals players (position players and pitchers combined) have produced 29.7 fWAR this season, which means that Goldy and Arenado have combined for 39.1% of St. Louis' WAR -- the largest share generated by a team's top two players among the 16 clubs with a record of .500 or better.

Cardinals: Nolan Arenado (6.0 WAR), Paul Goldschmidt (5.6 WAR)

Total team WAR: 29.7

WAR share by top two players: 39.1%

Still going strong at the age of 34, Goldschmidt entered Sunday as the NL leader in average (.330), slugging (.615) and OPS (1.028), producing 28 homers and 89 RBIs over 107 games.

The NL MVP Award has proven elusive for the first baseman, who finished second in the voting twice and third once, but it appears to be his award to lose at this point, even with Arenado putting together a strong case of his own. After posting an OPS over 1.000 in two of the first four calendar months this season, Arenado has taken it up a notch in August, recording a .381/.447/.905 slash with six homers through 11 games.

Joey Votto is already one of the best baseball players to ever come out of Canada. On Sunday as his team played the Cubs, the Reds first baseman set a new benchmark for Canadians in the game.

During Cincinnati's 8-5 win, the Etobicoke, Ontario native played in his 1,989th career game, passing Hall of Famer **Larry Walker** for most Major League games for a player born in Canada.

Behind Votto and Walker in the rankings are **Matt Stairs** (1,895), **Russell Martin** (1,693) and **Justin Morneau** (1,545).

Votto, 38, noted earlier this week that reaching his milestone 2,000th Major League game played would have "real meaning" to him. He currently ranks fifth all time in Reds franchise

history in games played behind **Pete Rose** (2,722), **Dave Concepcion** (2,488), **Barry Larkin** (2,180) and **Johnny Bench** (2,158).

Over his career, Votto is a six-time All-Star, the 2010 National League MVP and a 2011 NL Gold Glove Award winner. Votto is the only baseball player to twice win the Lou Marsh Trophy, presented annually to Canada's top athlete. He's also won the Tip O'Neill Award seven times as the best Canadian baseball player, and he's one of three players -- including Walker -- to win the MVP and Tip O'Neill Awards in the same year.

As of this past Monday the Mets are 9-1 over their last 10 games and their starting rotation is **simply unfair**. **Max Scherzer** (1.36), **Jacob deGrom** (1.62), **Carlos Carrasco** (1.69) and **Chris Bassitt** (1.79) all boast ERAs under two since July 1.

Pete Alonso picked up his 100th RBI of the season in the first inning, then added his 30th homer of the year -- and 101st and 102nd RBIs -- in the third to lead the Mets to a 7-2 series-opening victory over the Phillies. By reaching the 100-RBI mark in New York's 120th game of the season, Alonso became the fastest player to hit the milestone in franchise history. The previous record was 122 games, shared by **Carlos Beltrán** (2006), **Mike Piazza** (2000) and **Robin Ventura** (1999).

Sandy Alcantara, Miami Marlins right-hander. 11-5 with 1.92 era. 152 K's in 1972 innings and WHIP less than 1.

2.52: Alcantara's ERA vs. clubs in playoff position

In 15 of his 24 starts, Alcantara has faced a team that currently holds a playoff spot. He has recorded a quality start in 10 of those 15.

14.25: Pitches per inning for Alcantara entering Monday -- second-least in MLB

Clocked at 99.5 in the 7th inning of start against padres--Alcantara scattered four hits -- all singles -- walked two and struck out seven. He didn't allow a runner to reach third.

Albert Pujols looked like a 42-year-old in his first 43 games: .189 BA, .601 OPS, 4 HRs

But his last 23 have been vintage Albert: .365 BA, 1.145 OPS, 6 HRs

Two of those HRs, Nos. 688 and 689, came two days ago. Will he get to 700? he has 48 games to get 11, or one every 4.3 games.

9 are against the Pirates (4.63 ERA), 8 are against the Cubs (4.27 ERA) and 8 are against the Reds (5.03 ERA). In all, STL has 32 games against bottom-eight pitching staffs.

Pujols and his pursuit of 700 home runs has an outside chance. Back in June, when Albert Pujols hit .158 and went homer-less for the month, it looked as if his return to St. Louis for a final season might end badly. However, things dramatically changed in July (.320 batting average, .944 OPS, three home runs) and August (.381 batting average, 1.315 OPS, three home runs), and now, after hitting two home runs on Sunday, a run at 700 home runs is a possibility again. Pujols, who is hitting .354 with six home runs and a 1.054 OPS against lefties, can certainly get there if he sees enough southpaws down the stretch. Even if Pujols can't get to 700 home runs, passing Alex Rodriguez at 696 to get to fourth all-time would be a remarkable accomplishment.

With four home runs in the last eight days he is homering every 17.3 at bats, but has only played in 68 of 117 games. That pace gets him to **ARod** but not 700.

Then on Thursday against the Rockies--to put into perspective the tear Pujols has been on of late while nearing the end of his 22nd and final MLB season, the Cardinals' slugger has either tied or passed the likes of baseball immortals **Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, Hank Aaron and Willie Mays** in the record books in recent days with his jaw-dropping exploits. In the middle of tying an accomplishment set previously by Ruth, Aaron and one other player, Pujols also notched a career first on Thursday. With the clout, which was the 690th home run of his career, Pujols now has 16 career grand slams, tying him for 10th all-time with Ruth, Aaron and **Dave Kingman**. While the 374-foot shot, which left his bat at 105.1 mph, was also Pujols' sixth pinch-hit homer, it was the first time in his illustrious career he had a pinch-hit grand slam. Pujols' 16th grand slam trails all-time leader ARod who hit 25.

Since the MLB All-Star Game -- when Pujols was an honorary pick for the Midsummer Classic -- the slugger has hit .415 with a 1.321 OPS, five homers and 15 RBIs.

Sunday night's 3-0 victory against the Yankees took 2 hours and 15 minutes. It was the shortest nine-inning game the Red Sox have played since Aug. 3, 2018. That was a 4-1 victory against the Yankees at Fenway Park.

Rick Porcello pitched a complete-game one-hitter and struck out nine without a walk. His only blemish was a solo homer by **Miguel Andújar** in the fourth inning.

The last time the Sox were under 2:15 for a nine-inning game was July 23, 2017, at Anaheim in a 3-2 loss. That game was played in 2:13.

Rhys Hoskins homered twice and drove in five runs Tuesday as the visiting Phillies posted the 10,000th win in franchise history, beating the Reds, 11-4.

Philadelphia became the last of the original eight National League franchises to reach the mark. At 10,000-11,163, the Phillies are the only team among them with a losing record. Of course, the Phils became the first team in baseball history to lose 10,000 games.

They did that in July 2007.

The Phillies snapped a 13-year playoff drought in '07. Maybe 10,000 can be the Phils' magic number again in 2022. They are trying to make the postseason for the first time since 2011.

The New York Yankees are the lone American League team to top the five-figure win total.

Afterward, they toasted manager **Rob Thomson's** 59th birthday.

August 22, 1961 **Roger Maris** homers off **Ken McBride** of the Angels to become the first Yankee to hit 50 HRs before September 1.

Paul O'Neil (his 21 was retired by the Yankees this week) is the only player in MLB history to be on the field for 3 perfect games. **Tom Browning's** (Sept. 16, 1988, for Reds vs. Dodgers), **David Wells'** (May 17, 1998, for Yankees vs. Twins) and **David Cone's** (July 18, 1999, for Yankees vs. Expos).

Most HRs for Boston Red Sox through age 25

Tony Conigliaro – 16-

Rafael Devers – 136

Jim Rice – 133

Ted Williams – 127

Three players have led their league in HRs and hits in the same season. A tip of the cap if you got:

Carl Yastrzemski 44 HRs, 189 hits in 1967

Jim Rice 46 HRs, 213 hits in 1978

Dante Bichette 40 HRs, 197 hits for the 1995 Rockies

Most consecutive batters without giving up a hit

Dennis Eckersley 71 for the 1977 Indians

Dwight Gooden 57 for the 1996 Yankees

Ron Marinaccio 56 for 2022 Yankees

Mike Scott 55 for the 1986 Astros.

Dodgers broadcaster David Vassegh took a spin down the Brewers' home run slide Wednesday at American Family Field and was greeted by a rough landing. He slammed — hard! — into a padded wall and appeared to hurt himself. The clip later aired on TV, where he then appeared with a cast on his arm. Vassegh still did his postgame interviews. A pro's pro.

On the second pitch of his major-league career, **Brett Baty** flashed exactly why he took the fast-track to the Mets.

Baty turned on a hanging curveball from **Jake Odorizzi** and ripped it 377 feet over the right-field wall for the first home run of his major league career in his very first at-bat. He became the fifth Mets player in franchise history to homer in his first major-league at-bat and first since **Mike Jacobs** on Aug. 21, 2005.

The 22-year-old third baseman, who is the Mets' No. 2 prospect, was called up to Class AAA Syracuse on Aug. 8, but he only played six games at that level.

