

SUNDAY BASEBALL TIDBITS

JANUARY 2020

Happy New Year. Counting the days til pitchers and catchers report. Here are tidbits I spotted over the holdiays.

Only two pitchers won 300 games, struck out 3,000 batters and had 25 saves: Walter Johnson and Phil Neikro.

Albert Pujols is the only active player with 500 career home runs. The last season not a single player had a plate appearance as a 500-home run hitter was 1998. (Eddie Murray retired in 1997; Mark McGwire hit his 500th in 1999)

The last time the Yankees entered a season without sole possession of the most World Series championships of any franchise was 1937 (they were tied with the A's and Red Sox with 5 each, until the Yankees won their sixth in '37)

Four active teams' logos are not represented on a Hall of Fame plaque:

Marlins, Nationals, Rays, Rockies

Some Records Not Likely to be Broken

Johnny Vander Meer's back-to-back no-hitters

Ichiro's 262 hits in 2004

Nolan Ryan's 5,714 strikeouts and 2,795 walks

Rickey Henderson's 1,406 career steals and 130 steals in 1982

Hack Wilson's 191 RBIs in 1930

Barry Bonds' 232 walks in 2004

Babe Ruth's 177 runs scored in 1921

Pete Rose's 15,890 plate appearances and 4,256 hits

Cal Ripken Jr.'s 2,632 straight games played

Hank Aaron's 6,856 career total bases

Ron Hunt's 50 hit by pitches in 1971

Justin Verlander and Gerritt Cole became the second pair of teammates to have 300 strikeout season, matching 2002 Diamondbacks Randy Johnson and Curt Schilling

Cole averaged 13.8 strikeouts per 9 innings and 9 straight 10 or more strikeout performances. He struck out at least one batter in 73 consecutive innings, longest streak since 1961. He went 26 straight starts without a loss.

Verlander topped 300 strikeouts at age 36. Only Randy Johnson (3 times) and Nolan Ryan have done that.

Pete Alonso of the Mets with 53 HRs became the first rookie to lead the majors in homers. He also set a Mets franchise record.

Mike Trout won his third MVP. 8th time he was in the top two vote getters tying Albert Pujols and Stan Musial, bested only by Barry Bonds with 9.

Nelson Cruz hit 41 HRs and age 38. Only other players hit 40 or more at age 38 or older are Barry Bonds, Darrell Evans and Hank Aaron. Cruz led MLB with 346 HRs in the 2010's.

Robinson Cano had the most hits in the 2010's, 1,695.

George Foster hit 52 HRs in 1977 for the Reds, the only player in the 1970s and 1980s to hit 50 or more HRs.

Of the nine players with 600 career HRs only two never hit 50 in a season—Hank Aaron and Albert Pujols.

Only pitchers to win rookie of the year and two or more Cy Young Awards—Verlander, Seaver, de Grom.

Three players have won World Series with both the Red Sox and the Yankees. Babe Ruth, Johnny Damon and Eric Hinske.

King Felix Hernandez is the only pitcher to win a Cy Young, pitch a perfect game and strikeout 2500 hitters for the same team.

Nolan Ryan's 5714 career K's are more than double CC Sabathia's.

The last 20 players who appeared in 4 decades:

Jamie Moyer (1986-2012)

Ken Griffey Jr. (1989-2010)

Omar Vizquel (1989-2012)

Rickey Henderson (1979-2003)

Mike Morgan (1978-2002)

Jesse Orosco (1979-2003)

Tim Lincecum (1979-2002)

Bill Buckner (1969-90)

Rick Dempsey (1969-92)

Carlton Fisk (1969-93)

Jerry Reuss (1969-90)

Nolan Ryan (1966-1993)

Jim Kaat (1959-83)

Tim McCarver (1959-80)

Willie McCovey (1959-80)

Minnie Minoso (1949-80)

Mickey Vernon (1939-60)

Ted Williams (1939-60)

Early Wynn (1939-63)

Bobo Newsom (1929-53)

Back in 1980 a lot more balls were put in play – Ozzie Smith playing for the Padres had 621 assists at shortstop. 2019's MLB leader was Oakland's Marcus Semien at 436. The wizard led the league in assists 8 times and was second 4 times.

There have been 1,420 seven game post season series in MLB, NHL, NBA history. The Nationals win over the Astros was the first time the road team has won every game.

