

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

9.18.2022

Good morning baseball fans,

This week we've got **Trout and Pujols**, we've got **Mookie Betts**, crazy stuff from Jayson Stark, early history of Red Sox Nation from the Boston Globe, infield dirt, and of course, trivia. Enjoy.

Editor's note—thank you for the fast feedback on the last two trivia challenges—typos on two answers. Argh. Back-to-back Cy Youngs for **Lyle and Guidry** should have been 1977 and 1978 (not 79) and **Roger Maris** got skipped in the back-to-back MVP answer. Apologies.

### **THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE**

A pretty exclusive club. What did these 8 players accomplish? (they are atop a MLB career leaders list).

Carlos Beltran

Ken Caminiti

Tony Clark

Chili Davis

Mickey Mantle

Eddie Murray

Nick Swisher

Mark Teixeira

### **MISCELLANEOUS STUFF**

Tip of the cap to the 100-44 Dodgers. With Saturday's win over the Giants L.A. reached 100 wins in the fewest games in 21 years, since the 2001 Mariners.

**Shohei Ohtani** is slugging .522 as a batter. Opponents are slugging .344 against him as a pitcher. He could go 0 for his next 249 at bats before his slugging pct. Dropped below the hitters batting against him. Think about that.

The Yankees last 6 weeks haven't been pretty but they have scored 10+ runs in back-to-back games five times this season including this week.

While we have been watching **Aaron Judge's** HR count, he has been on a tear. Batting .294 on September 4. He went 20-for-41 (.488) over 11 games raising his average to .310, 4<sup>th</sup> best in the AL.

**Mike Trout** didn't hit a home run Tuesday night in Cleveland. His streak of consecutive games with a home run ended, then, at seven, one game short of the major league record. Across 21 games since returning from the injured list on Aug. 19, Trout had batted .313 with 11 home runs and 18 RBI before Tuesday, when he went hitless in four plate appearances. In 17 pitches, he saw six strikes. Seeking to match **Dale Long** of the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1956, **Don Mattingly** of the New York Yankees in 1987 and **Ken Griffey Jr.** of the Seattle Mariners in 1993 as players who homered in eight consecutive games, Trout flied to the outfield three times and walked.

The Angels are 20 games under .500 and trail the Astros by 31 games. Trout (1) has fewer playoff hits than **Zack Greinke** (7).

Trout has hit 35 homers in just 101 games this season.

The Seattle Mariners have a gem in rookie **Julio Rodriguez**. The 21-year-old outfielder projects to be a franchise cornerstone for Seattle in the years to come. With Rodriguez in the fold, the Mariners are also on the verge of making their first MLB postseason appearance in over two decades. But before that, Julio Rodriguez added one to the history books with an achievement no player has ever accomplished ever before in Major League Baseball

Rodriguez just became the first player ever in the history of the big leagues to have 25 home runs and 25 stolen bases in their debut campaign. As of last night he was batting .279 with 27 HRs and 25 stolen bases in 32 attempts.

The Red Sox may want to re-think their bullpen. Boston relievers have the second-most losses in the American League (30), the second-most blown saves (27), the second-highest ERA (4.50), and the most hit batters (43).

On the plus side, a whopping 15 Red Sox minor leaguers have at least 20 steals this season, led by Double A Portland middle infielder **David Hamilton**, who has been successful on a remarkable 69 of 77 (89.6 percent) steal attempts. Hamilton's 69 steals are the most by a Red Sox minor leaguer in its annals, surpassing the 68 bags swiped by **Gus Burgess** in 1981. Jacoby Ellsbury — who stole 70 in the big leagues in 2009 — is the only Red Sox known to have stolen more bases in a season than Hamilton.

Red Sox minor league teams are averaging 1.60 steal attempts per game, a whopping 42 percent increase from the 2021 season — too much to explain based on personnel alone.

Their huge jumps in both base stealing and success (at 80.7 percent, they're up from 73.1) are part of a minors-wide trend. According to MLB, steal attempts have gone up roughly 27 percent compared with 2019, with the success rate increasing from 68 to 77 percent.

That increase coincides with the introduction of new pace-of-game rules in the minors. In particular, the rule limiting pitchers to two step-offs from the rubber with a runner on base. On a third step-off, a pitcher must either pick off the runner or be charged with a balk.

**John Stearns**, long time Mets catcher died this week at age 71. In 11 seasons from 1975-1984 with the Mets he caught 810 games, made 4 All-Star games. Stearns stole 91 bases, batted .260 with 91 career HRs.

He played both baseball and football at the University of Colorado and was a late draft pick as a defensive back by the Buffalo Bills of the N.F.L. in 1973. The Philadelphia Phillies took him second overall that same year, and he opted to play baseball.

With Bob Boone behind the plate, Stearns never had a chance to play regularly for the Phillies after struggling early at the plate. After appearing in one game for the Phillies in 1974, he was traded to the Mets as part of the multiplayer deal that sent the relief pitcher Tug McGraw to Philadelphia.

Highest winning pct for a manager at time of his 400<sup>th</sup> win

**Earl Weaver** .639

**Dave Roberts** .606

**Aaron Boone** .606

Highest on base % first five seasons

**Ted Williams** .484

**Frank Thomas** .449

**Wade Boggs** .435

**Juan Soto** .426

**Stan Musial** .426

How good a lead off hitter is **Jose Altuve**?

When batting lead-off last two seasons:

295 hits 2<sup>nd</sup> in MLB

134 RBI 1<sup>st</sup>

54 HR tied 1<sup>st</sup>

120 extra base hits tied 1<sup>st</sup>

118 walks 2<sup>nd</sup>

Bet you could win a beer with this item:

4 players have won the MVP award at 2 positions:

**Hank Greenberg** 1935 first base and 1940 left field

**Stan Musial** 1948 & 1948 right field and 1946 first base.

**Robin Yount** 1982 shortstop and 1989 centerfield.

**ARod** 2003 shortstop and 2005 & 2007 third base.

**Mark Kotsay**, A's manager: on the new rule limit of 2 pick off attempts per at bat... I would love to hear what **Rickey Henderson** has to think about that. I think Rickey would probably sit here and say, 'Rickey would steal 200 bases if that was the rule.' He'd get them to throw over the first time, challenge them the second time and most likely be safe, then what are you going to do? Pitch the ball to home plate. I think that's going to increase stolen bases. It's going to make it really difficult to control the running game if your pitching staff isn't adequately getting the baseball to the plate in a good enough time."

**Zac Gallen**, Diamondbacks right hander, had not allowed a run since allowing three in six innings in a 6-3 win in Cleveland on Aug. 2, spanning parts of eight games and 44 1/3 innings. The streak came to an end on **C.J. Cron**'s RBI single in the bottom of the fourth.

However, it couldn't dim Gallen's moment, as he set Arizona's franchise record and finished with the seventh-longest scoreless innings streak in AL/NL history, surpassing **Brandon Webb** for both.

The Giants have not had a hitter with 30 home runs since **Barry Bonds** had 45 in 2004. Every other team has had at least four in that time.

Royals shortstop **Bobby Witt Jr.**, 22, had 27 doubles, 20 home runs, 6 triples, and 27 steals through his first 133 games. The last player to hit all those marks in his age-22 season or younger was **Mike Trout** in 2012 and '13. Before that it was **Carlos Beltrán** in 1999.

**Tom Gordon**. Gordon fanned 263 batters in 185 2/3 innings while rising from Single-A to Triple-A in 1988, when he was Baseball America's Minor League Player of the Year. He also whiffed 18 in 15 2/3 innings with the Royals that September, launching a big-league career that saw him earn 138 victories, 158 saves and three All-Star Game berths.

Gordon pitched 21 seasons, played for 8 teams from 1988-2009.

Marlins ace **Sandy Alcantara** reached 200 innings for a second consecutive season. In doing so, he became the seventh pitcher in club history to record multiple 200-inning seasons and the fifth in back-to-back campaigns, following **Dontrelle Willis** (three seasons from 2005-07), **Carl Pavano** ('03-04), **Ryan Dempster** ('00-01) and **Kevin Brown** (1996-97).

With his first swing Thursday night against Rays starter **Drew Rasmussen**, **Vlad Guerrero Jr.** skied a fastball over the left-field wall, putting the Blue Jays on the board in a 5-1 win over Tampa Bay at Rogers Centre. With his towering blast, the 23-year-old became the fastest to 100 homers in Blue Jays history, as well as the 12th youngest to reach that feat in AL/NL history.

He is the 7<sup>th</sup> youngest to 100 HRs and 100 doubles behind **Mel Ott**, **ARod**, **Andruw Jones**, **Miguel Cabrera**, **Johnny Bench** and **Bryce Harper**. Pretty good company.

He said he's giving the ball to his Hall of Fame father, who hit home run No. 100 in fewer games (438 vs. 486), albeit at an older age (25 vs. 23).