The only player in Astros history to have a 30-30 season is Hall of Famer **Jeff Bagwell**, who did it twice. He had 43 homers and 31 steals in 1997 and 42 homers and 30 steals in '99.

I didn't do the digging but a great stat – **Don Drysdale** was known as a fierce competitor who pitched inside. In 50 games Drysdale gave up a HR and hit a batter. In 6 of those games the batter he hit was the guy who homered.

Also interesting, though not surprising-- the Red Sox are 0-12 when they issue six or more walks.

The Red Sox are on a pace to hit 152 home runs. That would be their fewest in a full season since 2014, when they had 123. They hit 219 last year.

The 30 percent decrease isn't hard to explain. A big chunk of that was trading **Hunter Renfroe**, who hit 31 homers last season, for **Jackie Bradley Jr.** and two prospects.

Bradley hit three homers before he was released. Renfroe has 21 for Milwaukee.

In a 5-3 victory at Pittsburgh the Red Sox did not have a hit against the Pirates bullpen over seven innings.

According to the Elias Sports Bureau, it was the first time since 1893 the Pirates had a game where the bullpen didn't allow a hit while pitching seven or more innings.

Texas Rangers head of operations **Jon Daniels** was fired this week after 17 seasons. Only **Billy Beane** (Athletics) and **Brian Cashman** (Yankees) had longer tenures running their teams, both with 24 seasons.

Red Sox 3B **Rafael Devers**'s recently congratulated Atlanta third baseman **Austin Riley** on his 10-year, \$212 million deal that Riley signed to remain in Atlanta through 2032. And for the Red Sox and Devers, it's not hard to imagine the relevance of Riley's contract when the two sides resume negotiations on a potential extension this winter.

The two players have performed at strikingly similar, elite levels over the last two seasons:

Riley: 25 years old, 269 games, .301/.364/.557, 63 HR, 181 RBI, 144 OPS+

Devers: 25 years old, 250 games, .291/.358/.557, 62 HR, 173 RBI, 143 OPS+

This year, when the Sox talked with Devers about a long-term deal, they identified the eight-year, \$168 million deal that first baseman **Matt Olson** had just signed with Atlanta one day after being traded by Oakland. The offensive performances of Devers and Olson — both of whom were on track for free-agent eligibility after the 2023 season — over the three prior seasons offered some rationale for that approach:

Olson: 28 years old, 343 games, .257/.354/.522, 89 HR, 244 RBI, 139 OPS+

Devers: 25 years old, 369 games, .291/.350/.537, 81 HR, 271 RBI, 129 OPS+

At age 23 Devers is three years younger than Olson. Riley is 25.

3 Guardians strike out, then 6 score ... in the same inning

It's been said all season: This Guardians roster never gives up. Just how true is that statement? Well, somehow the offense turned three strikeouts into six runs.

The air seemed to be quickly escaping Cleveland's balloon. With a Twins victory earlier in the day, the Guardians knew they had to win on Wednesday night to preserve their one-game lead in the AL Central. But after back-to-back strikeouts in the eighth, Cleveland was running out of time to make a move. That's when the third strikeout of the frame led to a six-run inning that lifted the Guardians to an 8-4 win over the Tigers at Progressive Field.

Wednesday marked the first time in at least the Expansion Era (since 1961) that a team scored six or more runs in an inning *after* striking out three times, according to the Elias Sports Bureau.

How?

Owen Miller was fanned to start the inning. **Andrés Giménez** struck out on a foul tip. Then, **Luke Maile** went down swinging, but he realized the ball had escaped the catcher and trickled to the backstop, allowing him to reach first base.

Three strikeouts, but only two outs.

The Guardians made the Tigers pay for this mistake. What followed was a single, a ground-rule double, another single, consecutive doubles, an intentional walk and one final single by Miller, who started the frame with a strikeout, to give Cleveland six runs before the third out was made (again).

This is the benefit of the identity this young club has started to create. The scrappy, never-say-die, contact-first approach forces these types of scenarios. And when the Guardians boast seven hitters on their roster who are all under the AL average for whiff rate (20.7% average entering Wednesday), they make it difficult for them to be retired.

The Guardians have had 14 players make their MLB debut this season. Excluding the first year of the franchise in 1901, the most debuts in a single season in club history is 17, which was set in 1912 and done again in 1914. The last time the club had 14 debuts was 2002. But outside that '02 season, the franchise had never had more than 11 rookies reach the big leagues in a single season since 1928.

If you think that's a lot of promotions, look at the A's Going through the first year of a rebuild, the A's have had a carousel of players come and go from Triple-A Las Vegas to Oakland as they evaluate who might fit into their future plans. Recent callups **Shea Langeliers** and **David MacKinnon** will become the 53rd and 54th players to appear in a game for the A's this season, which ties the Oakland record set in 2007 and matched in '17. With nearly two months left, they'll have a shot at the franchise record of 56 (1915) and have already set an Oakland record with 26 rookies used.

The Red Sox have six more rivalry clashes against the Yankees this season, giving **Rafael Devers** a legit chance to pass **Ted Williams** with an impressive feat. Williams, who made his MLB debut at 20 years and 233 days old, bashed 20 homers against the Yankees before his 26th birthday. Devers currently sits at 19 against the Bronx Bombers, capped by his 433-foot shot on Sunday. Devers made his MLB debut at 20 years and 274 days. With two more homers in those remaining six games against Boston's top rival, Devers will top Williams.

Miguel Cabrera, already a member of the 3,000-hit and 500-homer clubs, continues to climb the all-time rankings. He cracked the top 25 in career hits on Elias Sports Bureau's official list when he passed **Craig Biggio** in July. His chronic right knee issues will likely deny him the regular playing time to make a huge climb further up the list by season's end, but he has a chance to climb at least a couple more spots and pass **Cap Anson** (3,081 hits, according to Elias) and **Ichiro Suzuki** (3,089 MLB hits).

Angels superstar **Mike Trout** is nearing a return from his back/ribcage injury and is just two runs shy of tying **Garret Anderson** for the franchise record for career runs scored. Trout, a three-time AL MVP and 10-time All-Star, has scored 1,022 runs in 12 seasons with the Angels, while Anderson scored 1,024 runs in his 15 years with the Halos. Trout already holds the club record for homers with 334 and is third on the club's all-time RBI list with 867. Anderson holds the club record with 1,292 RBIs, with **Tim Salmon** ranking second with 1,016.

Atlanta Braves third baseman **Austin Riley** is on pace to record 90 extra-base hits, a mark that has been reached just 20 times by any Major Leaguer going back to 2000. The only Braves player to ever reach this mark during the modern era was **Hank Aaron**, who tallied 92 extra-base knocks in 1959.

Pete Alonso's chase of the Mets franchise RBI record--through 117 games, Alonso has 99 RBIs, putting him on pace for a Mets-record 135. That would break the franchise record of 124 shared by **Mike Piazza** (1999) and **David Wright** (2008). **Francisco Lindor** has an outside chance to finish second on the Mets' all-time list behind his teammate, assuming Alonso indeed breaks the record. He's already the team's single-season home run king, with 53 in 2019.

Juan Soto is all over the age-based career leaderboards. Dingers are the most fun, so let's go there. With 120 home runs entering the week, Soto cracked the top 10 for homers before age 24 (tied with **Andruw Jones**). He possibly could jump as high as No. 3 if he hits 12 more down the stretch to equal **Ken Griffey Jr.** with 132. No. 1 **Eddie Mathews** (153) and No. 2 **Mel Ott** (152) are out of reach, even for Soto.

There were two no-hitters thrown in the Dominican Summer League on Thursday. They just so happened to be in the same game.

Cubs Red defeated Pirates affiliate PIT Black, 2-0, in a seven-inning contest that featured zero hits for either side. Six pitchers combined on the feat: **Juan Bello, Wilber Rodriguez and Yohan Crispin** for the Cubs; **Jonathan Salazar, Dioris Valdez and Hader Blanco** for the Bucs.

Cubs Red's only two runs of the game each came in the bottom of the first inning and were on a pair of errors. Despite the zero hits allowed the rest of the way, Pirates pitchers remained as wild as their fielders, issuing seven walks over six innings on their side of the no-hitter. They did fan nine batters along the way too.

By comparison, Cubs hurlers were much more in control, issuing only four free passes in their seven frames.

The DSL is filled with young, inexperienced international players who are just getting their pro careers going, often leading to errors and bouts of pitching wildness. Leaguewide fielding percentage entering Thursday was .952, while pitchers averaged 5.2 BB/9 -- the highest walk rate at any affiliated circuit.

Thursday's oddity represented the sixth and seventh no-hitters of the 2022 Dominican Summer League season. There have been 36 no-hitters of at least seven-innings length across all affiliated Minor Leagues in 2022.

Giants righthander **Jakob Junis** is the only pitcher with at least 10 starts this season not to allow a run in the first inning.

Milwaukee pitchers have 11 games with at least 15 strikeouts. The Mets are second with eight. The Red Sox have three.