Nationals were 19-31 after 50 games, worst start ever for a World Series winner.

Stephen Strasburg became first pitcher ever to go 5-0 in October. His career post season 1.46 era is fifth all time behind hall of famers Mariano Rivera (0.70), Sandy Koufax (0.96), Christy Mathewson (1.06) and Eddie Plank (1.32).

Larry Walker

In 1997, Larry Walker hit .366/.452/.720 with 46 doubles, 49 homers, 130 RBIs and 143 runs scored for the Rockies. He was the league MVP. He also stole 33 bases. He also won a Gold Glove.

People tend to disregard it because he played half his games at Coors Field.

The next year, he hit .363 (won the batting title this time) with 46 doubles and 113 RBIs. He won another Gold Glove.

The next year he hit .379, slugged .700 again, hit 37 homers, drove in 115 RBIs, scored 108 runs and won another Gold Glove.

Tony Gwynn

Tony Gwynn's hitting. He hit .338 for his career. Going back to 1961, the first year of expansion, that's far and away the highest average for any hitter with at least 3,000 plate appearances:

1. Tony Gwynn, .338
2. Roberto Clemente, .331
3. Wade Boggs, .328
4. Rod Carew, .328
5. Vladimir Guerrero, .318

Gwynn hit .309 or better every full season of his career. He hit .351 in his first full season and hit .338 in his last, the first of those just after Prince released the album “1999,” and the second in the actual year of 1999.

From 1983-2001, 19 straight seasons, Gwynn walked more than he struck out.

In 1995, when Gwynn led the league with a .368 average, he struck out 15 times all season.

Gwynn hit .343 at home. He hit .334 on the road.

He hit .345 against righties. He hit .325 against lefties.

He hit .346 in April, .333 in May, .344 in June, .325 in July, .348 in August and .333 in September.

In his two World Series, he hit .371.

Sandman

Mariano Rivera finished more games (952), saved more games (652) and finished with the highest ERA+ (205) in baseball history.

From 1996 to 2013, he only once had an ERA above three — that was in 2007 when he was 37 years old.

He pitched 141 postseason innings. He allowed just two home runs. He had an 0.70 ERA. He allowed a total of one run in his last 24 postseason appearances.

This edition wraps with a wonderful (and Long) piece by Jason Stark, who along with Peter Gammons makes a subscription to The Athletic worth the money. Enjoy.

Stark: Strange But True Feats of the Year, 2019 Edition

Jayson Stark

So what was so Strange But True about baseball in the year 2019?

Oh, nothing much — except that a guy got hurt while *cooking Cajun food* ... And another guy hit a home run *after striking out* ... And we found a real pitcher who is still trying to convince us that he *pitched on two days on the same day*!

But that's not all. There's so much strangeness where that came from. So fasten that seat belt. And put your seat back in the full upright-and-locked position — because it's time for another wacky edition of the Strange But True Feats of the Year!

The Strange But True Team of the Year

Didn't it figure that *this* would be the year the Washington Nationals won the World Series? All those years when they were clearly The Best Team didn't lead them to any parade floats. It took *this* year, *this* Strange But True journey. Because baseball! So *how* unlikely was this journey? Let's count the ways.

- Back on May 23 — 50 games into the season — the Tigers and Nationals were both 12 games under .500. The Tigers went on to lose 114 games. The Nationals went on to win the World Series, because hell yeah, why not?
- Then, 4 1/2 months later, the Nationals found themselves in the NL wild-card game against Milwaukee, trailing by two, with that scary Josh Hader on the mound. Of course, they would go on to win that game, even though *they never sent a single hitter to the plate with the lead all night* ... Of course, they would go on to win that game, even though *they held the lead for exactly nine minutes all evening* ... Of course, they would go on to win that game, even though Hader didn't have *a single blown save all season* in a game his team led by two runs or more. Of course they would!
- But it turned out the Nationals were just getting us set for the rest of their epic, upside-down October. They won five potential elimination games — *and trailed in all five of them*. So how many previous teams had ever come from behind to win five elimination games in the same postseason? You know exactly how many. That would be none, says STATS.
- That wild-card game was also one of three winner-take-all games in which the Nationals were down by at least two runs in the seventh inning or later — *but of course they won all three*. Want to guess how many other teams had ever won three winner-take-all games like that in one postseason? You know that answer, too. *No* other teams had ever done that, according to STATS.
- The Nationals also won a World Series *without winning any home games in that World Series*. That had never been done. ... And they did that against a Houston team *that never lost four straight home games at any point all season*, because of course they did. ... And they beat a