On the first day of Latino Heritage month MLB celebrated **Roberto Clemente** Day on Thursday. A few stats that were highlighted:

18 seasons

Slashed .317/.359/.475

3,000 hits

Struck out only 1,230 times

166 triples.

12 consecutive Gold Gloves, second all time with 255 outfield assists.

Two-time World Series champion

At age 37, Clemente slashed .414/.452/.759 in the 1971 Fall Classic to help lift the Pirates over the Orioles in seven games.

Hit safely in all seven games of the 1960 and 1971 World Series.

15 All-Star Games

Four NL batting titles

1966 NL MVP Award.

Ranks 37th all-time with 94.8 WAR.

Hit the only inside-the-park, walk-off grand slam in Major League history

**Yandy Díaz** hit a three-run home run and the Tampa Bay Rays — starting an unprecedented nine Latin American position players on Roberto Clemente Day — routed the Blue Jays, 11-0, on Thursday in Toronto to pull within a half-game of the Blue Jays in the wild-card chase.

Clemente was from Puerto Rico. The Blue Jay nine starting position players came from five countries: Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Venezuela, and the Dominican Republic.

All nine Rays starters, as well as bases coaches **Chris Prieto** and **Rodney Linares**, wore No. 21 to honor Clemente. **Bo Bichette**, righthander **José Berríos**, outfielder **George Springer**, and third base coach **Luis Rivera** wore No. 21 for Toronto.

### **WAINWRIGHT AND YADI**

Mlb.com

For nearly two decades now, **Adam Wainwright** and **Yadier Molina** have worked together in harmony, one on the mound and one behind the plate. It's impossible to think of one without the other.

This terrific Cardinals tandem made history on Wednesday night at Busch Stadium, where Wainwright took the ball for first-place St. Louis against NL Central-rival Milwaukee. It was their 325th regular-season start together, passing the Tigers' **Mickey Lolich** and **Bill Freehan** to set a new AL/NL record for the most common pitcher-catcher batteries in the Modern Era (since 1900), according to the Elias Sports Bureau.

Wainwright and Molina's special night was punctuated with the Cardinals' 4-1 win over the Brewers in front of 46,459 at Busch Stadium. The veteran pitcher picked up his 11th win of the season, the 195th of his career and the 106th in St. Louis through the years. Molina had the go-ahead RBI single in the second inning, and their longtime teammate, **Albert Pujols**, tallied his 2,200th career RBI with an eighth-inning double.

A few facts to support the celebration:

Molina caught Wainwright's first Major League start, on April 6, 2007, at Houston. How long ago was that? The Astros were part of a six-team NL Central, Wainwright's first hitter was Hall of Famer **Craig Biggio** (in his final season), and Albert Pujols was joined in the Cardinals' infield by **Adam Kennedy**, **Scott Rolen** and **David Eckstein**.

Over the past couple of years that Wainwright and Molina have moved into the top five on that aforementioned list of the batterymates with the most starts together in the Modern Era. They passed the Dodgers' **Don Drysdale and Johnny Roseboro** (283), the White Sox's **Red Faber and Ray Schalk** (306), the Braves' **Warren Spahn and Del Crandall** (316) and now, finally, the Tigers' Lolic and Freehan (324). But what do all of those duos have in common? They played in different eras, when pitchers had larger workloads. Lolic and Freehan, the most recent of those, worked together in the 1960s and '70s -- when Lolic made as many as 45 starts in a season.

Per the Elias Sports Bureau, if you limit the field to the Divisional Era (since 1969), Wainwright and Molina's closest competition is **Steve Rogers and Gary Carter** of the Expos (270). If you limit it to the Wild Card Era (since 1995), it's **Tom Glavine and Javy Lopez** of the Braves (232, although they made 16 more starts together in '94).

What about active duos? Among those who have worked together in 2022, the closest would be the Cubs' **Kyle Hendricks and Willson Contreras**. Their total of 105 starts is less than one third of Wainwright and Molina's.

Wainwright has pitched to 17 catchers besides Molina in the Majors. Those bit parts have been filled by All-Stars such as **A.J. Pierzynski and Matt Wieters**, as well as obscure names such as **Matt Pagnozzi and Travis Tartamella**. Those 17 have combined to accrue only 412 1/3 innings with Wainwright, or about 16% of his career total.

**Iván Herrera**, the Cardinals' No. 7 prospect, debuted earlier in 2022 and caught Wainwright's June 27 start against the Marlins. He was 6 years old the first time Wainwright and Yadi started a game together.

Obviously, Molina has caught other pitchers much more than Wainwright has pitched to other catchers. Even so, Molina's 2,136 1/3 innings behind the plate with Wainwright, entering Wednesday, are 1,052 1/3 more than he logged with **Chris Carpenter**, his next-closest partner at 1,079 innings.

Wainwright plus Molina has equaled success for St. Louis over the years. That the club lost their record-tying start last Thursday against the Nationals went against the grain, dropping the Cardinals' mark in their first 324 starts to 212-112. Those 212 victories are a Modern Era regular-season record -- 10 more than Spahn and Crandall had.

That comes out to a .654 Cardinals winning percentage when Wainwright starts on the mound with Molina behind the dish. That equates to a 106-win pace over a 162-game season.

What about some other categories? Their 2,136 1/3 regular-season innings together rank fourth, trailing Spahn-Crandall (2,418 1/3), Lolic-Freehan (2,332 1/3) and **Red Ruffing-Bill Dickey** (2,165 2/3). Their 1,813 strikeouts in appearances together trails only the 1,876 compiled by Lolic and Freehan.

Three of Molina's nine career multi-homer games have come in Wainwright starts. Molina now has racked up 336 hits in games started by Wainwright. That's the third-most hits by any player in starts by any pitcher in Cardinals history, behind only **Lou Brock's** 443 for **Bob Gibson** and **Curt Flood's** 365 for Gibson.

Of Molina's 336 hits in Wainwright starts, 335 have come with him also appearing as a starter (one was as a pinch-hitter). No other starting catcher in AL/NL history has recorded more hits in games started by the same pitcher, with the closest being Dickey's 327 for Yankees teammate Ruffing.

With the Cardinals in playoff position, Wainwright and Molina could extend their partnership for a while longer. It would hardly be the first time, of course. Wainwright has made 15 of his 16 career postseason starts with Molina catching, tying them with the Yankees' **Mike Mussina** and **Jorge Posada** for the fifth-most-prolific starting postseason battery, per Elias. One more will tie them with the Yankees' Posada and **Roger Clemens** for fourth. Also ahead: Molina and Carpenter (18), Glavine and Lopez (19), and **Andy Pettitte** and Posada (24).

## **JAYSON STARK AND SOME GREAT THOUGHTS FOR SEPTEMBER**

1. Will the Dodgers blow up the history books?

Has it dawned on you that we're watching one of the greatest baseball teams of all time? No, not the Orioles. We're talking about the 2022 Chavez Ravine Dodgers.

They're the 1962 Packers of baseball, bludgeoning everyone in their path. They've won 51 games by four runs or more. The Marlins have only played 50 games in which they've *scored* four runs or more. So here's a little taste of where the Dodgers could be heading in the next four weeks:

**112 wins?** That's the pace they're on. They won 106 last year. And did you know no team has ever won 106 (or more) one year and then won *more* games the next?

**An Expected W-L record of 117-45?** Ever heard of a team on pace to win 112 games that's actually *underperforming* its expected won-lost record? That's because there has never been one. Until now. Based on run differential, the Dodgers should be on pace for — *what???* — 117 wins. And yep, that would be a record. According to Baseball-Reference, the most Expected Wins in a season by any team since 1900 is 115, by the 1906 Cubs (who actually won 116).

**A plus-355 run differential?** Speaking of run differential, only two teams since 1900 have ever made it to plus-350 or above: the legendary 1939 Yankees (plus-411) and 1927 Yankees (plus-376). The "modern" National League record? Plus-335, *by the 1902 Pirates*. The NL record in the

162-game-season era? Guess what? These Dodgers *have already set it*, at plus-298, through Wednesday — which puts them on pace to finish at plus-355. Unreal.

**The best at everything!** The Dodgers lead the whole sport in most runs scored. They lead the whole sport in fewest runs allowed. They lead the National League in Defensive Runs Saved, according to Sports Info Solutions. Only one team since World War 2 — Ichiro's 2001 Mariners — has been first in runs scored and allowed. Only one NL team has done it in the last century — Marty Marion's 1944 Cardinals. There was no such thing as Defensive Runs Saved in 1944 (or 2001), so we can't make that comp. But whatever. The point is, you don't see this much!

None of this guarantees the Dodgers will win the World Series, naturally. None of this guarantees the Dodgers will win a postseason series, period. So maybe health, or the back of the bullpen, or the randomness of October, will undermine their claim to historic dominance. But in the meantime, we have four weeks to decide if we've truly appreciated them enough.

"We get bored with greatness sometimes," one rival executive said. "But that team is really awesome. I don't know if they're going to be 'win-117-games awesome.' But I think if they had to, they probably would, if that makes any sense. That's how good they are."