BASEBALL HAS NEVER SEEN ANYONE LIKE PIRATES SHORTSTOP ONEIL CRUZ

Peter Abraham, Boston Globe

He's as tall as NBA star **Luka Doncic**. He sprints as fast as NFL playmaker **Tyreek Hill** and throws as hard as Yankees ace **Gerrit Cole**.

Pirates rookie shortstop **Oneil Cruz** is a one-of-a-kind player. At 6 feet 7 inches, the 23-year-old is the tallest player ever to start a game at shortstop, by 2 inches.

Hall of Famer **Cal Ripken Jr.**, who set the standard as a "big shortstop," was 6-4. Remember the debate about whether **Xander Bogaerts** was too tall to play shortstop? Cruz has him by 5 inches.

Cruz also has hit a ball 118.4 miles per hour this season. Only **Shohei Ohtani** and **Giancarlo Stanton** have had higher exit velocities.

One of Cruz's throws across the infield earlier this season was measured at 97.8 m.p.h., the fastest recorded by Statcast since it started in 2015.

His father, **Rafael**, was a minor league second baseman and shortstop in the Rangers organization from 1985-87. Oneil was determined to follow the same path and be a position player.

Even his name was a homage to baseball. Rafael Cruz named his first son after **Paul O'Neill**, his favorite player.

The Dodgers signed Cruz in 2015 and traded him to the Pirates two years later in a deadline deal for lefthanded reliever **Tony Watson**. Cruz quickly became one of the organization's shining lights.

Like so many other prospects, Cruz didn't have a 2020 season because of the pandemic, although he played 14 games in the Dominican winter league. He started the 2021 season in Double A and finished it with two games in the majors.

He was 3 for 9 with a home run and three RBIs. There were 55 games in Triple A this season before Cruz came back up again in June.

The rebuilding Pirates are living with his learning on the job. Cruz has hit .197 with a .635 OPS and is overmatched by lefthanders (13 of 64 with 36 strikeouts).

he is from a baseball family. Both of his brothers have played professionally. **Homer** was a pitcher in the White Sox organization before being released earlier this month. **Rafael Jr.** is a 6-1 shortstop with the Twins who was promoted to the Florida Complex League in July.

NEWSLETTERS

For a while now I have recommended the subscription newsletters from Joe Posnanski and Joe Sheehan. Insightful and enjoyable reads. Here are some more recent highlights:

JOE POSNANSKI

As of right now, the oddsmakers have St. Louis' **Paul Goldschmidt** as the heavy favorite to win most valuable player — and why not? He's leading the National League in batting, slugging and

OPS. He's having his best season in a spectacular career, and if he finishes this off and wins the MVP, I'd say the Hall of Fame watch is ON.

Yes, Goldschmidt would still need a couple more great seasons. and he turns 35 in September. But if he stays healthy and consistent, he'll finish the season with something like 58 or 59 bWAR. He's basically been playing at six-plus WAR level the last three seasons (counting the COVID year), and if he can just stay there for a little longer, 70 WAR is going to happen and 75-80 WAR is not out of the question.

That's first-ballot Hall of Fame.

Thing is, I'm not even sure Paul Goldschmidt is the most valuable (or best) player on his own team. **Nolan Arenado** is having another sensational year (assuming health, he's DEFINITELY going to the Hall of Fame). At last check, he's hitting .297/.364/.559 and playing some of the best defense of his career — this from a guy who has won the Gold Glove every single one of his nine years in the big leagues.

Both versions of WAR at the moment have Arenado worth SLIGHTLY more than Goldschmidt. I wouldn't put a lot of stock into the decimal-point difference, but it's clearly not easy to choose between them.

There are others who are currently behind Goldschmidt and Arenado, but with a hot six weeks — I could see Atlanta's **Austin Riley**, San Diego's **Manny Machado** or, obviously, Los Angeles' **Mookie Betts** make a run at the MVP.

Juan Soto is otherworldly. Since joining the Padres on Aug. 3, he's hitting .350/.480/.550 and you get the sense he's only just getting used to his new digs. He absolutely could put up a scorching six weeks and place himself squarely in the middle of the MVP conversation.

Juan Marichal. Four times he led the league in fewest walks per nine innings. Nine times he finished top five in strikeout-to-walk ratio. He did this despite throwing what today we would consider a suicidal number of innings. Marichal threw 295 or more innings in a season five times. Only **Robin Roberts**, **Jim Palmer** and **Gaylord Perry** did it more in the live ball era.

If you look closely at Marichal's career, he had a remarkable talent for being second best. This, undoubtedly, has influenced the way people remember him.

— In 1963, Marichal went 25-8 with a 2.41 ERA — he led the National League in wins and innings. But that was **Sandy Koufax's** first legendary season, and so Marichal was overshadowed and finished 11th in the MVP voting.

— In 1964, Marichal went 21-8 with a 2.48 ERA and led the league in complete games. But the young **Bob Gibson** was just about as good, and Gibson's year was in the spotlight because his Cardinals pulled off one of the most miraculous comebacks in baseball history.

— In 1965, Marichal went 22-13, led the league in ERA+ and shutouts — TEN shutouts. I realize this isn't apples to apples, but Juan Marichal had more shutouts in 1965 than Justin Verlander has had in his entire career. He had TWICE as many shutouts as **Max Scherzer** has had in his entire career. But he didn't win the Cy Young anyway because Koufax was again breathtaking, and that was the year of the frightening Marichal-**Johnny Roseboro** incident, which we will get into in a minute.

— In 1966, Marichal went 25-6, led the league in WHIP, hits per nine and had a remarkable 6.17 strikeout-to-walk ratio, the best in baseball since **Walter Johnson** more than 50 years earlier. But, again, there was Koufax at his Koufaxian best.

— In 1968, Marichal went 26-9 with a 2.43 ERA, led the league in complete games, innings and strikeout-to walk ratio. But nobody even noticed because that was the year of the pitcher and, more specifically, the year of Bob Gibson and his 1.12 ERA.

— In 1969, Marichal led the league in ERA and shutouts and WHIP, but 1969 was the year of miracles, and the Cy Young went to the miraculous **Tom Seaver**.

JOE SHEEHAN

This is why you write the check.

The Mets flew into Atlanta Monday off a weekend dusting of the Phillies that capped a 9-2 homestand in which they went 6-2 against their NL East rivals. Their division lead, squeezed down to just half a game on July 23, was back up to 5 1/2 games over the Braves and 11 1/2 over the Phillies.

On Monday, **Carlos Carrasco** allowed three runs in the second inning and didn't come out for the third, having strained his left oblique. He'll miss a month. The Mets' bullpen collapsed in his absence in a 13-1 loss.

On Tuesday, **Taijuan Walker** threw two shutout innings but, like Carrasco, he never showed for the third. He tweaked his back running to cover first on the final play of the second inning and may miss one start. **R.J. Alvarez**, making his first MLB appearance since 2015, allowed two home runs in the next two innings and took the loss in a 5-0 Mets defeat.

The Mets' lead was down to 3 1/2 games with two more to play in Atlanta. Mets fans, just going by our Slack, were getting nervous. The disaster scenario, a sweep that would cut the lead to 1 1/2 games, was in play.

On Wednesday, **Max Scherzer** stopped it right there. Backed by three early home runs -- including **Brett Baty** hitting one in his first MLB at-bat -- Scherzer shut down the Braves over 6 1/3 innings. In an era when teams are extremely conservative about how they use pitchers after a delay, the Mets sent their co-ace to the mound after rain stopped the game for 34 minutes in the bottom of the third. Scherzer wasn't sharp out of the break, walking the first man he faced and eventually allowing a run, but he pitched into the seventh on the heels of the Mets getting consecutive two-inning starts, and he held the Braves to one run while he was in the game. (**Adam Ottavino** allowed three inherited runners to score.) On a night he didn't have great control -- throwing 40 balls on 91 pitches, including a pair of four-pitch walks -- Scherzer nevertheless carried the load of an ace.

Scherzer missed more than two months with a strained oblique, so his counting stats are all down. When he's pitched, though, he's been great: a 2.15 ERA over more than 6 1/3 innings per start. He's a bit shy of qualifying for league leaderboards, but if we drop to a 100-inning minimum, Scherzer is fifth in ERA, sixth in FIP, tenth in walk rate, third in K-BB%, 11th in fWAR. He's been worth every penny of the \$43 million he's being paid this season. On a night like last night, pitching behind two guys who never saw the third inning, coming off two losses, going on the road against the team chasing you, that's when you need the best. Max Scherzer was the best available pitcher last winter, and the Mets went and got him.

It's incredibly hard to employ the best players in baseball, especially in an era when so many never even reach free agency. Nine players have signed \$300 million contracts; just four of them were free agents. Of the 25 \$200 million deals, 14 have been signed by free agents, though in a few of those cases the players' free agency was largely a fig leaf -- they returned

quickly to their old team. Even if you want to spend the money, \$200 million players are available less than once a year.