107-win Astros team in the World Series after beating a 106-win Dodgers team in the NLDS. So how many teams had ever done *that* — oust two teams that won 106-plus games in the same postseason? Only one, naturally: The team that won the 2019 World Series. The Strange But True Team of the Year. The *How the Heck Did They Do That Anyway* 2019 Washington Nationals.

Five Strangest but Truest Injuries of the Year

FIRST PRIZE: The hardest hit Blake Snell gave up all year didn't even involve a baseball. It involved — what else? — a shower! Back in April, he set out to take a simple shower at home in Tampa Bay. The good news was, he made it in and out with no soap-related mishaps. The bad news was, he decided this would be an inspired time to do a little bathroom redecorating. So he lifted a decorative stand to move it. The bottom half of the stand attacked, just when he least expected. That half was made of — oops! — granite, which Snell would soon learn is an excellent substance for crushing toes. And his beautiful encore to his Cy Young season was never quite the same. But, hey, his bathroom has never looked lovelier.

SECOND PRIZE: It's hard to top an innovative cooking injury. So here's to Joe Kelly and all who cook, with sometimes-unfortunate results. How did the Dodgers reliever hurt his back this spring? By cooking up a hearty repast of Cajun food, naturally. Which caused him to do just a little too much standing, according to his manager, Dave Roberts. So remember, kids. When cooking that Étouffée, stay light on your feet — and heavy on the crawfish.

THIRD PRIZE: Nobody knows for sure — outside of maybe the cattle — what the heck Yoenis Céspedes was doing down on his ranch in Florida last May. But the official story goes something like this: Stepped in a hole that was secretly lurking in some underbrush. Took a “violent” fall. And fractured his right ankle in multiple places. Now, normally, we'd award way more credit to a tumble this creative than if he'd done this while running for, say, the No. 7 train. Instead, we're deducting points since (A) he got hurt while he was already hurt and (B) this just caused him to miss a season he was already missing, or he never would have been on that ranch in the first place.

FOURTH PRIZE: Texas is normally a great spot for ribs. But not so much for Carlos Correa this May. He actually cracked one of his own ribs — while getting a massage. Next time, try the baby backs!

FIFTH PRIZE: The Yankees' Dellin Betances had a lot to celebrate Sept. 15, after finally making it back to a big-league mound for the first time all season and striking out the first two hitters he faced. So that little voice in his head told him that was worth a leap of celebration. Which was true. If only that little voice had also told him to stick the landing. He tore his left Achilles when he returned to earth. And that was that for the comeback portion of his season. But on a brighter note, he did end the season with a higher strikeout rate than Simone Biles.

SPECIAL JAPAN CITATION: Remember our old friend Daisuke Matsuzaka? He spent 2019 as a proud member of the Chunichi Dragons. And a funny thing happened to him last February, while he was shaking hands with fans at a spring-training meet-and-greet. He ran into what the team described as “an overzealous fan,” who yanked so hard on his pitching arm that he

missed *the next three months* with shoulder inflammation — and wound up pitching in just two games all season.

HONORABLE MENTION: So many Strange But True injury classics this year: Ketel Marte's hamstring went on the fritz *in mid-home-run trot*. ... Baltimore's DJ Stewart spent a week and a half on the concussion list *after getting hit on the head by a fly ball*. ... Max Scherzer broke his nose *by fouling a batting-practice bunt off his face!* (But of course he was back on the mound a day later, rampaging through seven shutout innings and punching out 10, because *he's Max Scherzer*.) ... And Boston's Brock Holt missed 40 games, all because he got poked in the eye by his 2-year-old son. Inspiring Jimmy Kimmel to quip: "Let that be a lesson to all the working dads out there. Never spend time with your children."