Are the Yankees still a team to fear?

I almost changed this question to: "Are the Yankees still better than the Orioles?" But we can save that one for some other time. It's disorienting enough that if the season had started on July 5, the Yankees would be trailing the Orioles in their division *by 10 1/2 games!*

So after losing 31 of their last 53, the Pinstripes have a lot of housekeeping to do to clean up this mess, restore order and regain their fear factor over the next few weeks, because here's the stuff hovering over them:

**They can't blow a 15 1/2-game lead, right?** How many teams in the World Series era have coughed up a lead as humongous as the Yankees' 15 1/2-game spread in the American League East on July 8? That would be none! The largest lead blown by any first-place team is 13, by **Ralph Branca's** 1951 Dodgers. These Yankees aren't re-enacting that collapse, are they? Seriously?

FYI, the biggest lead ever blown by any Yankees team that didn't finish first isn't even half that large, according to Baseball-Reference's Katie Sharp. It's a mere seven games, by the 2015 Yankees — not that it seemed so "mere" at the time.

**Can they recover from already making 10 games of that lead disappear?** Even if the Yankees hold on to win the division, as we're assuming they will, it still took this team only 45 games to make 10 games of that lead disappear. And here's what you need to know about that:

Only two Yankees teams had ever lost 10 games off any lead in that span or less, according to Stats Perform — the 2012 Yankees (over 44 games) and the 1928 edition (38 games). But both of those teams wound up finishing first anyway.

What if that *doesn't* happen this time, though? What if they actually (gasp) *don't* finish first? According to STATS, just six teams in the World Series era have lost 10 games off their lead that swiftly and ended up not in first place:

| <u>YEAR</u> | <u>TEAM</u> | <u>SPAN</u> |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 2014        | Giants*     | 19 games    |
| 1995        | Angels      | 32 games    |
| 1993        | Giants      | 43 games    |
| 1979        | Astros      | 45 games    |
| 1951        | Dodgers     | 36 games    |
| 1942        | Dodgers     | 36 games    |

*(\*- still made playoffs, won World Series)*

So granted, it didn't end well for most of those teams above. But assuming this Yankees team hangs on, holds onto its first-round bye, takes a breath and resets for October, every exec I surveyed said they're still dangerous.

"To me, that's still a great team," one AL exec said. "In the first half, I think everyone thought they were over their skis. But in the end, they're going to finish with a great record and a bye. And it's been shown over and over that the way you play at the end (of the regular season) means nothing. If they show up in Game 1 at Yankee Stadium, and **Gerrit Cole** is on the mound and Aaron Judge is in the lineup, they're terrifying. Ever sat in that stadium in October? I have. And it's a terrifying place to play."

### 3. Could the Mets turn into the 2021 Dodgers?

See that chart above? Could it really apply to *both* New York teams? Yikes, it really could — because the Mets just managed to carve 10 games off their 10 1/2-game lead in *less* time than the Yankees — 43 games. They were caught from behind Tuesday by those rampaging Braves. So here's some perspective on that stunning development:

**10-plus games up and lost their whole lead?** According to MLB.com's Sarah Langs, the Mets just became the eighth team in the division-play era to hold a double-digit lead at any point in a

season and then give up all of it. Three of those teams — the 1995 Angels, 1993 Giants and 1979 Astros — are on that list above. The others:

**2019 Twins (still won division)**

**2012 Yankees (ditto)**

**2006 Tigers (wild card)**

**1978 Red Sox (Bucky “Bleeping” Dent)**

**But this is no collapse!** Since the last time the Mets held a double-digit lead (after the games of June 1), they’ve gone 18 games over .500 — *and the Braves still caught them*. I’ve looked at every team on that list above. Only two of those other “collapsers” even had a winning record while their leads were vanishing — **Will Clark’s** 1993 Giants (five games over .500 in that span) and **Nelson Cruz’s** 2019 Twins (two over).

So we’re hereby banning the use of the word “collapse” to describe this situation. Got it? That’s because ...

**The Braves never lose!** In that same period, the Braves have played 86 games. They’re 62-24! How sizzling is that? Only one Braves team in franchise history ever had a better 86-game stretch than that. And that was the 1914 “Miracle” Braves, who pulled off an even more epic comeback.

But back to the Mets. Just one team on that list above was chased down by a club that won at a rate that matched or beat these Braves. And that was those ‘93 Giants, who were famously caught by the **Greg Maddux/Tom Glavine/John Smoltz** Braves, who also went 62-24 over 86 games. Amazing. But now ...

**Here’s why this matters.** There is *no* race in either league this September that carries the stakes that this one has. The Braves are the defending champs. According to STATS, they just became the first reigning World Series winners to take over first place in September for the first time all season since **Reggie Jackson’s** 1978 Yankees (and just the third ever). So for these Braves, winning the division would put them in the best possible position to become the first NL team to win back-to-back World Series since the 1975-76 Big Red Machine.

But the implications for the Mets are far greater — and scarier. They’ve already spent 153 days in first place. So just the psychological and emotional scars of not finishing that ride would be inescapable. But also ...

One rival exec pointed to what happened to the 106-win Dodgers last year, the best team ever to not win its division or league. Because those Dodgers didn’t finish first, they were thrown into a grind of wild-card game/intense five-game NLDS/grueling coast-to-coast travel/no home field in the NLCS. And they paid the price. So could the Mets face that same fate?

“I think the Mets-Braves race is the most interesting race in September, because of the impact,” that exec said. “But especially for the Mets. I think we all have the same question about that team — about how many bullets both **(Max) Scherzer and (Jacob) deGrom** have in them. So having to waste those bullets in a three-game (wild-card) series, and then having to go on the road (to start the NLDS) and having to pitch **(Chris) Bassitt and (Taijuan) Walker** in the first two games? Not ideal.

“But there’s also the long-term part. Listen, the Mets have unlimited money, so they can do whatever they want financially. But they have an aging Scherzer and they have deGrom probably opting out (after this season). So this is a huge year. It’s so important for them to have those guys healthy and lined up for the (NLDS). So it would really impact their ability to go deep into October if they have to play that first round.”

#### 4. Will the AL Central expose the flaws in the new playoff format?

On one level, the AL Central is the most entertaining division race in baseball. Three teams — the Guardians, Twins and White Sox — bunched within two games of each other, with under four weeks to play? Sign us up for that show. But on the other hand ...

“How many games is the champion of that division going to win?” asked one exec. “Maybe 84? 85?”

Hmmm, good guess. The current division leaders — the Guardians — are just five games over .500 (70-65). And these three teams still have 18 games left against each other. So if they beat up on each other all the way to the finish, here’s what we could be looking at:

You’d have a division champ that’s only six or eight games over .500 somehow hosting all three games of a best-of-three series, against a team that’s 16 to 20 games over .500. Is that fair, considering the better team gets *no* home games in that round?

“In the National League, it’s not so bad because the Cardinals are going to be the 3-seed, and they’re really good,” the same exec went on. “But in the American League, it’s more stark. None of those teams in the Central are very good. But one of them is going to be a 3-seed, get three home games and play against Toronto or Tampa, who are going to have a better record by what, 10 games? I don’t understand that.”

But that’s not all. The winner of that series also gets to dodge the AL’s top seed, the Astros, because MLB has decided not to reseed the field after the first round. And that setup, too, has issues.

As Rob Mains wrote recently in Baseball Prospectus and Joe Sheehan wrote this week in his newsletter, that creates an incentive for teams in a wild-card race to *lose* down the stretch, so they can finish as the 6-seed instead of the 5-seed. Is that cool with everyone? It shouldn’t be.

But it's a real thing. You get to match up with the AL Central winner *and* avoid the Astros? What's the downside there?

"In all seriousness," the same exec said, "the idea that the White Sox or Guardians or Twins have an easier path to getting to the LCS than the Rays or Blue Jays or Mariners is insane. ... This needs to change. You just have to say, 'The two best records get the byes, period.'"

5. Will Ohtani/Judge be the greatest MVP debate ever?

There's no magic formula for what an MVP looks like. And that's too bad. More than ever, as the 2022 AL MVP duel roars into September, we could use one!

I'm not sure we have ever lived in a world where a player like the 2022 **Aaron Judge** was *not* an MVP. The problem is, I know we have never lived in a world where any human quite like **Shohei Ohtani** has played baseball.

I'm convinced that Judge is going to hit 62 home runs — if not 72. So he's going to walk with the legends, for the first-place New York Yankees. And his gargantuan second half — 22 home runs, an OPS (1.326) about 300 points higher than anyone in his league, a slugging percentage (.839) about 200 points higher — looks as if it's going to be the single largest reason his team avoids a historic *el foldo*. Now *that* is what MVPs — and MVP narratives — look like.

But what the heck do we do about Ohtani? He won a unanimous MVP award last year. He has been even more ridiculous this year. My friend Joel Sherman, of the New York Post, said the other day that Ohtani might be having the greatest season ever. I'm not sure he's wrong.