Let's run at this from a different direction. Over the last ten years, back to 2013, 39 players have been worth at least 30 bWAR. That's a pretty good listing of the best players of our era. Of those 39, 22 have been free agents. Again, some of those 22 weren't really available, and others were free agents long after their stay atop our game. At your most generous, though, you could argue that two of the best players in baseball are available, just for money, every year.

So much of the conversation around baseball player salaries, dating back 50 years now, has deemed them to be a cost to be borne. They're not. They're investments, investments in wins. Being able to employ Max Scherzer isn't a burden, it's a benefit. Yes, you have to pay him well -- good, proven baseball players cost money -- and in exchange, you don't start **David Peterson** or **Jordan Yamamoto** on a wet Wednesday night in Atlanta with your season on the line.

There's risk. The Cubs recently made it clear that their relationship with **Jason Heyward** is ending. Heyward, in six-plus seasons in Chicago, never met expectations. On the other hand, he was in uniform on a November night in Cleveland and is one of the few people on the planet who have ever won a World Series as a Chicago Cub. **David Price** is playing out the last year of a seven-year contract, a period during which he never received a single Cy Young vote. The Red Sox, however, don't win the 2018 World Series without his excellent pitching that October.

I don't know what the first thing I ever wrote as a professional was, but it may very well have been "In free agency, buy the very best or bargain hunt. The middle is death." This is the lesson too many owners, thinking of players as expenses to be minimized, have failed to learn. It's the second tier that gets you, the players you settle for *instead of* buying the best. That's where all the disasters are.

The Mets did plenty of that in Steve Cohen's first couple of years. But when they had a chance to trade for a superstar in Francisco Lindor, they did it. When they had a chance to buy one of the few true #1s in the game in Scherzer, they did it.

It's incredibly hard to employ the best players in baseball. When you have a chance to do so, you have to jump at it. The Mets have a one-game winning streak and a 4 1/2-game lead in the NL East today because they did.

MLB teams are now slugging .397 in August. That's the lowest slugging in any month since April, and if it holds, the lowest slugging August since 2014. There have been just three seasons in the last 30 in which MLB teams slugged under .400 in August: 2022, 2014 (.381) and 2013 (.395).

It's the baseball, of course. Dr. Meredith Wills pointed out that this year's baseballs aren't flying better in the summer months the way they usually do. Whether that's the construction of the new balls, the universal humidors, or the interplay between the two, MLB has created a game in which the ball doesn't go anywhere.

The engine of baseball begins to break down under a .260 batting average and a .330 OBP. MLB has gotten away with offensive levels below those marks for some time because of the ability modern hitters have to hit for power. Taking that power away has cut off the last path for offenses to produce runs. We know, looking at historical trends, that when offense declines, fans turn away from the game. A league that hits .243/.312/.396 -- the 2022 line -- just doesn't have enough happening to be entertaining. Even with the elimination of pitcher batting, this will be the fifth consecutive season in which there are more strikeouts than hits.

MLB is betting a lot on the pitch clock and a shift ban, both widely expected to be put in place for 2023. These will be popular moves, sure to gain offseason praise, but it's not at all clear that either will change gameplay significantly. MLB would do well to fix the baseball at the same time.

There's a tension in ballpark architecture that has played out time and again. A team decides it wants outfield fences to be deep for whatever reason and places them two counties over. That team's hitters play in the park, see their big blasts land in gloves or perhaps for doubles, and complain. The team then moves the fences in. This happened at Comerica Park, at Petco Park, and at Citi Field, just to name three. The history of Yankee Stadium was a history of making Death Valley into Mild Cold Valley.

The Orioles went the other way this year, moving their left field fence back in an explicit effort to help a set of middling young pitchers. A year ago, Orioles pitchers allowed 155 home runs in 81 home games, a .495 SLG, and 6.3 runs per game. This year, a group of mostly the same pitchers and some mediocre talents added to the mix has allowed 49 homers in 54 home games, a .381 SLG, and 3.8 runs per game. You can argue that it's the pitchers, whether development or personnel, but the single biggest reason is that the park was converted from the best homer park in the game to the worst one. Orioles' pitchers have benefited from the change more than their hitters have been hurt by it.

PRECIOUS LEATHER

Major leaguers form deep relationships with their gloves. You can look, you can touch, but don't even think about trying it on.

James Wagner, NYT

LOS ANGELES — When Seattle Mariners third baseman **Eugenio Suárez** misses a ground ball, he shoves his face into his glove and has a few choice words for his leather companion.

"I'll say, 'Come on, come on,'" he recalled recently in Spanish. "'If I don't eat, you don't eat.'"

Yes, Suárez talks to his glove. It doesn't have a name, but he admitted it is like a person to him. "It's there with me and helps me give my best on the field," he said. And as a result, he goes out of his way to make sure his buddy is comfortable.

Suárez, 31, doesn't put it on the ground, preferring to rest it on a bench or rack. In his locker, he said it *always* has its own shelf. In his travel duffel bag, it has a case and its own space. But what if a teammate wants to touch it?

"You can, but use it? No," he said. "A hand inside? I don't like that."

Baseball players are a quirky and superstitious bunch. The Major League Baseball season is arduously long: 162 regular-season games over six months, not including six weeks of spring training and a month of the playoffs if a team reaches the World Series. So players naturally develop routines to add some semblance of order. And when they are successful on the field, habits tend to stick — even if the difference exists only in their heads.

So Suárez, in his ninth major league season, is not unlike many other baseball players who have, we'll say, special relationships with their gloves.

"I care for it as if it were my wife," **Willson Contreras**, an All-Star catcher for the Chicago Cubs, said with a smile. "It's my baby. It's the most precious thing I have in my locker."

Santiago Espinal, an All-Star second baseman for the Toronto Blue Jays, also sees his glove as family: "It's like my son. There are even times I sleep with my glove. When I buy a new glove, I sleep with it." (Technically, he clarified, the glove sleeps on his nightstand.)

As a catcher, it makes sense for Contreras, 30, to have deep feelings about his mitt. But the elements (heat, dryness, humidity) and pitchers' throwing harder than ever (the average four-seam fastball was 93.9 miles per hour this season) quickly wear down and rip Contreras's most essential tool. He does his best to pamper it so it can make it through the season, and then he donates the glove at the end of the year.

“If I could use the glove for more than a year, I would,” he said. “But I do have to change them.”

The same is true for **Yadier Molina**, the St. Louis Cardinals catcher who has won nine Gold Glove Awards throughout his 19-season career and plans to retire after the 2022 campaign. Molina said he cleaned his glove frequently but he still had to introduce a new one each year. His teammate **Paul DeJong**, a shortstop, said he learned how to tend to his 5-year-old glove with a leather spray nearly every day in part by watching Molina do it.

“I have to take care of them because they take care of me,” said Molina, 40.

Some players are so attached to their gloves that they will do anything to keep them in action. **Trea Turner**, the All-Star shortstop of the Los Angeles Dodgers, begrudgingly admitted that this is the first season that his leather pal, which he has been using for at least four seasons, has started to look “old.” He then corrected himself, “It’s actually not that bad.”

(Note: It is fairly bad.)

“I think it’s the West Coast since it’s a little drier,” said Turner, 29, who spent parts of seven seasons with the Washington Nationals before he was traded to the Dodgers during the 2021 season.

“Because on the East Coast,” he continued, “that humidity keeps the moisture in the glove. So I’ve had to take care of the glove more this year, and it’s starting to get little holes in there. I’m trying to find Band-Aids for it. I’m trying to keep it alive as long as I can.”

Turner plans to retire it, though, before it reaches the levels of a former teammate’s **Jordy Mercer**, an infielder who was also on the 2021 Nationals, used a glove that was over 10 years old, was held together by stitches and looked like it belonged in a museum rather than on a field.

“It was pretty gross,” Turner said. “I’m going to have to get a new glove before then. I don’t really like how his felt so I’m trying to keep mine alive.”

Jeff McNeil, the All-Star second baseman of the Mets, disagrees that gloves have expiration dates. He has used the same glove since 2013, the year he was drafted in the 12th round by the Mets. He originally had two, but he retired one after his first season and framed it. The second is still going.

“It’s flimsy, and it’s not the best. But it works for me,” said McNeil, 30, who reached the major leagues in 2018. “It’s broken in perfect. Once an infielder gets that glove, they use it for a long time.”

McNeil said a ball once found its way through the loose webbing on his tattered glove so he had it restrung. He also once had it “fixed up completely” by a professional, but holes remain. “It’s my baby,” he added.

Despite all that affection, McNeil isn’t perfect. When he makes an error, he admitted — with a chuckle — he has found occasion to throw his glove to the ground. And he has secretly been forming a new relationship behind his glove’s back.

“I’m working on breaking in another one right now,” he said, “and it’ll probably be ready in two years.”

Several players said they did not have much to say about their gloves, regardless of how often they use them. But even among those who insisted they weren’t particular about their gloves, there was a common third rail.