Ten Strange But True Hitting Feats of 2019

- Zack Greinke had an .888 OPS this year — as a hitter. You know which actual hitters didn't have an OPS that good? Oh, only Bryce Harper, Gleyber Torres and Ronald Acuña Jr. Whoever they are.
- Alex Bregman walked 18 times just after Sept. 10. Tim Anderson also walked 18 times — all season. How many batting champs in history have walked fewer times than that? None. Of course.
- On April 26, that very same Tim Anderson hit a walk-off home run to end a 12-11 game. And NBC Sports Chicago's Christopher Kamka noticed something about that home run. That game lasted 4:02. And that homer raised Tim Anderson's batting average to — you guessed it — .402.
- Speaking of walk-offs ... On Aug. 5 at Target Field, Miguel Sanó did something very cool. He didn't just hit a walk-off homer. He hit the Twins' first walk-off homer against the Braves since the Kirby Puckett Game 6 We'll See You Tomorrow Night shot that set up the epic Jack Morris-John Smoltz Game 7 in the 1991 World Series. But then ... guess what Ronald Acuña Jr. did on the *first* pitch of their next game? Yessir. Hit a *leadoff* homer. It's the only time in any of the past 13 seasons when one game ended on a last-pitch homer and the next game started with a *first*-pitch homer.
- And speaking of Acuña ... On Aug. 18, he was benched by Brian Snitker for not running out a fly ball. But that wasn't the Strange But True part. The Strange But True part was that the guy who replaced him, Rafael Ortega, was a dude with one career home run, hit *three years earlier*. OK, anybody want to guess what Ortega did two innings later? He hit a *game-winning grand slam* for his second career homer, because what else would he do?
- As Kris Bryant stepped in to hit in the seventh inning of the Cubs' May 17 game in Washington, he hadn't hit two home runs in a game in 679 days. Then, naturally, he hit *three home runs in three innings* because of course he did!
- How'd this happen? On June 12, the Brewers struck out 24 times against the Astros — 22 of them *swinging* — and still won.

- And how'd this happen? On Aug. 4, the Braves hit home runs in the eighth, ninth and 10th innings of a game against the Reds — and still *lost*!
- Let the record show that on April 17, Joey Votto hit a popup. To the first baseman. Which would sound kind of routine — if it hadn't been (A) the 6,878th plate appearance of his career and (B) the first time he'd *ever* done that. In that time when Votto was hitting no P-3's, Ian Kinsler hit 193 of them!
- Let the record also show that on April 21, Joey Gallo hit a sacrifice fly. Which would also sound kind of routine ... except that (A) it was the first time *he'd* ever done *that* and (B) it was his 1,337th career plate appearance — and no position player had gone that long without a sac fly since Steve Sax rolled up 1,388 SF-free PAs more than three decades ago. That would be insane enough, but here comes the Strange But True part. Guess who has lofted the highest percentage of fly balls of any player in baseball over the past three years? Right you are. It's Mr. Joey Gallo.

Ten Strange But True Pitching Feats of 2019

- What was the most Josh Hader-ish moment of 2019? Well, it wasn't quite one moment. But there *was* this insane stretch from April 15 to May 8, when the Brewers' human K Mart rampaged through a 28-out reign of unhittable terror that looked kinda like this:

8 appearances, 28 outs, 26 strikeouts.

Somewhere in there was the first nine-inning span in baseball history in which anybody ever piled up 25 strikeouts. And just to put that in perspective, Clayton Richard didn't whiff that many hitters *all season*, even though he got to face over 200 of them (22 K's, 201 BF). So in other words, *holy crap*!

In other news ...

- Mike Fiers finished the season with as many "home" losses in Japan as Oakland (one), although one was a longer BART ride.
- In his first start of the year, Yu Darvish threw 57 pitches *before anyone even put a ball in play*. If that wasn't the most 2019 start ever, I don't know what was.
- In a May 16 relief outing for the Giants, that tricky, switch-pitching Pat Venditte hit two batters while pitching left-handed and then, just because he could, plunked another while pitching right-handed. So how many other pitchers have ever switch-hit batters from both sides of the plate in the same inning? That would be none, obviously. Take that, Ice Box Chamberlain!
- The Twins' Ryne Harper had a July 7 outing in which he faced four hitters, struck out all four of them and still managed to record a total of ... *five* outs — thanks to a little miracle we like to call the old strike-'em-out-throw-'em-out inherited-runner double play.