As a hitter, Ohtani went into Wednesday with a better OPS+ (149) than **Freddie Freeman** or **Mookie Betts**. As a pitcher, he has a better ERA (2.58) and strikeout rate (12.0 per nine innings) than the guy who won the last AL Cy Young Award, **Robbie Ray** (2.84 ERA, 11.5 K/9 rate last year).

And how dominant is this dude, really, at both of those things? MLB.com's Andrew Simon figured that out earlier this week. Ohtani would have to go *0 for his next 249* at the plate to have *his* slugging percentage (.533) slip below the slugging percentage of those poor hitters who have to face him (.349)? No kidding.

So how can Ohtani *not* be the MVP? And how can Judge *not* be the MVP? Even the execs I asked have no idea how to answer this one.

"For Judge to have this season on a team that's winning, that would be a tiebreaker for me," one exec said. "But I also can't hold (not winning) against Ohtani, because I think what Ohtani is doing is far more mind-blowing than what Judge is doing. Not to disparage Judge in any way, but what Judge is doing happens once every — what? — 25 years. But what Ohtani is doing happens once every 100 years."

Uh, wait a second, I said. Remember that he also did it *last* year?

“Oh, right,” the exec said, laughing. “Sorry. I mean, other than last year, it’s once every 100 years.”

OK, that’s true. Except the time it happened last year, that Ohtani guy won an MVP award. So why would he not win it again? We have four weeks to wrestle with that one!

6. Can Goldschmidt turn the Triple Crown into a thing again?

The last time a Triple Crown winner passed through this sport, I’m officially ruling right here that the Triple Crown was *the* reason **Miguel Cabrera** won the AL MVP Award in 2012. The debate was theoretically Miggy versus **Mike Trout**. But really, it was romance and history versus WAR and wRC+. I’m not sure romance and history should have won that competition, but hey, I get it.

So now here we are, 10 years later. And now here comes Cardinals star **Paul Goldschmidt**, trying to do something that was last accomplished as recently as 85 years ago – namely, win a Triple Crown in the NL.

Heading into Wednesday night, Goldschmidt led the NL in average (.329) and RBIs (107). And he was just two back of **Kyle Schwarber** for the home run lead. So with four weeks to go, he has a realistic shot at a legitimately magnetic and cool feat. And we should care about that.

FYI, we’ve had lots of great NL players in those 85 years who won two legs of a Triple Crown. Just usually, it’s the homer/RBI legs. But the two Goldschmidt legs — leading in average and RBIs — that’s almost as rare as a Triple Crown itself.

Led in average and RBIs, expansion era

| <u>HITTER</u>      | <u>YEAR</u> | <u>AVERAGE</u> | <u>RBI</u> |
|--------------------|-------------|----------------|------------|
| <b>Todd Helton</b> | 2000        | .372           | 147        |
| <b>Al Oliver</b>   | 1983        | .331           | 109        |
| <b>Joe Torre</b>   | 1971        | .363           | 137        |
| <b>Henry Aaron</b> | 1963        | .346           | 153        |

But now, here’s the difference between Goldschmidt in 2022 and Miggy in 2012. Unlike Miggy, Goldschmidt’s MVP candidacy will *not* be defined by whether he wins the Triple Crown.

He's also leading the league in OBP, Slugging, OPS, Win Probability Added and Wins Above Replacement, among other stuff. Not to mention he has a **Lou Gehrig**-esque OPS+ (194). So he obviously has outlit everyone else in his league, Triple Crown or no Triple Crown. Nevertheless, *he's chasing a Triple Crown*. And that's cool, historic and fun. It's a reason to pay attention this month. So let's do that.

"The thing with Goldschmidt," said one AL exec, "is that he's clearly the best offensive player in the league — *and* he's also doing something that hasn't been done in 85 years. We should talk about that more, because that's great for baseball when those things happen."

7. Who wins home-field advantage in the first round — and how large will it loom?

They've been playing postseason baseball for nearly 120 years. But something is about to happen this October that we've never seen before:

We'll see four postseason series in which one team gets to host *all* the games, with the stands full of actual humans.

That's the format for the new wild-card series — a best-of-three, with all three games in the ballpark of the higher seed. True, baseball tried that during the 2020 wild-card round, but that was in the cardboard-cutout, zero-attendance pandemic postseason. So this will be very different. And although it makes sense on lots of levels, there's a lot to digest here.

**Who has to worry about it?** In the NL, this is practically a done deal already. The Cardinals are running away with the NL Central, so that's all but settled. And at least the consolation for the Mets or Braves for *not* winning the NL East is getting to host all three games in the first round. The Padres, Phillies and Brewers have almost no chance to do that.

So all the drama is in the AL, with the Rays/Mariners/Blue Jays/Orioles wild-card free-for-all on one side of the draw and the AL Central tussle on the other side. Why do I think we'll still be following this when all those Game 162's start at 4 p.m. ET on Oct. 5?

**Is home-field advantage a real thing in October?** This isn't the NFL. This isn't the NBA. Home field doesn't mean *that* much, in the postseason or any other time. But is it a real thing? Heck, yeah, it is.

**Home team win pct., 2022 regular season: .531**

**Home team win pct., 1995-2021 postseason: .550**

*(Source: Baseball-Reference/Stathead)*

**So who needs home field most?** The Twins (40-29) have the best home record among the AL Central field. The Rays (47-24) have a sizable lead for best home record among the AL wild-card

contenders. But when I surveyed execs on this question, two other teams were mentioned prominently.

**Mariners:** Hey, they've waited 21 years — essentially **Julio Rodríguez's** entire lifetime — to play postseason baseball. So think about what it would mean to that fan base to break the drought with three raucous games in Seattle — as opposed to the disappointment of watching three road games being played as distant as 3,000 miles away.

"It would feel so much different for those people to have that best-of-three in Seattle, where there hasn't been a playoff game in 21 years," one AL exec said. "You got a taste of it in the last weekend of the regular season last year (when the Mariners just missed the playoffs). It would be bananas. It would be an SEC football game for three straight days. So I think that more than any other place, the difference between non-home playoff games and home playoff games in Seattle would be enormous."

**Blue Jays:** Anybody remember the October electricity in Toronto in 2015 and 2016? What team would want to wander into three days' worth of that bedlam in October? But that's not even the No. 1 reason the Blue Jays came up in this discussion. Yeah, it's the COVID-19 factor again. How many unvaccinated players on the other team *wouldn't* be able to play in Canada in every game the Jays host? Their potential opponents are already contemplating that question.

"That's a topic people might not be talking about now, but it's going to become a thing really quickly for any team that looks like it might have to go play there," one rival exec said. "That's going to get interesting, because you know there's some team out there that has a couple of players that can't play there, at least right now. So if they end up in that spot, it's going to be a major story."

#### 8. Other stuff on our September watch list

**The Orioles!** No team has ever lost 110 games one year and then made the postseason the next year. Could these Orioles be the first? Don't tell them they can't be!

**The Phillies!** All 14 other NL teams have played a postseason game since the last time the Phillies played one. Remember **Ryan Howard** sprawled in the dirt, clutching his torn Achilles, in October 2011? That was the last postseason pitch thrown to any Phillie. But they've spent the big bucks to go for it this year. And here they are, with 241 million reasons to hope they can hand that Longest NL Drought baton to the Pirates (2015) in a few weeks.

**Verlander!** Can he make it back from his calf injury to win a third Cy Young Award? If he can, **Justin Verlander** would become the first pitcher ever to win a Cy Young after missing the entire previous season. He'd tie **Early Wynn** as the oldest AL Cy Young winner ever (at 39 years old). And he'd become just the second pitcher ever to go 11-plus years between his first and last Cy Young (trailing only **Roger Clemens**, who went 18).

**Corbin!** With four weeks to go, **Patrick Corbin** is lugging around 17 losses. Can he avoid becoming the first 20-game loser since **Mike Maroth** in 2003? We're about to find out. Maroth had eight starts left when he lost his 17th. Corbin figures to have five more starts if the Nationals keep running him out there. But here's a question: Why would they?

**Albert!** Finally, how can you not get caught up in the **Albert Pujols** 700-homer watch? He's five away, with 25 games left to play. The Baseball Earth has spun him back home to St. Louis for his grand finale. And it's as fun as any living legend's closing act could possibly be.

"I think it's awesome," one rival exec said. "I feel like when you think about how the all-time greats end their careers, sometimes they end and everybody does that victory tour but they really can't do anything anymore, and it's kind of sad. But not in Albert's case. I don't know if it was realistic to think this was going to happen. But it's happening. And it's super cool."

### **TEAMMATES 1-2 IN MVP VOTING**

If teammates finishing first and second in MVP Award voting sounds like a rarity, that's because it is. There have been just six instances in the divisional era (since 1969) of teammates finishing 1-2 for the award.

It makes sense, given that we've come to expect that teammates who excel in the same year may "split the vote," preventing either from winning an award. But sometimes, two teammates produce enough that even that doesn't stand in the way.