Just don’t put your hand in it and take ground balls,” said **Xander Bogaerts**, an All-Star shortstop for the Boston Red Sox. **Dansby Swanson**, an All-Star shortstop for Atlanta, added: “I just don’t want people stretching it out.”

Nolan Arenado, the Cardinals third baseman who has won the Platinum Glove Award as the best overall fielder in the National League five times, has the same red line.

“A big no-no,” said Arenado, 31, who is on his second season with his current glove. “If someone wants to feel my glove, yeah, go ahead. If you try to put your hand in it, I’ll be like, ‘No, man, don’t be doing that.’ I stop them before they do it. It’s not that their hand is bigger or smaller than mine. I just don’t want anyone putting their hand in my glove.”

There are some who find the rules about other players and gloves to be a tad extreme.

“Some guys are crazy about that, like they won’t let you put your hand in it or barely even touch it,” said Mariners shortstop **J.P. Crawford**, who won a Gold Glove Award in 2020 and normally uses a new glove each season. “That’s a little too much.”

Some players — outfielders and pitchers — didn’t worry at all about their leather. “I’m a pitcher so I don’t care, and I’m not that good of a fielding pitcher,” said Mariners reliever **Paul Sewald**. Asked about his habits, Aaron Judge, the Yankees’ superstar outfielder, didn’t even know where his glove was in his locker at that moment.

“If I played infield, that’s where I’d probably be a little superstitious with it,” he said. “You’re taking grounders, and you got to have a certain feel for it. It’s a different relationship. In the outfield, it’s just like, ‘Make the catch. Come on, buddy.’”

Even though he is an infielder, the Minnesota Twins All-Star **Luis Arraez** said he didn’t concern himself much with his gloves, tossing them on the floor and letting them get a little damp. He

said he would clean them and talk to them on occasion, saying, “Behave, we’re going to play well today.”

Arraez reserves his extra attention, though, for his bats. “My babies,” he said. He sometimes sleeps with a smaller bat he uses for his pregame practice next to his bed.

“I put it by my side,” he said, “and say, ‘Baby, we’re going to do my routine tomorrow so behave well.’”

WHEN LITTLE LEAGUERS SET THE EXAMPLE FOR ADULTS

An extraordinary embrace between opponents becomes a viral moment in an acrimonious summer

Jason Gary, WSJ

It’s the Little League hug that stirred the planet.

The moment happened last week, in Waco, Texas, during regional play of the Little League World Series. The opponents were Pearland, Texas, and Tulsa, Okla. Pearland pitcher **Kaiden “Bubs” Shelton** threw a pitch that veered dangerously inside and *thunnnnnk*—it smacked right off the protective helmet of Tulsa batter **Isaiah “Zay” Jarvis**, who dropped to the ground and clutched his head.

It was scary. It’s scary whenever a pitch flies near a batter’s head, and it’s outright terrifying when the pitch knocks a hitter to the dirt. Jarvis, who was likely spared a more serious injury when the pitch hit the corner of his helmet’s ear flap, eventually rose to his feet, and trotted down to first base.

Upon reaching first, Zay Jarvis noticed something: Shelton, the Pearland pitcher, was still reeling about the beanball and seeing Jarvis on the ground. He was in tears.

That’s when Jarvis did an extraordinary thing: He calmly walked over from first base to the pitcher’s mound and embraced his opponent, reassuring him that he was OK.

“It wasn’t really a thought,” Jarvis told the Oklahoman. “It was just kind of like a natural reaction.”

Shelton was grateful for the unexpected gesture. “I could hardly breathe, honestly,” the pitcher told KHOU 11 TV. “He came over and hugged me and told me I got this. He was like: ‘Take deep breaths and just think happy thoughts.’”

If you haven't watched this moment, take a couple of seconds to do so; The hug between Zay and Bubs is everywhere on the Internet. If you're not at least a little moved by the scene, it's safe to assume you're not breathing.

The hug has gone viral as a stirring example of sportsmanship and kindness. It's the type of moment that reassures there is still humanity out there (even between regional rivals like Texas and Oklahoma). Presumably, there has been good coaching. And good parenting. A child does not suddenly become an empathetic human being midway through a Little League contest.

"I'm super proud that he would think of someone else over himself in that type of moment," Zay's father, Austin Jarvis, the baseball coach at Carl Albert State College, told the Ada News.

That's the nature of life in our digital era—a hug on a mound in Waco can travel around the world by the end of the afternoon. (It helped that the game was televised by ESPN, which covers the LLWS.) By week's end, Jarvis had been interviewed on "Good Morning America" and been feted by Major Leaguers and other notables.

This has been another long, hot, acrimonious summer. Good news has been hard to find. Our national pastime continues to be Grown Adults Yelling at Each Other. Ad hominem rancor rules the day. It's embarrassing.

The Little League goosebumps are a welcome counter. As Ralph Fiennes's concierge character, M. Gustave, intones in the movie "The Grand Budapest Hotel": "You see, there are still faint glimmers of civilization left in this barbaric slaughterhouse that was once known as humanity."

Youth sports aren't immune from adult incivility. Barely a week seems to pass without a report of some fistfight or ugly incident among grown men and women at a children's game. Adults with misplaced priorities are toxifying rituals that are supposed to be fun.

Leave it to the Little Leaguers to set the example.

I can get queasy about the expansive TV coverage of the Little League World Series, because it feels like another example of adults unnecessarily raising the stakes. Do they need the pressure? But kids like Zay and Bubs seem to be alright.

Pearland, Texas, is moving on to the big show in Williamsport, Pa. Bubs and his teammates will be playing for a shot at a magical title. In the crowd will be their friend Zay, flown up as Little League's invited guest.

It's a well-deserved trip.

"That kid—he was something different," said Bubs.

Today in Baseball: Ebbets Field sold

Posted by yankeebiscuitfan

Today in 1956, Brooklyn Dodgers owner Walter O'Malley sold the home of the Dodgers, Ebbets Field, to real estate developer Marvin Kratter. Looking back, this was the omen of the Dodgers' move after the 1957 season.

The sale to Kratter included a three-year lease, with an additional two years to be added in January, to stay and play at the Flatbush facility. This meant the 'Bums' had a potential home in the borough until 1961.

But we all know that O'Malley was two-faced here. He played like he wanted to stay in Brooklyn but in the meantime he was hammering out a deal with the city of Los Angeles.

Cheapskate O'Malley wanted land in Brooklyn for a fraction of the price. To achieve that he needed the help of Robert Moses, the city's Construction Coordinator.

O'Malley was free to purchase land of his own choosing but needed Robert Moses to condemn land along the Atlantic Railroad Yards (O'Malley's preferred choice) in downtown Brooklyn under Title I authority. Title I gave the city municipality power to condemn land for the purpose of building what it calls "public purpose" projects. Moses's interpretation of "public purpose" was to build public parks, public housing and public highways/bridges. What O'Malley wanted was for Moses to use this authority rather than pay market value for the land. With Title I, the city, aka Robert Moses, could have sold the land to O'Malley at a below market price. Robert Moses refused to honor O'Malley's request and responded by saying, "If you want the land so bad, why don't you purchase it with your own money?"

During the 1956 World Series, officials of the city of Los Angeles attended the Fall Classic. They wanted to entice a team to move to the City of Angels, they were not even thinking of the Dodgers. Their original target had been the Washington Senators (who would in fact move to Bloomington, Minnesota to become the Minnesota Twins in 1961). O'Malley let the city of Los Angeles know that he was interested in a move. First talks made clear that Los Angeles was willing to give O'Malley everything that Robert Moses didn't want to give. Is it a coincidence that O'Malley sold Ebbets Field to Kratter?

Anyhow, to make a long story short, the City of Los Angeles gave O'Malley what he wanted. After signing the deal, O'Malley came back to Brooklyn wearing a "Keep the Dodgers in Brooklyn" button. So even then he kept lying about his plans.

INTRODUCING MLB'S 2022 OVERPAID TEAM

Editor note—not included but certainly on Yankee fans' minds—Joey Gallo \$10,275,000 and Josh Donaldson \$21,000,000.

Kerry Miller, Bleacher Report

There are 200 players making at least \$7 million in 2022, and—to put it lightly—they aren't all worth what they're getting. In fact, a bunch of them are getting eight-figure salaries while producing at a below-replacement level, per Baseball Reference.

This 28-player All-Overpaid Team is making a combined total of \$553.5 million in 2022. That's more than double the Los Angeles Dodgers' payroll and more than 12 times what the Baltimore Orioles are paying players. Yet, through Monday, these players were worth negative-7.2 bWAR.

Might want to have some anti-nausea medicine nearby for this one.

Catcher

Worst ROI: Yasmani Grandal, Chicago White Sox

\$18.3 million, -1.0 bWAR

Grandal was worth every penny at this price in 2021. He made only 375 plate appearances, but he homered in 23 of them while setting career bests in on-base percentage (.420) and slugging percentage (.520).

But this year, Grandal has been a shell of himself at the dish. He has been limited to 275 trips to the plate, most of which have been unfruitful.