- How weird is baseball? On April 16, Steven Matz made a start in which he faced eight Phillies, got none of them out, allowed all eight to score and then ... after the game, the *other* starting pitcher (Nick Pivetta) got sent to the minors.
- But that wasn't even the most Mets-ian start of the year. On June 7, they played a game against Colorado in which *their* starting pitcher (Jacob deGrom) piled up 10 strikeouts, while the other starter (Antonio Senzatela) racked up exactly zero strikeouts. So guess which one of those two pitchers won and which one lost? Yep!
- Once upon a time, in another Padres universe, Trevor Hoffman made it through five seasons in which he didn't give up four home runs all year. On June 9, in this Padres universe, Craig Stammen gave up home runs to *four hitters in a row* (in a span of seven pitches by the way) — and then, naturally, *didn't even get taken out of the game!*
- On his way to getting released and becoming the Worst Marlins Free Agent of All Time, Wei-Yin Chen spun off this little box-score gem on April 9: 2 IP, 7 H, 10 R, 10 ER, 2 BB, 3 K, 4 HR. So what's so strange about that, you ask? Oh, only that he gave up those 10 earned runs *in relief*. Which made him the first pitcher to allow 10 earned runs in relief before *any starter* gave up 10 *in 46 years* (since Paul Lindblad did that for the 1973 A's).
- (Special bonus Wei-Yin Chen note! He pitched 24 times after June 22 — and *the Marlins went 1-23 in those games*. The only game in all that time that they won was one in which he left with them trailing, but they came back to score 12 after they got him the heck out of there. Yikes!)
- And here's to the Strangest But Truest 11-10 game of the year. The Nationals and Mets played that one on Sept. 3. And you know what made it so Strange But True? Oh, just the fact that the two starting pitchers were (who else?) Max Scherzer and Jacob deGrom!

10 Strange But True classics

- Apparently, nothing in baseball is impossible. Ask White Sox reliever Nate Jones. On April 12, he collected his only save of the year. But guess what he didn't do: *Throw the last pitch of that game*. The Yankees' Chad Green actually delivered the final 14 pitches that night. But then the game got rained out — with the White Sox leading. So the save went to ... Nate Jones. Of course!
- But you know who can top that? Anthony Swarzak of the Braves. Because on June 11, he saved a game *after his team pinch-hit for him*. That's normally kind of hard to do — except that a few minutes later, that game also got rained out — *after* he got pinch-hit for, but *before* anyone else on his team threw another pitch. So you know what they call that? The Strangest But Truest Save of the Year!
- You know what else ought to be impossible? Getting caught stealing twice in the same inning — *with the same hitter at the plate*. But the Rays' Kevin Kiermaier managed to pull off that feat anyway on April 16. So how'd *that* happen? Let's just say he had a major assist from an E-6 on the Orioles' Jonathan Villar. But no need to check the small print!

- Ever seen a guy get thrown out *in the middle of a home run trot*? It happened June 19 to Eric Hosmer, who got tagged out at third in the midst of a Manny Machado home run trot. Of course, it would have helped them both if Manny had been trotting on a ball that actually left the park. Which this one didn't!

- Did you know the Reds had games delayed by a bee infestation and a light-tower failure in the same week? ... Or that the Brewers had a nine-minute rain delay — inside their very own domed stadium? ... But nobody had a Stranger But Truer delay in 2019 than the Rays, thanks to a bunch of Rays-ian July 24 maneuvers in which they moved pitcher Adam Kolarek to first base, then tried to double-switch him back to the mound while sending Brandon Lowe to first. That led to so much confusion about who was occupying what lineup slot that a total of one pitch was thrown *in a span of 21 minutes* while the umpires went to the headsets to beg New York to please sort it all out. Gotta love the good old-fashioned 21-minute double switch!

- How long a year was it in Detroit? At one point, the Tigers somehow went 58 consecutive games without winning two in a row. But they did indeed finally end that streak on Aug. 9, in a game started by Edwin Jackson — *whose teams had won no games he'd started all year before that*.

- You know what's a really Strange But True way to score a winning run? By hitting a foul ball to the third baseman. But that's how the A's won their Aug. 29 game against the Royals — on an F-5 in which the third baseman, Cheslor Cuthbert, then helpfully *fell into the dugout* to allow the winning run to score.