This is of particular relevance in 2022, with the Cardinals' **Paul Goldschmidt and Nolan Arenado** tied leading all National League players with 7.3 WAR, per Baseball Reference (entering Sunday). They could join this exclusive list when awards are announced in November.

Here's a look at the six instances of teammates finishing first and second in MVP Award voting in the same year in the divisional era. The MVP Award winner is listed first in each pair.

#### **2000 NL: Jeff Kent & Barry Bonds, Giants**

Bonds went on to win the next four NL MVP Awards, but it was his teammate Kent who won in 2000. Kent received 22 of 30 first-place votes, with Bonds getting the next-most, with six. The vote wasn't close between Kent's 392 vote points and Bonds' 279. But **Mike Piazza** was just eight points behind Bonds in third, with 271. That's how close this was to *not* being on the list, and the teammates not finishing first and second.

Both players had prodigious offensive outputs for the 97-win Giants, who won the NL West. Kent hit .334, with 125 RBIs, fourth-most in the NL. Bonds' .688 slugging percentage was second

in the NL, and his 49 homers were second in MLB. The NL WAR leader was actually Todd Helton, who led MLB with 147 RBIs, a .372 batting average and a .698 slugging percentage.

### **1990 NL: Barry Bonds & Bobby Bonilla, Pirates**

That's right, Bonds is on this list twice, but won the award this time. He received 23 of 24 first-place votes, with his Pirates teammate Bonilla getting the other one. Bonds received 331 vote points total. Unlike the 2000 vote, this one wasn't a close call between second and third place, with Bonilla's 212 vote points not close to **Darryl Strawberry's** 167.

Bonds led the NL with 9.7 WAR, a .565 slugging percentage and a .970 OPS. Bonilla had 120 RBIs to Bonds' 114, though it was the Giants' **Matt Williams** who led the NL, with 122. The two helped lead a 95-win Pirates team that won the NL East for the first time since 1979, when the team went on to win the World Series.

### **1989 NL: Kevin Mitchell & Will Clark, Giants**

The Giants have had this happen with two standout teammates twice since '69. Mitchell got 20 of 24 first-place votes and won the award with 314 vote points. His teammate Clark got three of those other four first-place votes, accumulating 225 vote points for second place, well ahead of the Cardinals' **Pedro Guerrero's** 190, in third.

Mitchell led MLB in homers with 47, RBIs with 125, slugging percentage at .634 and OPS at 1.023. Clark tied for the NL lead with 104 runs scored. He also had 196 hits, second in the NL to **Tony Gwynn's** 203. The Giants won the NL West for the second time in three seasons.

### **1983 AL: Cal Ripken Jr. & Eddie Murray, Orioles**

Ripken received 15 of 28 first-place votes, ending up with 322 vote points. His teammate Murray got 10 first-place votes and 290 vote points total. It wasn't close between second and third, with White Sox catcher **Carlton Fisk** next with 209 vote points.

Ripken led the Majors with 8.2 WAR and 211 hits, playing all 162 games and amassing an MLB-leading 663 at-bats. He also led the AL with 121 runs scored. Murray hit .306 himself, with a .538 slugging percentage and 111 RBIs, nine more than Ripken. The O's won 98 games, and went on to win the World Series.

### **1976 NL: Joe Morgan & George Foster, Reds**

Morgan received 19 of 24 first-place votes, totaling 311 points. His teammate Foster got the other five first-place votes and 221 vote points. The Phillies' **Mike Schmidt** was third, with 179 vote points.

Morgan had 60 stolen bases, plus led MLB in WAR (9.6), on-base percentage (.444) and slugging (.576). Foster led the Majors with 121 RBIs. The Reds won 100-plus games for the second straight year and won the NL West for the fifth time in seven seasons, going on to win their second straight World Series.

### **1971 AL: Vida Blue & Sal Bando, Athletics**

Blue, who also won AL Cy Young, received 14 of 24 first-place votes, and 268 total points. His teammate Bando got four first-place votes and 182 points, ahead of the Orioles' **Frank Robinson's** 170 vote points in third.

Blue led the AL with a 1.82 ERA and 0.95 WHIP, and led MLB with eight shutouts. Bando hit .271 with 24 homers and 94 RBIs. The A's won 101 games, the franchise's most since winning 107 in 1931 as the Philadelphia A's.

### **JOE POSNANSKI ON TROUT AND PUJOLS**

(an example of why you might want to subscribe to his newsletter)

#### **MIKE TROUT**

Here's the thing that blows my mind about **Mike Trout**: He's ALWAYS Mike Trout. That is to say that he gets hurt a lot, he's got some sort of congenital back problem going, his teams are always terrible, but when he gets on the field he's always this absurdity, this larger-than-life superstar who is simply better at baseball than anyone else in the entire world.

You see what Trout is doing now. He came back from injury on Aug. 19. In the weeks leading up to his return, there were rumors — triggered by some perhaps imprecise wording from Angels trainer Mike Frostad — that his career was substantially over, that the back thing was going to haunt him for the rest of his career. Those rumors were so forceful and convincing that Trout had to do what he thoroughly loathes doing: Talk about himself.

"I think [Frostad] meant I've got to stay on top of the routine I do on a daily basis to prevent it from coming back," Trout said. "I feel good where it's at right now."

"You think you're going to play again this season?" he was asked.

"Of course," he said. "Of course."

“You don’t have any long-term concerns?”

“No,” he said. “No. No. No.”

OK, so Trout returned on Aug. 19. Twenty-one games ago. In those 21 games\*, he’s hitting .313/.367/.747 with 11 home runs, 17 runs scored and 18 RBIs. You probably don’t want to do the 162-game projection on that, that’s not especially realistic, but quick math will tell you that’s even bigger than what **Aaron Judge** is doing. Trout has now hit home runs in seven straight games.

*\*It goes without saying that the Angels are 10-11 in those 21 games, by the way.*

Trout has played only 100 games — and many of those were pain-filled games (in the three or so weeks leading up to the injury, he hit just .197). Even so, he is now second in the American League in home runs behind Judge. He’s second in the American League in OPS.

Every so often when talking with ballplayers like **Joey Votto**, I’ll bring up Trout along with other great hitters in baseball like Judge and **Yordan Alvarez and Paul Goldschmidt and Mookie Betts**, and they will almost always stop me to say that as great as those other players are, they’re not Trout. He’s his own category.

## ALBERT PUJOLS

For a while baseball fans called Albert Pujols “Ese Hombre” or “The Man.” He asked them to stop doing that. “There is only one ‘Man,’” he said. “And that’s **Stan Musial**.”

After that, “The Machine” (or “La Maquina”) became Pujols’ main nickname (along with Prince Albert, among others). It was a great nickname for Pujols for the first 11 seasons of his career, because the guy put up the same incredible season year after year after year, like a machine. I’ve done this before — but look at this season:

.328/.421/.617 with 41 doubles, 41 homers, 120 RBIs, 117 runs, 89 walks, 64 strikeouts, 170 OPS+.

That’s a pretty good season, no?

Except — that isn't a season. That's the AVERAGE season for Albert Pujols between 2001 and 2011. As good as you might remember Pujols being, he was probably better than that. He won three MVP awards. He probably should have won five or six. He led position players in WAR every year from 2005 through 2010.

Anyway, the Machine broke down for almost a decade in Anaheim. Some of it was predictable — Anaheim is a tough hitters' park, he was 32 when he got to town, etc. Some of it was unforeseen. Pujols could still hit mistakes out of the park, and he did hit 222 home runs for the Angels, which is as many as **Brian Downing** and more than **Troy Glaus**. But the rest of his game suffered. And it was hard to watch. The Angels flat-out released him last year.

He went to the Dodgers and discovered something about himself: If given the chance, he could still punish left-handed pitching. Throughout his career, Pujols had a pretty normal-looking split — he might have hit lefties a touch better than righties, but only a touch. The Machine punished all.

But as he saw his career come to a close, he found that with his experience and know-how, he could really exploit that platoon advantage. He hit 17 home runs in 2021. Thirteen of them were off lefties. His slugging percentage against righties was an astonishing .266. His slugging percentage against lefties was an equally astonishing .603.

Then, as we all know, he returned to St. Louis, and the Cardinals tried hard to match him up against left-handed pitching — and the results are mind-boggling.

Against righties, Pujols is hitting .200/.292/.360, which is poor, sure, but better than last year.

But against lefties? He's **Babe Ruth**. He's **Josh Gibson**. He's hitting .363/.405/.775 against lefties. He has hit 12 home runs in 116 plate appearances. That's one homer per every 9.3 plate appearances. How good is that? When **Barry Bonds** hit 73 home runs, he hit one homer every 9.1 plate appearances.

And here's the thing — if you watch Pujols hit against lefties, it's like watching the years melt away. He's attacking the ball. He's swinging like he's 25 years old. He's hitting absolute rockets.