His batting average (.198) and on-base percentage (.305) are career worsts, while his slugging percentage (.257) ranks among the worst in recent history. Since 2012, there have been 2,641 instances of players with at least 300 plate appearances in a season. The only one to do so with a worse mark was **A.J. Ellis**, who slugged .254 in 2014.

Runner-Up: Yadier Molina, St. Louis Cardinals

\$10 million, 0.1 bWAR

Love me some Yadi and believe he should be a first-ballot Hall of Famer five years from now. However, his farewell tour simply has not been worth what St. Louis is paying. Molina is still undeniably one of the best in the business at throwing out would-be base-stealers, but his .514 OPS is atrocious.

First Base

Worst ROI: Miguel Sano, Minnesota Twins

\$9.3 million, -0.7 bWAR

Through his first seven seasons, Sano was something of a **Chris Davis 2.0** or **Chris Carter 2.0**: He may well lead the majors in strikeout percentage, but you can live with it so long as he's homering on a good number of the balls that he doesn't miss. And to that end, Sano homered once every 17.3 trips to the plate from 2015 to 2021—on par with the rates of **Nolan Arenado** (17.6), **Shohei Ohtani** (17.3) and **Kyle Schwarber** (16.9) during that same window.

That version of Sano never showed up in 2022.

He went 5-for-54 with one home run and 21 strikeouts in April, missed nearly three months because of knee surgery, came back for three games and then landed on the 60-day injured list, presumably ending both his season and his tenure with the Twins.

Runner-Up: Joey Votto, Cincinnati Reds

\$25 million, -0.1 bWAR

It was a toss-up between Sano and Votto, but at least the latter has recovered from his terrible start. Votto hit .122 with one extra-base hit through Cincinnati's first 22 games. He's hitting .234 with 11 home runs over the past three months. Still definitely not worth \$25 million, but at least he is providing *some* value.

Second Base

Worst ROI: Jonathan Schoop, Detroit Tigers

\$7.5 million, 0.0 bWAR

Excluding 2020, Schoop entered this season having hit at least 21 home runs in each year since 2016. He out-homered Jose Altuve 131-128 in that span even though the Houston Astros' slugging second baseman made nearly 300 more plate appearances.

But that power has gone missing, leaving Schoop hovering around the infamous Mendoza line and providing minimal value to the Tigers.

From 2016 to 2021, Schoop hit .268, slugged .458 and had an OPS of .767. However, he is batting .203 with nine home runs, only four of which have come since June 1. His slugging percentage is all the way down to .317, and his .554 OPS ranks 200th among the 201 players with at least 300 plate appearances.

Schoop does at least have a solid glove, boasting a .993 fielding percentage. That has kept his season from being a complete disaster.

Runner-Up: Adam Frazier, Seattle Mariners

\$8 million, 0.5 bWAR

Frazier hasn't been awful, but there aren't many highly-paid second basemen to choose from. He has never been a power hitter with just 43 home runs in his seven-year career. Still, his .245 batting average and .312 slugging percentage are considerably worse than his usual marks. And he picked a bad year to put up those stats, as he'll hit free agency for the first time this offseason.

Third Base

Worst ROI: Anthony Rendon, Los Angeles Angels

\$36.6 million, 0.9 bWAR

In each of the three seasons before he reached free agency, Rendon batted at least .300, slugged at least .530 and had an OPS north of .900. Among 234 qualified hitters from 2017 to 2019, he ranked in the top 10 in average, on-base percentage, slugging percentage, RBI and doubles. And he was still only 29 years old, so it wasn't much of a surprise when the Angels made him one of the highest-salaried players in baseball.

What L.A. has gotten, however, is an injury-prone, lesser version of "Washington Nationals Rendon."

Over the last two seasons, Rendon has played just 103 games (and will miss the rest of this season) with a triple slash line of .235/.327/.383. The Angels are paying him to produce like **Mike Trout**, but what he's actually giving them are numbers on par with those of **Ben Gamel** and **Colin Moran**.

And Los Angeles better hope he gets healthy and turns a corner, because it has to pay Rendon like a superstar through 2026. It is going to be tough if his contract is more or less the reason the Angels don't sign Shohei Ohtani to a long-term deal.

Runner-Up: Evan Longoria, San Francisco Giants

\$19.5 million, 0.3 bWAR

At no point since he joined San Francisco during the 2017-18 offseason has Longo been worth what the Giants are paying. But with the exception of a six-game stretch in late May in which he hit .364 with five home runs, this season has been especially rough. Longoria has already made three trips to the IL and is saddled with the highest strikeout rate and one of the lowest batting averages of his career. The three-time Gold Glove Award winner isn't exactly a vacuum at the hot corner anymore, either.

Shortstop

Worst ROI: Didi Gregorius, Philadelphia Phillies

\$15.3 million, -0.6 bWAR

It's not exactly the "seven years, \$126 million for **Barry Zito**" standard for horrendous contracts, but the two-year, \$28 million deal Philadelphia gave Didi Gregorius before last season is surely one of the worst short-term pacts in recent history.

Gregorius was one of the Phillies' most valuable players during the COVID-19 pandemic-shortened 2020 season. He played all 60 games, batted .284, had an .827 OPS and hit 10 home runs. Since the start of last season, though, he has hit .210 with a .613 OPS and was worth negative-1.4 bWAR.

Gregorius hit just one home run in 232 plate appearances in 2022.

Even though Gregorius is making \$15.3 million this season, when **Jean Segura** returned from more than two months on the IL, the Phillies released Gregorius on Aug. 4.

Runner-Up: Brandon Crawford, San Francisco Giants

\$16 million, 0.0 bWAR

Crawford darn near won the National League MVP Award last season at the age of 34, setting career bests in home runs (24), RBI (90), batting average (.298) and, by more than 100 points, OPS (.895). So, the Giants gave their long-tenured shortstop a two-year deal worth \$32 million, only to watch his numbers drop off a cliff. He has not homered in 32 games since June 3 and is hitting .221.

Left Field

Worst ROI: AJ Pollock, Chicago White Sox

\$14.5 million, 0.3 bWAR

In a one-for-one swap of well-compensated veterans, the White Sox flipped **Craig Kimbrel** to the Dodgers for Pollock a week before the start of the season, adding versatility and leadership to what is otherwise a young outfield.

But while Pollock has played in more games this season than every teammate not named Jose Abreu, he has barely given Chicago replacement-level production.

One year removed from a .297 average and .892 OPS, Pollock is at .246 and .674. And the 2015 Gold Glove center fielder is no longer anything close to a defensive asset; he's in his sixth consecutive season with a negative defense rating.

At least Pollock does have *some* value, though. Kimbrel has been worth negative-0.2 bWAR for L.A. So I suppose the trade was fine even though neither team has particularly benefited from it.

Runner-Up: Kris Bryant, Colorado Rockies
\$18 million, 0.5 bWAR

Bryant has been OK when he has actually played. He hit .359 through his first 10 games and batted .341 with five home runs in 22 games in July. But he has missed 75 games to a litany of injuries, and his home run rate (162-game pace of 19) is nowhere near what we expected with his move to Colorado. Here's hoping for the Rockies that Bryant is just getting a disappointing year out of the way early, because his salary spikes to at least \$27 million for each of the next six seasons.

Center Field

Worst ROI: Jason Heyward, Chicago Cubs
\$24.5 million, -0.7 bWAR

Heyward probably isn't going to play again in 2022, and the Cubs have already said they'll release him after the season with one year left on his deal, bringing to an end one of the worst contracts in MLB history.

Heyward signed an eight-year, \$184 million deal with Chicago after the 2015 season. He did win Gold Gloves in 2016 and 2017, and everyone in and around the club always talked about his great locker-room presence. But he has 8.9 bWAR in his Cubs career.

It was always bad, but this year marked rock bottom. Heyward homered once in 151 trips to the plate, setting career worsts in average, on-base percentage and slugging percentage. And for the first time in his career, he posted a negative ultimate zone rating on defense.

Really, it was just a question of whether we put him down for worst return on investment in center or right, and he played more at the 8 than he did at the 9 this season.

Runner-Up: Lorenzo Cain, Milwaukee Brewers
\$18 million, -0.4 bWAR

While Heyward has been a painful sunk cost pretty much from the moment he landed with Chicago, Cain was providing a respectable return through last season before he became unusable in 2022. In 43 games before the Brewers released him, his strikeout rate (23.1 percent) was the highest of his career, he hit just one home run, and his batting average (.179) and on-base percentage (.231) were more than 100 points below his career marks.

Right Field

Worst ROI: Nick Castellanos, Philadelphia Phillies

\$20 million, -0.7 bWAR

In 2021, Castellanos ranked 15th among 132 qualified hitters with a batting rating of 30.0.

This season, he is 128th out of 146 with a negative-5.9 mark.

Castellanos also ranks last in "dollars" at negative-9.6. How that is calculated or what it means, I'm not sure, but let's just say it's not a great sign that he's in the 2013 Ryan Doumit range (negative-10.5), as he's 1,545th out of 1,555 qualifiers since 2012.