- The Dodgers, meanwhile, scored two runs Sept. 12 *on a strikeout*! In fact, they scored those two runs on what should have been an inning-ending strikeout. But here comes a really important detail: They were playing the Orioles! So of course the catcher, Pedro Severino, didn't catch the third strike. And of course, the pitcher, Dylan Bundy, couldn't work covering the plate into his busy schedule. So voila. Two runs scored — in a game the Dodgers would wind up winning by (yep) two runs.

- The Strangest But Truest deadline deals of the year:

FIRST PRIZE: Yasiel Puig gets traded from the Reds to the Indians, doesn't know it, stays in the game, stirs up a brawl and ends up getting suspended in Cleveland for wreaking Puig-a-palooza in his last game in Cincinnati.

SECOND PRIZE: Aaron Sanchez gets dealt from the Blue Jays to Astros while *in the middle of a 13-game losing streak* (and then, naturally, spins off six hitless innings in his first start in Houston).

THIRD PRIZE: Zack Greinke gets traded *during a rain delay* in New York. So he goes from working on a 3-2 lead for Arizona when the raindrops arrive ... to working for the Houston Astros by the time the game resumes!

- One final, poignant Strange But True classic: On July 12, in their first home game after the death of Tyler Skaggs, the Angels threw a combined no-hitter. It was the first combined no-

hitter in the state of California since July 13, 1991. That, amazingly, was the day Tyler Skaggs was born.

Five Strangest But Truest Men-in-Blue Moments of the Year

- You just can't beat those replay machines. They make so much baseball madness possible. Like this, for instance: On Aug. 29, two Yankees in a row hit into a double play. And that's mathematically challenging enough. But here's the best part: After those two straight double-play balls, the inning *still* wasn't over — because that cagey Aaron Boone challenged the out at second after the first double play ... and wound up getting *both* outs overturned. It was the first two-for-one sale in replay history!
- You know what else should be impossible? Striking out *after* you get ejected. But the Reds' Jesse Winker pulled that off, too, on May 2. Wasn't real delighted with a called strike two. Got himself tossed. Then Kyle Farmer pinch-hit — and finished the strikeout. Which got credited to Jesse Winker. Even though he was hanging out in the clubhouse when that third strike crossed home plate. Hard to do!
- And here's another thing that seems hard to do: Getting hit by a pitch *while you're trying to call time*! You can ask Kevin Pillar all about it sometime.
- Here's another one you shouldn't try to imitate on your Xbox One: Tony Kemp hit a home run Sept. 21 for the Cubs — *after striking out*. So how the heck did he do that? He swung and missed what looked like strike three. He was on his way back to the dugout. Then he got the memo that plate ump Lance Barksdale had called a balk on the pitcher, Giovanny Gallegos. So what happened on the next pitch? Lofted a ball into the Wrigley breezes, then trotted away. It was his only home run as a Cub. Hey, of course it was!
- Finally, here's to that bizarre 4 1/2-minute delay in Game 6 of the World Series that was caused by, well, we're still not sure. Trea Turner got called out for runner's interference at first base but wasn't clear on why. ... Then Dave Martinez protested the game, but when asked later what he was protesting, said: "Nothing, really." ... Then the umpires went to the headsets, so the folks in New York could talk on the phone to Joe Torre, who was sitting 50 feet from the umpires who made the call. ... Then Martinez became the first manager in history to get thrown out of a World Series game *that his team happened to be winning*. ... And eventually, they got back to playing baseball. But nobody summed up all that Strangeness But Trueness better than Astros manager A.J. Hinch, who said: "It took a really long time for nothing to happen."

Strangest But Truest Gopherballers of the Year

You might have caught wind of this, but those Baltimore Orioles didn't just break the all-time record for most home runs allowed in one season. They broke it *by almost 50 homers*. They served up a mind-blowing 305 home runs in 2019 — more than Jim Palmer's 1966-67-68 Orioles once gave up over three seasons *combined*.

Fortunately for this column, when a team allows that many homers, Strange But True stuff is bound to happen. And oh, did it ever!