Pujols seems determined to retire at the end of the year, though I cannot imagine he will if he falls short of 700 homers. Then again, I don't think he's going to fall short of 700 home runs. He's at 697. There have to be three lefties he can face over the next two-plus weeks.

### JOE SHEEHAN ON MOOKIE BETTS

(an example of why you might want to subscribe to his newsletter)

Last night, **Mookie Betts** hit a three-run homer to cap a 6-0 Dodgers win that clinched the NL West. It's the team's ninth division title in ten years, a streak broken only by the 107-win 2021 Giants. The Dodgers, after some postseason troubles early in the run, have won three of the last five NL pennants and are the favorites to win a fourth in six years. They've won nine of their last 13 postseason series, a mark that would have gotten you nine championships up to 1969 and at least five in the years after that through 1993.

The Dodgers' postseason track record, and how we judge baseball teams in general, will be a big topic in October. Today, I want to go back to that three-run homer and the player who hit it. Mookie Betts has an MVP award and two rings, and I'm not entirely sure the average fan knows how great he is. I'm not sure I did until I went digging.

Consider this list of active bWAR leaders:

#### Simply The Best (most bWAR, active players)

|                  | bWAR  | Age |
|------------------|-------|-----|
| Albert Pujols    | 100.9 | 42  |
| Mike Trout       | 81.4  | 30  |
| Justin Verlander | 77.0  | 39  |
| Clayton Kershaw  | 71.6  | 34  |
| Zack Greinke     | 70.9  | 38  |

|                     |             |           |
|---------------------|-------------|-----------|
| Max Scherzer        | 70.2        | 37        |
| Robinson Cano       | 68.1        | 39        |
| Miguel Cabrera      | 67.9        | 39        |
| Joey Votto          | 64.3        | 38        |
| Evan Longoria       | 58.3        | 36        |
| Paul Goldschmidt    | 58.0        | 34        |
| <b>Mookie Betts</b> | <b>56.3</b> | <b>29</b> |
| Nolan Arenado       | 51.4        | 31        |
| Manny Machado       | 51.0        | 29        |

Betts is three months younger than Manny Machado, making him the youngest player in baseball with at least 50 bWAR. All these players lost wins to the pandemic season, but Betts, Machado, Mike Trout and Nolan Arenado lost prime years. They're short two to four wins of what they might otherwise have. Keep that in mind as you read this next list.

(As I've mentioned before, I like using 1961 as a cutoff because it is a reasonable approximation of when the leagues were fully integrated. All the following charts and analysis do so. Your mileage may vary.)

#### Another Hero (bWAR through age-29 season, since 1961)

| bWAR             |      |
|------------------|------|
| Alex Rodriguez   | 80.6 |
| Mike Trout       | 76.1 |
| Albert Pujols    | 73.8 |
| Ken Griffey Jr.  | 70.7 |
| Barry Bonds      | 66.5 |
| Roger Clemens    | 62.6 |
| Rickey Henderson | 61.4 |

|                     |             |
|---------------------|-------------|
| Johnny Bench        | 59.5        |
| Bert Blyleven       | 59.3        |
| Clayton Kershaw     | 58.8        |
| Tom Seaver          | 58.0        |
| Andruw Jones        | 58.0        |
| Cal Ripken Jr.      | 57.8        |
| Pedro Martinez      | 57.3        |
| Ron Santo           | 56.6        |
| <b>Mookie Betts</b> | <b>56.3</b> |

Betts is 16th on this list, at the tail end of a large cluster of players. In 2020, Betts put up 3.6 bWAR in a 60-game campaign, on pace for nearly a ten-win season. bWAR doesn't always work that way, but you don't have to be a family member to think that Betts would have racked up another four wins in 2020, leapfrogging that cluster to become just the eighth player in the expansion era with at least 60 bWAR before he turned 30.

That shortened campaign sticks out on his b-r page, the only "full" season in which he's had fewer than four bWAR. Mookie Betts doesn't have bad years. He was worth 2.3 wins in 52 games as a rookie. His "down year" in 2021 was a four-win season that most players would die to have -- .264/.367/.487 (126 OPS+), ten steals -- all while playing 122 games despite injuries to his back, forearm, and hip. Drafted out of a Nashville high school at 18, Betts did nothing but hit in the Sox system while being promoted slowly. He might reasonably have been called up sooner in 2014 and had a four-win season.

If we put our thumb on the scale and just look at players from ages 22 through 29, we find six who have been worth at least four wins in all eight years. Betts is at seven plus 3.6 bWAR in 60 games in 2020 -- I think we should give it to him.

The list of highest WAR totals by young players is dominated by ones who reached the majors at 20 and younger. That's as it should be -- playing well in the majors at that age is a sign, in and

of itself, of greatness. If we use that same thumb on that same scale to limit ourselves to players across Betts' eight full campaigns...

(most bWAR, ages 22-29, since 1961)

|                     |             |
|---------------------|-------------|
| Albert Pujols       | 67.3        |
| Alex Rodriguez      | 66.1        |
| Barry Bonds         | 62.9        |
| Roger Clemens       | 60.8        |
| Tom Seaver          | 58.0        |
| Mike Trout          | 56.2        |
| Ken Griffey Jr.     | 55.2        |
| <b>Mookie Betts</b> | <b>54.1</b> |
| Pedro Martinez      | 54.0        |

Mookie Betts, since becoming a full-time player, has played like an inner-circle Hall of Famer, like some of the best players in baseball history.

Betts hit last night's homer in a game he started and in which played all nine innings at second base. It's not terribly unusual -- Betts was primarily a second baseman in the minors, moved off the position in deference to Dustin Pedroia. The Dodgers gave him one start at second in 2020 and five each in 2021 and 2022, looking to establish their Team Pretzel bona fides and allow Dave Roberts to get all his outfielders into the lineup.

When Betts reached the majors in 2014, he had played just 415 career innings in the outfield, all in '14, so it's incredible that he's become one of the best outfielders of his era. But for coming up alongside Jackie Bradley Jr., Betts probably would have been a center fielder, though playing right field at Fenway Park is as close as a right fielder gets to having a center fielder's defensive responsibilities. He took to the position well enough to have won five Gold Glove awards in an era when those awards have better tracked defensive performance.

There are just three active players who have at least five seasons of four offensive bWAR and one defensive bWAR. (We'll call them "two-way seasons.") Betts is one of them, along with Nolan Arenado and Carlos Correa. Take off the "active" tag and return to our earlier criteria, and...

Show Some Respect (4+ oWAR and 1+ dWAR seasons, by age 29, since 1961)

Johnny Bench 8

Cal Ripken Jr. 7

Alex Rodriguez 6

George Brett 6

Mike Schmidt 6

**nine tied with 5**

Betts is in the last group, with five two-way seasons by age 29. I hate to keep harping on this, but Betts's 2020 season (2.6 oWAR, .09 dWAR) was certainly headed for this as well, elevating him to a tie with some of the best two-way players ever. The 2020 season will be poisoning our stats for a generation.

Running at this from a different direction, Betts's combination of offensive and defensive value in his twenties marks him as one of the all-time two-way players.

What You Get Is What You See (40+ oWAR and 10+ dWAR before age 30, since 1961)

oWAR dWAR

Alex Rodriguez 77.5 11.6

Ken Griffey Jr. 64.1 10.3

Barry Bonds 49.9 11.7

|                     |             |             |
|---------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Johnny Bench        | 50.3        | 17.7        |
| Cal Ripken Jr.      | 48.5        | 19.9        |
| <b>Mookie Betts</b> | <b>41.2</b> | <b>12.9</b> |
| Robin Yount         | 51.0        | 12.1        |
| Manny Machado       | 41.9        | 13.5        |
| Mike Schmidt        | 40.3        | 12.7        |
| Alan Trammell       | 41.2        | 14.8        |
| Jim Fregosi         | 44.3        | 11.6        |

Again, this is with Betts being shorted by the 2020 season. (Manny Machado, who also lost WAR to the pandemic, is perhaps even more underrated than Mookie Betts is.)

Look, we live in the age of Mike Trout, who was so incredible in his twenties that he broke the curve. He's the best player of his era and, if you acknowledge that baseball players are always getting better, the best player ever. Betts, though, now looks very much like the clear #2 from this era, and he has some markers Trout doesn't have: More two-way value, more postseason performance, two rings, better durability. Over the last five years, Betts is five WAR clear of the field, even with that injury-plagued 2021 season.

The best may be yet to come. Betts, to me, is most reminiscent of a player we haven't mentioned yet.

### Two People

|          | PA   | AVG  | OBP  | OPS+ | SB  | oWAR | dWAR |
|----------|------|------|------|------|-----|------|------|
| Betts    | 4984 | .294 | .370 | .523 | 158 | 41.2 | 12.9 |
| Player X | 5298 | .270 | .384 | .414 | 320 | 47.5 | 1.4  |

Player X played in a total dead zone for offense, and he stayed at second base rather than being moved to the outfield. He stole more bases because everyone did and, while not shown above, struck out less because everyone did.