Not exactly worth \$20 million is the moral of the story. He does at least have occasional spurts wherein he sees the ball well, but he's not hitting for power, he's striking out a ton, and his defense ranks somewhere between not great and statuesque.

Runner-Up: Wil Myers, San Diego Padres

\$22.5 million, 0.2 bWAR

Could have also gone with **Charlie Blackmon**, **Avisail Garcia**, **Jackie Bradley Jr.** or even **Giancarlo Stanton**, as right field is seemingly overrun with expensive players amounting to little. But it's Myers, who may have had the strength sapped from his body *Space Jam* style. He mashed 15 home runs in 2020 and averaged one blast for every 6.3 games from 2016 to 2021, but he has one homer in 42 games this season and is slugging .329 after entering 2022 with a career mark of .446.

DH

Worst ROI: Miguel Cabrera, Detroit Tigers

\$32 million, -0.7 bWAR

Fair or not, Cabrera has become the cautionary tale in paying a player like he's going to stay in his prime forever.

The first season of the eight-year, \$248 million extension he signed for 2016-23 was rock solid, but Detroit has been paying ridiculous amounts for simply no value ever since.

Cabrera did at least tap in to the fountain of youth for the first half of the Tigers' games this season, batting .308. However, he did so with just three home runs, and he is hitting a woeful .128 in 26 games over the past five-plus weeks. Might as well keep playing him, though, since the Tigers have no hope of reaching the playoffs.

Runner-Up: Marcell Ozuna, Atlanta Braves

\$16 million, -1.3 bWAR

Ozuna does have 20 home runs this season, so it's a little surprising that Baseball Reference and FanGraphs regard him as one of the least valuable hitters in baseball. Then again, he is batting .214, is averaging just a shade under four strikeouts per walk and was recently dropped to eighth in the order. If Atlanta weren't on the hook for \$18 million in each of 2023 and 2024, it would be a no-brainer to boot Ozuna when **Ozzie Albies** recovers from his broken foot.

Starting Pitchers

Worst ROI: Stephen Strasburg, Washington Nationals

\$35 million, -0.3 bWAR

Since leading Washington to the 2019 World Series title, Strasburg has made eight starts with a 6.89 ERA, and he reportedly won't pitch again this season after he made just one start in early June. This is highway robbery, and the Nationals will be the victims of it until 2029.

First Runner-Up: Chris Sale, Boston Red Sox

\$30 million, 0.0 bWAR

Sale has made 11 appearances since 2019 and makes \$30 million per season. At least he pitches well when healthy, making him the first runner-up to Strasburg. This year, he suffered three separate injuries: a rib stress fracture, broken finger and broken wrist. He was limited to two starts, ensuring that "if he stays healthy" will be attached to his name for the rest of his career.

Second Runner-Up: Patrick Corbin, Washington Nationals

\$23.4 million, -2.5 bWAR

As frustrating as it has been for the Nationals to pay Strasburg to not pitch, at least they aren't giving him a ton of money to go out and get shelled every fifth day like they are with Corbin. The left-hander was an NL Cy Young Award candidate in 2018 and 2019, but he has gone from bad to worse to historically awful since then. At least Corbin's 7.02 ERA is helping the Nats lock up the No. 1 pick in next year's draft.

Third Runner-Up: Hyun Jin Ryu, Toronto Blue Jays

\$20 million, -0.3 bWAR

Ryu made six starts with a 5.67 ERA before undergoing Tommy John surgery in mid-June. He'll likely miss most, if not all, of 2023, for which the Blue Jays owe him another \$20 million. What a steep fall from grace after Ryu almost won the NL Cy Young in 2019 and American League Cy Young in 2020.

Fourth Runner-Up: Madison Bumgarner, Arizona Diamondbacks

\$23 million, 0.1 bWAR

"MadBum" got out to an impressive start this season, allowing just three earned runs in 23 innings in April. In 17 starts since mid-May, however, Bumgarner has a 5.18 ERA, allowing multiple runs in all but one of those games. The Diamondbacks owe him another \$23 million next season and \$14 million in 2024, which makes the mediocre production sting just that much more.

Relief Pitchers

Worst ROI: David Price, Los Angeles Dodgers

\$32 million, 0.6 bWAR

Now in the final season of a gargantuan seven-year, \$217 million contract, Price has done an OK job in what has primarily been low-leverage, middle-relief work. He has a 2.51 ERA this year and a 0.96 ERA over the past two months. But he hasn't been worth anything close to \$32 million since the season before he signed that contract.

First Runner-Up: Aroldis Chapman, New York Yankees

\$18 million, 0.1 bWAR

Through his first 12 appearances of the season, Chapman didn't allow a single run. He has also kept opponents off the board over the past few weeks, putting together an impressive line of 9.1 IP, 3 H, 0 R, 1 BB and 10 K since July 26. In between, however, he couldn't find the strike zone, missed more than a month with an Achilles injury and got shelled for an 11.70 ERA. We shall see which version shows up in less than two months when it matters most.

Second Runner-Up: Zack Britton, New York Yankees

\$14 million, 0.0 WAR (has not pitched in 2022)

Hate to include a guy who has missed the entire season while recovering from **Tommy John** surgery, but Britton also cost the Yankees \$13 million for 18.1 innings with a 5.89 ERA in 2021. So that's now \$27 million since the start of last season for a whole lot of nothing. We'll see what

sort of market there is this offseason for the soon-to-be 35-year-old who had a sub-2.00 ERA in 2019 and 2020.

Third Runner-Up: Will Smith, Houston Astros
\$13 million, -0.7 bWAR

Smith pitched 11.0 scoreless innings with six saves for Atlanta during last year's playoff run, and Houston is surely hoping there's still some of that postseason magic left in his left arm. Despite his dreadful metrics, Houston traded for him just before the deadline, and he has delivered a not-great 4.76 ERA in six appearances.

Fourth Runner-Up: Craig Kimbrel, Los Angeles Dodgers
\$16 million, -0.2 bWAR

It looked like the Dodgers hit the jackpot with Kimbrel early in the year, but he has posted a 5.29 ERA and 1.58 WHIP over his last 34 appearances. And while he hasn't blown a save since July 3, Kimbrel also hasn't had a 1-2-3 inning since before the All-Star break. Kimbrel has 392 career saves, but his 3.89 ERA since the beginning of 2019 suggests he might be Los Angeles' weak link in the postseason.

VISIT SYRACUSE'S NBT BANK STADIUM

Benjamin Hill, mlb.com

Editor's note—I was born in Syracuse as was my father, my grandfather (principal of Central High School) and many generations before them. I received a stock certificate for one share of Syracuse Chiefs stock for my 12th birthday.)

Welcome to NBT Bank Stadium, where the potatoes are salty and the beer selections plentiful. Enjoy a night of baseball in the fair state of New York, in close proximity to the wonderment of the New York State Fair.

Syracuse Mets (Triple-A affiliate of the New York Mets since 2019)
Established: 1961 (as the Syracuse Chiefs in the Triple-A International League)
League: Triple-A East
Ballpark: NBT Bank Stadium (opened 1997)
Championships: 1969, 1970, 1976
Notable Alumni: Carlos Delgado, Dave Steib, Ron Guidry, Bobby Cox (manager)

Professional baseball in Syracuse is nearly as old as professional baseball itself, with the city's first team taking the field in 1877. The 1879 Syracuse Stars were members of the National League. The 1889 Stars, members of the International League, featured Moses "Fleetwood"

Walker. He was the last Black player to compete in the league until Jackie Robinson suited up for the Montreal Royals in 1946.

Minor League Baseball has been a near-constant in Syracuse since the establishment of the Chiefs in 1934. That International League team played through 1957; in 1961 the franchise returned for good following a community effort in which shares of the team were available to purchase at \$10 apiece. The Chiefs remained community-owned until the New York Mets purchased the team following the 2017 season. In 2019, following the completion of a preexisting affiliation agreement with the Washington Nationals, the team changed its name to the Mets. This marked the end of the Chiefs era, and it also marked the first time that a Syracuse Minor League team had the same name as its parent club.

When the Mets bought the Syracuse club, they committed to remaining in the city until at least 2043. This would result in the longest affiliation in the city's history, beating out the Chiefs' three-decade run with the Toronto Blue Jays (1978-2008).

NBT Bank Stadium

Capacity: 10,815

Dimensions: left field, 330; center field, 400; right field, 330

When the first Syracuse Chiefs team took the field in 1934, they did so at their brand-new home of Municipal Stadium. That facility, renamed MacArthur Stadium in 1942, hosted Minor League Baseball through 1996. It was replaced in nearly the same location by the ballpark now known as NBT Bank Stadium, which opened on April 3, 1997.