- Fourteen teams hit at least five home runs in a game at Camden Yards in 2019. None of those teams happened to be known as “the Orioles.”
- Four Orioles did manage to hit two homers in a game at Camden Yards. Which sounds encouraging until you remember that four Twins did that *in one day* (April 20). All right, so they played a doubleheader that day. But still ...
- Pete Alonso had four multi-homer games last season on the way to hitting 53 home runs. Gleyber Torres had *five multi-homer games last season* — just against the Orioles!
- In one five-game stretch between Aug. 5 and 10, Orioles scored 16 runs — *and gave up 22 homers*.
- And, finally, there’s this little ode to history:

Yankees hitters just against the Orioles this year: .303/.386/.682, with 61 home runs.

Roger Maris in 1961 against everybody: .269/.372/.620, with 61 home runs.

The 2019 Orioles, man. They turned every hitter they faced into one of the most historic home run figures who ever lived — *only better*.

10 Strangest But Truest Home Run Feats of the Year

Did somebody mention home runs? Thanks to a bunch of baseballs that flew like 757s, we just witnessed more home runs (6,776) than in any season in history. Which resulted in stuff like this!

- Only one player hit a grand slam on two straight days last season. That would be Brewers catcher Tyler Saladino, naturally. Who hit no other big-league homers of any kind all year. And has never hit any other kind of homer on back-to-back days at any point in his career. Because of course he hasn’t.
- Then there were the Yankees, who managed to whomp an astounding 306 home runs in 2019 — in a year in which Giancarlo Stanton hit exactly three. Along the way, only one Yankee had back-to-back multi-homer games. That Yankee would be the irrepressible Gio Urshela, because of course it was.
- The Yankees blew away the all-time record for home runs in one season — but didn’t even lead their league, because the Twins hit 307 of them. *Five* different Twins hit at least 30 home runs in 2019. Which was kind of notable because only five different Twins had had a 30-homer season *in the previous 30 seasons put together*!
- The Mariners also made home run history last season — by becoming the first team ever to hit a home run in the first 15 games of a season. And who hit the home run that enabled them to break that record? That would be Dee Gordon, the guy with *the lowest career home run rate of any active player* (with at least 2,500 PA). Heck, you were expecting maybe Jay Buhner?
- Edwin Encarnación played for the Mariners for a couple of months last year. Which was really helpful, since it allowed him to become the first man ever to hit a home run on three continents in the same year. He homered in Japan (Asia) for the Mariners, in Europe (England) for the

Yankees and in North America for both of them. He'll be publishing his Home Run Travel Guide in time for next Christmas, I'm sure.

- Meanwhile, in Canada on April 12, the Rays' Austin Meadows became just the second man in the past 20 years to rocket a baseball into the *fifth* deck of the Rogers Centre, way, way out there in deep right field. That's so hard to do that, naturally, no one would hit another ball up there for, oh, *another four hittters*! Yeah, that's how long it took for teammate Brandon Lowe to crunch a home run into almost that same spot. So that's once in two decades ... and then *twice in the same inning*? Baseball!
- Until this year, the Nationals had gone a decade without having two players hit 30 home runs in the same season. Then, naturally, they had two guys (Anthony Rendon, Juan Soto) hit their 30th homers *back-to-back*, in a span of three pitches, because it was the most 2019 thing to do ever!
- Or maybe this was the most 2019 thing to do ever: The Astros played a game Sept. 9 in which they hit six homers *before they made six outs*. Hold those trash-can jokes. Thank you.
- We'd like to nominate Max Kepler and Trevor Bauer as the 2019 Home Run Couple of the Year. In one Strange But True stretch in June and July, Kepler hit a home run off Bauer *in five consecutive at-bats*. No other big-leaguer on Planet Earth has hit a home run off Bauer in five any kind of at-bats!
- Finally, mark down Sept. 11, 2019, as the day baseball set its all-time record for most home runs in a season, with the Orioles' Jonathan Villar doing the honors by launching the historic 6,106th homer of the year. But here's the spectacular Strange But True part: It was a team leading its league in home runs *allowed*, the Orioles, that *hit* the record-breaking homer. And it was a team leading its league in home runs *hit*, the Dodgers, that *allowed* that record-breaking homer. Because, well, baseball!