Joe Morgan was on a Hall of Fame trajectory in his twenties. Then he put together one of the best stretches of my lifetime, a three-year run in which he hit .313/.446/.525 (171 OPS+), stole 62 bases a year with an 86% success rate, won two NL MVP awards and helped his team to two championships. He was one of the best percentage players of all time, one of the smartest players of all time, and was eventually elected to the Hall of Fame on his first ballot.

Now, baseball is played differently today, so I doubt Mookie Betts has that kind of running in his future. The rest of it, though, is within his grasp. Morgan's 1975 season is one of just nine 11-win seasons in my lifetime, ninth-best of that group. You know who just missed? Mookie Betts in 2018, with 10.7.

Mookie Betts is the second-best player of his era, which makes him one of the very best players ever. His combination of offense and defense puts him in a rare category among players in the last 60 years, as complete a player as has played the game. His baseball intellect calls to mind that of Joe Morgan, who combined talent and experience and that intellect to play an all-time stretch of baseball in his early thirties. The best may be yet to come for Betts.

A piece like this would be impossible without the [Stathead](#) tool. I use it for work, obviously, but also for fun, randomly looking up splits or leaderboards or whatever else pops up in my baseball day. I'm grateful to Sean Forman for building it, and I encourage all of you to give it a try.

### **MINOR LEAGUE NAMES TO NOTE FOR THE FUTURE**

From the free newsletter major league pipeline

With the Minor League season nearing its conclusion, I want to highlight the five performances that have stood out the most in 2022:

**Vaun Brown, OF, Giants:** I handle our Giants prospect coverage, and coming into the year, the only thing I knew about Brown was that he was a 10th-round pick in the 2021 Draft out of NCAA Division II Florida Southern as a 23-year-old. No longer anonymous, he has hit

.346/.437/.623 with 23 homers and 44 steals while rising from Single-A to Double-A, and he currently leads the Minors in hitting and ranks second in OPS. He's loaded with tools too, including well-above-average raw power and plus-plus speed.

**Jackson Chourio, OF, Brewers:** After spending last year in the Rookie-level Dominican Summer League, the lowest level of the Minors, Chourio will finish this season in Double-A -- at age 18. Baseball's biggest breakout performer in 2022, he has established himself as one of the game's top prospects while batting .300/.354/.562 with 20 homers and 14 steals between Single-A and High-A. He has electric bat speed and could wind up with four plus-or-better tools (his fringy arm is the lone exception).

**Elly De La Cruz, SS/3B, Reds:** De La Cruz was the Chourio of 2021, wowing evaluators in his U.S. debut after making the jump from the DSL. He has continued to dazzle with his size, athleticism and five-tool potential this summer while hitting .300/.355/.599 with 28 homers and 43 steals between High-A and Double-A at age 20. If he can go deep two more times before the season ends, he'll become the Minors' first 30-30 player since Luis Robert and Kyle Tucker in 2019.

**Andrew Painter, RHP, Phillies:** The 13th overall pick in the 2022 Draft, Painter has posted a 1.17 ERA, .170 opponent average and a 6.00 K/BB ratio in 99 2/3 innings while advancing to Double-A in his full-season debut at age 19. He'd be leading the Minors in ERA and opponent average if he had enough innings to qualify, and while he'll fall a few short, no pitcher has worked more innings with a lower ERA since Mike Villano (0.99) in 1996. He has four quality pitches in a fastball that reaches 98 mph, a distinct curveball and slider and an advanced changeup.

**Gavin Stone, RHP, Dodgers:** The highest-drafted pitcher in Central Arkansas history and the penultimate pick in the five-round 2020 Draft, Stone has improved his repertoire in pro ball. He now works with a mid-90s fastball that features a tough approach angle, a mid-80s slider/cutter and an upper-80s changeup that dives at the plate. He has used those weapons to lead the Minors in ERA (1.56) and rank seventh in strikeout rate (12.3 per nine innings) while surging from High-A to Triple-A.

He couldn't quite crack my top five, but Diamondbacks right-hander **Brandon Pfaadt** has had a special season as well. Until he ended the drought on Sunday, 11 years had passed since a Minor League pitcher struck out 200 batters in a season. He whiffed 11 in eight innings for Triple-A Reno, pushing his season total to 202 in 155 1/3 frames between Double-A and Triple-A.

A fifth-round pick out of NCAA Division II Bellarmine (Ky.) in 2020, Pfaadt can miss bats with his fastball, slider and changeup. He also pounds the strike zone and ranks fourth in the Minors in K/BB ratio (6.5). Ranked No. 94 on [MLB Pipeline's Top 100 Prospects list](#), he should arrive in Arizona in early 2023.

With teams more conscious than ever of not piling innings on young arms, the 200-strikeout Minor League pitcher is nearly extinct. There were 11 in the first 12 seasons of this millennium, but Pfaadt is the only one in the last 11 years. Here's a complete list:

**Brandon Claussen**, 2001 - 220  
**Edwar Cabrera**, 2011 - 217  
**Clint Nageotte**, 2002 - 214  
**Matt Moore**, 2011 - 210  
**Matt Moore**, 2010 - 208  
**Trevor May**, 2011 - 208  
**Francisco Liriano**, 2005 - 204  
**Jose Beckett**, 2001 - 203  
**Brandon McCarthy**, 2004 - 202  
**Brandon Pfaadt**, 2022 - 202  
**David Williams**, 2000 - 201  
**Yusmeiro Petit**, 2004 - 200

The last two Minor Leaguers to reach the 300-strikeout plateau were **Nolan Ryan** (307 in 1966) and **Dwight Gooden** (300 in 1983). **Grover Lowdermilk** established the all-time record with 465 in 397 innings in 1907, mostly with Mattoon in the Class D Eastern Illinois League.

### **THIS WEEK'S HISTORY LESSON**

Red Sox Nation, meet your horn-tooting, rabble-rousing granddaddies, the Royal Rooters. They were the original sports fans, ebullient and rowdy and committed. For them, it was never only a game.

By Paul Ringel, Boston Globe

One hundred twenty-five years ago this month, a group of Boston baseball fans traveled to Baltimore armed with fish horns and police rattles to celebrate their beloved Beaneaters (later renamed the Braves), who played the Orioles in a series that decided the 1897 National League pennant. Boston won the series and the title, and those fans came to see themselves as a good luck charm. That weekend launched a traveling band of New England baseball fanatics known as the Royal Rooters — and the start of our modern expectations of the behavior of American sports fans.

For the next two decades, the Rooters traveled with the Braves and the Red Sox as they won six World Series and an additional pennant race. The Rooters were the first American sports fans to become nationally famous, thanks to rituals that included pregame parades with marching bands, stomping and dancing on dugouts, and relentless singing of their signature song, “Tessie.” The Rooters received newspaper coverage from Florida to Montana and were powerful enough to have a Red Sox employee fired after the 1912 season for neglecting to save their customary seats for Game 7 of the World Series. (A near riot ensued when the Rooters

discovered their seats occupied.) In 1917, the American League gave them tickets to the Series as a “baseball institution of twenty years’ standing,” even though neither Boston team was playing.

Americans had paid to attend sporting events since at least the early 1800s, and for most of that time attendance carried a stain of disrepute because it was associated with drinking, gambling, and violence. Rabid supporters were called kranks or fanatics; the most famous fans during the 1800s were eccentric millionaires and actors who enjoyed being linked to such a marginalized form of entertainment.

Most Rooters fit neither category. They were young and middle-aged white men who pushed the boundaries of acceptable behavior with their heckling, wagering, and preening for photographers. They may not have been millionaires, but they had means. Traveling with Boston’s baseball teams required a significant income; the cost of the 1903 trip to Pittsburgh for the first World Series was \$100, which was almost two months’ salary for the average American worker of the time. Many Rooters participated in multiple trips, including a California spring training excursion in 1911 and five additional World Series between 1912 and 1918.

Some in the media — especially outside Boston — found their behavior repugnant. The Sporting News called them “braying” and “clowning seekers.” But gradually, the press became more admiring. During the 1916 World Series, a reporter for the Boston Journal noted that the Rooters were “outgrowing the cruder joys of their earlier years” and even giving cheering lessons to Brooklyn Dodgers fans who were enjoying their first championship contest.

The Rooters faded away after Boston’s run of baseball championships ended in 1918, but their legacy has persisted. In 2004, the Dropkick Murphys and sportswriter Jeff Horrigan created an updated version of “Tessie” that plays after every game at Fenway Park. The song begins, “Tessie is the Royal Rooters rally cry.”

In 2008, Dropkicks’ singer Ken Casey opened McGreevy’s, a sports bar on Boylston Street intended to replicate the look and feel of Rooter Michael T. “Nuf Ced” McGreevy’s Third Base Saloon. (McGreevy reportedly got his nickname by pounding on the bar and bellowing “Nuf Ced!” to end sports debates.) The New England Historical Society has described him as “the Grandfather of Red Sox Nation,” and Peter Nash, in his book “Boston’s Royal Rooters,” calls him “perhaps the most influential baseball fan of all time.”