NBT Bank Stadium is, in a word, big. It's one of the few Minor League ballparks featuring an honest-to-God upper deck, which has room for some 3,000 fans. Recent renovations to the Onondaga County-owned facility, spurred by the New York Mets' purchase of the team, have improved the fan experience. The Metropolitan Club, an enclosed banquet room located the end of the first-base side of the ballpark, is adjacent to the Salt City Deck group area. Four-top table seating has been installed behind home plate, and synthetic turf berm areas were added in left and right field. Left field now features the 315 Bullpen Bar, open to all fans throughout the ballgame.

NBT Bank Stadium, located north of downtown Syracuse, is accessible primarily by car. It is bounded by I-90 (to the north) and I-81 (to the west). The New York State Fairgrounds are located nearby, on the other side of Onondaga Lake. The State Fair, which runs for two weeks in the late summer, inspired the Syracuse Mets' unique Butter Sculptures alternate identity.

NBT Bank Ballpark's hot dogs and sausages are supplied by Hofmann's Sausage Company, a Syracuse institution since 1879. For many local fans, hot dogs and Hofmann's are synonymous. Pair your dog with the simple and self-explanatory side dish that are salt potatoes, a local

specialty of small boiled white potatoes that has inspired its own food-based alternate team identity.

HIS NIGHT OF BASEBALL FAME HAS LINGERED 70 YEARS

(from a NYT series on fame)

By Jonathan Abrams



Ron Necciai whiffed a whole game's worth of hitters, then disappeared from the sport. Our writer's connection to him goes back to his childhood.

BELLE VERNON, Pa. — Seventy years ago, Ron Necciai accomplished a feat that no other professional pitcher — not **Walter Johnson**, not **Bob Gibson**, not **Nolan Ryan**, not anyone — ever managed: He struck out 27 hitters in a nine-inning game. The major league record for strikeouts in a nine-inning game, achieved four times, is 20.

It was May 1952, and Necciai, 19, had no clue what he had achieved in his no-hitter until his manager informed him and his catcher, Harry Dunlop, after the game.

“I’ve heard all kinds of things,” said Necciai, who did it while pitching for the Bristol Twins, a low-level minor league affiliate of the Pittsburgh Pirates in Virginia. “I’ve heard the fans in the stands were chanting, 25, 26. I don’t remember that. I don’t pay attention to the fans. There’s a guy down there between me and Dunlop with a bat.”

A reporter from The Bristol Herald Courier, the lone journalist to witness the game, hurried to write an article that The Associated Press carried nationally. “The Ed Sullivan Show” asked Necciai to appear, he said, but he and the Pirates declined. A few days later, Bristol held a Ron Necciai night to celebrate him. As far as most people were concerned, that was pretty much the end of his moment of fame.

And yet that extraordinary pitching performance defined his life forever — not just for Necciai, but for obsessed fans who see miracles in box scores.

As a child, I was one of them. Not long ago, I had the opportunity — for the second time — to ask Necciai about that night.

‘Buy a Gas Station’

Necciai carried the recognition from the 27-strikeout game for the rest of his career, which turned out not to be long. He finished the 1952 season with a horrid Pirates squad, going 1-6 in 12 games.

That off-season, he was drafted into the Korean War, then discharged with chronic bleeding ulcers. He hurt his shoulder preparing for the baseball season, and a doctor told him: “Son, go home and buy a gas station. You’re never going to pitch again.”

“That’s life,” Necciai told me. “Hell, after a while you get over it.”

He became a manufacturer’s rep, selling hunting and fishing equipment. He and Martha, his wife of 67 years, raised three children.

The embers of his fame occasionally glowed. A couple of times when Necciai was traveling, he said, agents recognized his name and quickly stamped him through customs or put him on a flight.

But mostly there are the letters. They come from Germany, from the United States, from everywhere. Someone in Japan sends a 1,000-yen note every few months.

Some letters came from my hometown. From me.

I spent a lot of my childhood writing letters to athletes and asking for their autographs. In 1995, when I was 11, I wrote one to Necciai, whose feat I had read about in a long-defunct magazine named *Collector's Sportslook*, and asked him questions about pitching.

He responded in elegant cursive, graciously answering the same questions he has received for generations. We exchanged letters. He told me about a busy work trip, advised me to listen to my mother and to stay in school.

I understand now that I was cultivating and pairing what became lifelong interests in sports and writing. But lately I've wondered what it was like for this man, now old, to still be recognized for something he did on a single day when he was young.

Necciai is 90 with shoulders still broad. He has not lost much height since his 6-foot-5 playing days. He busies himself in retirement with crossword puzzles, and he and Martha can spot hummingbirds out one window and see their basil growing out the other.

He occasionally grabbed my arm to steady himself as he showed me memorabilia — a scrapbook containing his first signed contract, the telegram summoning him to the big leagues, plaques commemorating the 1952 game.

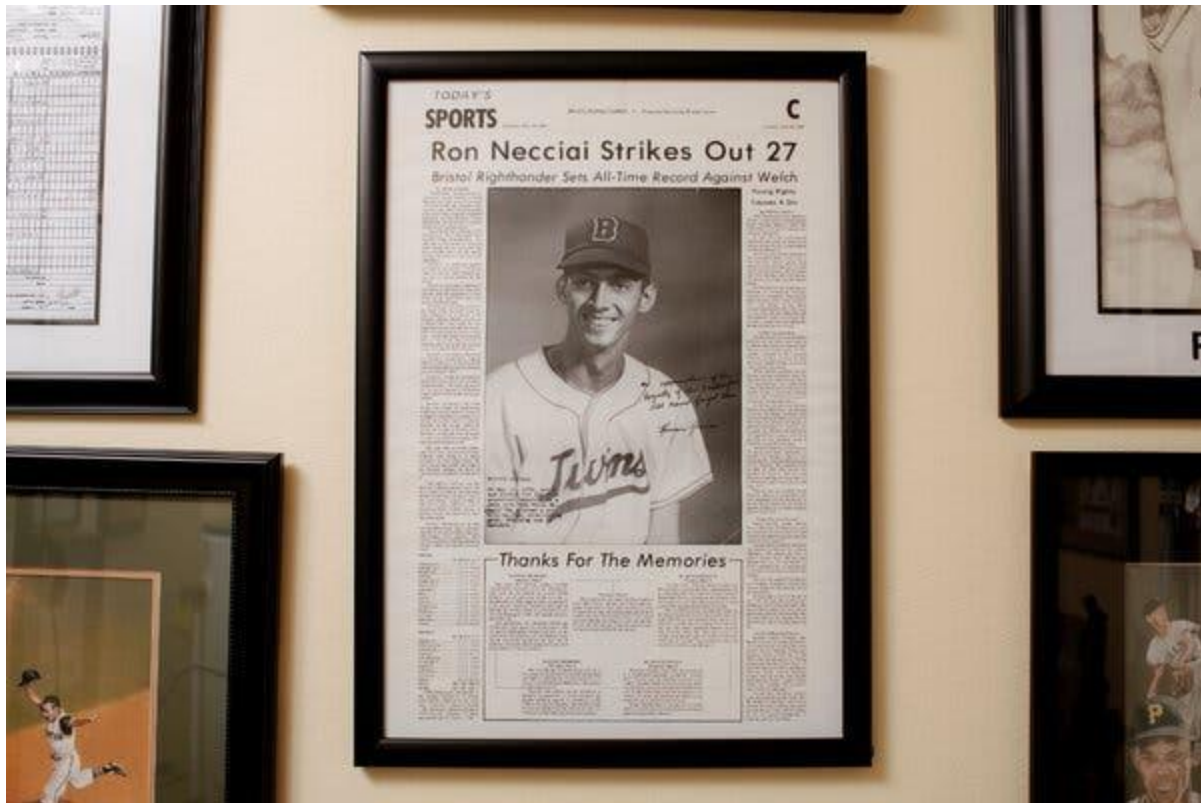
"It's getting a little harder and harder to walk," Necciai said. "I have degenerative joint disease. When you're old, you've got to get something."

At his dining room table, Necciai clasped copies of the letters he had sent me, just as he palmed the baseball so many years ago.

Baseball doesn't last forever for players, so you must work just as hard on your education, he had written to me. Education lasts forever.

And he had his name in the record books. I asked him what it meant to him.

"If you look back, just about everything," he said. "I'm surprised at the people that still remember. I haven't played in 70 years. I still get fan mail every week. A real big impression. It's meant a lot."



THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE ANSWERS

50 HR seasons—41 times by 27 players. Some obvious like **Barry Bonds**, **Mark McGwire**, **Sammy Sosa**. Some famous like **Roger Maris**, **Babe Ruth**, **Mickey Mantle**, **Willie Mays**. Some old guys like **Ralph Kiner**, **Jimmie Foxx**, **Hank Greenberg**. Some you may not have guessed like **Brady Anderson**, **Andruw Jones**, **George Foster**, **Albert Belle**, **Jose Bautista**, **Chris Davis** and **Luis Gonzalez**.

All three active MLB players who have hit 50 HRs in a season currently play in NY. Name them.

Giancarlo Stanton 59 for 2017 Marlins

Pete Alonso 53 for 2019 Mets

Aaron Judge 52 for 2017 Yankees

HOUSEKEEPING

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