Perhaps, but he was not the most famous during the group’s heyday. That distinction belonged to John F. “Honey Fitz” Fitzgerald, the congressman and, later, mayor of Boston, who led the Rooters on tours of the US Capitol and made an unsuccessful attempt to buy the Red Sox.

According to newspapers of the day, 19th-century baseball executives promoted their game as a “safety valve,” a “harmless outlet for pent up emotions” that positioned the game as a solution to problems created by the tensions of industrialization and urban growth.

Recalling the Rooters as rowdies and rabble-rousers reinforces this notion. It helps to normalize the idea of sports fandom as an escape from everyday life and decorum. Scholars have generally explained such behavior as a modern version of the bread and circus, the ancient Roman tradition of elites delivering food and entertainment to the masses to distract from the burdens of daily life.

But the Rooters' actual experience challenged this concept. They didn't need baseball as an outlet to vent their frustrations. They cheered for Boston's teams out of commitment to their community and as a way to gain support from their friends and neighbors. The reasons we root for our favorite teams are more complicated than safety valves or bread and circuses, and anyone trying to understand the motivations of modern sports fans would do well to start by looking at the Royal Rooters.

Michael T. "Nuf Ced" McGreevy, in center with megaphone, led the Royal Rooters back to Boston from Pittsburgh during the 1903 World Series. The Boston Americans left Boston trailing the Pittsburgh Pirates but returned with the series lead. Michael T. "Nuf Ced" McGreevy Collection/Boston Public Library

A Royal Rooters souvenir card with lyrics to "Tessie." Michael T. "Nuf Ced" McGreevy Collection/Boston Public Library

A Royal Rooter beating a drum on the visitors' dugout at the 1903 World Series. Michael T. "Nuf Ced" McGreevy Collection/Boston Public Library

Boston Mayor John F. "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald threw out the first ball of the Red Sox season at the Huntington Avenue Grounds, c. 1910. Michael T. "Nuf Ced" McGreevy Collection/Boston Public Library





**Rooter's Souvenir**

**BOSTON - PITTSBURG**

**Oct., 1903. M. T. McGreevy**

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**TESSIE,**

**You Are The Only, Only, Only.**

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**CHORUS.**

Tessie, you make me feel so badly;  
Why don't you turn around.

Tessie, you know I love you madly;  
Babe, my heart weighs about a  
pound.

Don't blame me if I ever doubt you,  
You know, I wouldn't live with-  
out you;

Tessie, you are the only, only,  
only, -ly.

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**3d Base. Nuf Ced.**

**Who Kidnapped the Pittsburg Band  
Nuf Ced—McGreevy.**



Michael T. "Nuf Ced" McGreevy, in center with megaphone, led the Royal Rooters back to Boston from Pittsburgh during the 1903 World Series. The Boston Americans left Boston trailing the Pittsburgh Pirates but returned with the series lead. Michael T. "Nuf Ced" McGreevy Collection/Boston Public Library

### STARK ON INFIELD DIRT

The inside dirt on infield dirt: MLB addressing its 'dirty little secret' in wake of new shift rule

Dirt. You probably stopped caring about dirt when you were — what? — maybe 4 years old. But it's time to care about dirt again — in baseball, at least.

Thanks to Major League Baseball's new shift rules, dirt is suddenly a big thing again. We'll cover all the down and dirty details momentarily. But trust us: Dirt now matters, maybe more than ever before, because starting next season, that dirt dictates where infielders can stand.

Before this, nobody in baseball has ever cared much about dirt. You can find a thousand works of great literature that rhapsodize about those emerald blades of grass all over the field. But never dirt.

Why is that, anyway? Maybe it's because all those renowned authors are scarred by all the dirt they couldn't get out of their pants in the laundry.

But now it's time to bring you the inside dirt on, well, dirt — because we learned something incredible recently:

You know all those baseball diamonds you've been staring at all your life? You would think every one of them had the same amount of dirt in their beautifully manicured infields. But if you thought that, boy, would you be wrong.

It turns out that all big-league infields are *not* created equally. In fact, they've never been created equally. This sounds crazy, right? But multiple sources have confirmed it's true.

There is an obscure rule in baseball's official rulebook that mentions what those infields are supposed to look like and where you're supposed to find — and not find — the infield dirt. But guess what?

According to sources familiar with all of this, that rule has never been thought about much, let alone enforced. So in some major-league parks, the infield dirt extends deeper than in other parks. We promise we're not making this up.

And there is *no* rule in the books dictating where the *inner* edge of the infield dirt should be located. So in virtually all parks, that inner edge of the dirt takes on a slightly different shape and location, based more on aesthetics than math. Seriously.

Oh, and one more thing. You know the dirt/grass line around the bases? That can be placed pretty much anywhere and sculpted however the grounds crew enjoys sculpting it. This really happens. And you would be amazed how many people *who work in baseball* are completely unaware of it.

Oh, they're aware all ballparks look different, with their unique and funky outfield angles and depths. That's one of everyone's favorite cool things about baseball. Plus, the teams helpfully paint big signs on the fences to let you know they're not the same in Detroit as in Chavez Ravine. Thank you!

But who knew the dimensions of *the infield* weren't the same everywhere? Lots of people! *The Athletic's* Ken Rosenthal was asked a question about it on his podcast the other day. He'd never noticed. Can't blame him. And when we asked a high-ranking executive of a National League team about this Wednesday, there was a moment of silence. Then he replied:

“Wow. I had no idea that was a thing.”

Well, it is now. But the time has arrived for every one of these ballparks to, um, come clean. That’s because of the new rule banning the shift, starting next season.

That rule requires all infielders to have both feet on the infield dirt as every pitch is thrown. Which sounds pretty standard until you learn stuff like ...

*That infield dirt isn’t necessarily located in quite the same place tonight as in that park in Pittsburgh you played in last night.*

So here is how MLB is about to start dealing with that dirty little secret:

- Let’s start with the rule itself. It says the outer edge of the infield dirt is supposed to extend no more than 95 feet from the center of the pitcher’s mound. OK, good to know.
- So MLB now *does* plan to enforce that rule, beginning next season. That makes sense.
- But it *does not* plan to enforce the rule literally, according to sources. It will allow up to a foot of leeway in either direction, to account for what one source described as groundskeeping “error.” So it’s still possible the back edge of the dirt in various parks could extend anywhere from 94 to 96 feet from the center of the mound.

“Interesting,” one AL executive observed, when we updated him on that leeway. “If they’re allowing for error, why do I think that everyone is going to err on the larger side?”

Ha. We know why he’d suspect it, but would teams really do that sort of thing? Ha again. That answer is: Why wouldn’t they?

In a world in which infielders no longer will be allowed to set up on the outfield grass, the deeper they can find safe, legal haven on that infield dirt, the happier they’ll be. A foot may not seem like much, but if baseball is really a game of inches, who wouldn’t want to order 12 more of them?

Nevertheless, preparation for enforcement of this rule has begun. MLB officials recently began measuring the depth of infield dirt in all 30 parks. Sources say only one park — it’s not known which one — is in violation at the moment. That violation will be rectified by the 2023 season. So that seems like a good thing.

Also, in the future, MLB has informed clubs that the depth of the infields will be checked regularly, much like officials have always checked the height of the mound. Likewise, a good thing. But ...

That still doesn't mean the infield dimensions in all parks will be exactly the same. And that, according to one of the executives quoted earlier, "doesn't make any sense — because it kind of means you're playing by different rules in different parks."

So is that true? MLB would dispute that because, at least moving forward, those dimensions will be more similar — and closer to the rule — than they've ever been. Still, it's fair to wonder about this.

Is this dirt disparity just part of the charm of baseball? Or in these shift-restricting times we're about to live in, is it, ahem, muddier than that?

A difference in outfield dimensions and heights of assorted Green Monsters? No problem! That's just quirky. And fun.

But a difference in infield dimensions, especially now that defensive positioning is specifically tied to those dimensions? Still kind of quirky. But suddenly, more confusing than fun.

"Can you imagine if the 3-point line had a foot of leeway in basketball?" one exec wondered. "Or with the lane, you can make it a foot wider depending on what style of ball you want to play?"

Well, of course, no one can imagine those things. But somehow, baseball has always been different like that. Nobody has ever seemed to mind that your team's park looks different from our team's park. But if your team's infield is sculpted differently than our team's infield, should someone be, well, digging into that?

Oh, wait. We just did. And you're welcome. It was a dirty job. But somebody had to do it.

### **THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE ANSWERS**

A pretty exclusive club. What did these 8 players accomplish?

As switch-hitters they all homered from both sides of the plate in a game 10 or more times.

**Mark Teixeira** — 14 times

**Nick Swisher** — 14

**Carlos Beltran** — 12

**Chili Davis** — 11

**Eddie Murray – 11**

**Tony Clark- 10**

**Ken Caminiti – 10**

**Mickey Mantle – 10**

### **HOUSEKEEPING**

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