Strangest But Truest Series of the Year

The great Vin Scully once said: "You don't need an official scorer at Coors Field. You need a certified public accountant." So, clearly, the Padres and Rockies needed to hire the entire staff of H&R Block after their June 13-16 series at Coors. How Strange But True was it? Hahahaha. Here's how strange:

- *In just one series*, these teams combined for 92 runs, 131 hits, 27 doubles, seven triples, 17 homers, 42 walks, three stolen bases, 44 hits with runners in scoring position, 121 at-bats with runners in scoring position, 346 hitters digging into home plate, 38 pitching changes, 15 one-run innings, 10 two-run innings, nine three-run innings, two four-run innings and two six-run innings. *All in four games*!
- Wait. Did we just say 92 runs scored in *one series*? There weren't 92 runs scored at Petco Park in San Diego during *the entire month of April*! In fact, 42 different players came to bat for the Padres this season — and none of them scored 92 runs *all season*! But these teams scored 92 in one series. Right.

- Hold on. Did we also say 131 hits in one series? Did you know that in 2017, Max Scherzer pitched over 200 innings in his third Cy Young season — *and didn't allow 131 hits all season?* But the Padres and Rockies got 131 hits in one series.
- At one point, the Rockies scored at least 12 runs three games in a row in this series — *and lost two of them*. The last team to do that? The great Doug (Kernels) Kern tells us it was Malachi Kittridge's 1896 Chicago Colts, against Boileryard Clarke's vaunted Baltimore Orioles, in a series that went 14-13, 13-11 and 15-13.
- Ready for Charlie Blackmon's crazy hit total in this series? Four hits in the first game. Four hits in the second. Four more hits in the third. Two more hits *in the first inning* in the fourth game and three hits altogether. So he went 15-for-24, with 10 RBIs, *in one series*! Last player, according to STATS, to get 15-plus hits and 10-plus RBIs in any series of any length? How about Lou Gehrig, in an eight-game series in 1935!
- Oh, and the Padres' starting pitcher in the series finale was Nick Margevicius. Who gave up 11 hits and nine runs, got four outs and, of course, *his team won*! Because Coors!

"I think the humidior was unplugged," quipped Padres coach Skip Schumaker, with exceptional logic.

Strangest But Truest Adventures in Mystery Pitching

Would you believe that 90 position players were allowed to take the mound in 2019 — and pitch in actual major-league games? What a time to be alive, huh? That means mystery pitchers pitched more innings in the big leagues this season (61.1) than Kenley Jansen. Or Zack Britton. Or Matt Harvey. But it's what happened when they got out there that really got nuts.

- On July 25, Orioles outfielder Stevie Wilkerson did something that no position player had done since the dawn of the modern save rule in 1969. He actually *saved a game* against the Angels. And quite a save it was. He threw 27 pitches that night that were clocked by Statcast at 56 mph or slower. That was *in one inning*. You know how many pitches that slow Statcast tracked by all other pitchers combined last season? That would be 24!
- Russell Martin may not have saved any games in 2019. But he did *finish* a game the Dodgers won before Kenley Jansen did that. ... And also finished as many shutouts as Craig Kimbrel (one). ... And was so invaluable that he pitched in *three* games the Dodgers won, but only *one* game the Dodgers lost — and never gave up a run in *any* game he pitched in. ... So just to sum this up, Russell Martin had more scoreless outings last season (four) than Zack Wheeler (three), because of course he did!
- Pablo Sandoval made a trip to the mound on May 6. And finished the day by cramming a home run, a stolen base and a scoreless outing into the same box score. Last man to do that: Christy Mathewson — in 1905!
- The Phillies wound up their Aug. 2 game against the White Sox with a center fielder (Roman Quinn) on the mound and a pitcher (Vince Velasquez) in left field. The good news: Velasquez

threw out a runner at the plate. The bad news: Their center fielder turned out to be the losing pitcher.

- In one action-packed weekend in Boston, Yankees catcher Austin Romine gave up a home run as a pitcher but also hit a home run while performing his day job. Last Yankees position player to hit a homer and give up a homer in Fenway in the same series? Yessir. That would be the Babe — in 1921.

- **SPECIAL MICHAEL LORENZEN SALUTE!** Since the Reds' Michael Lorenzen mostly pitches for a living, he doesn't really qualify for this section. Nevertheless ... he played one game (Sept. 27) in which he started in center field, came in to pitch, then went back to center field. And he had another game (Sept. 4) in which he played center, hit a home run and wound up as the winning pitcher. Last man to do all that? Yep, it's that Babe Ruth again!

Strangest But Truest Time Travelers of the Year

On May 19, the Tigers and A's started playing a baseball game in Detroit. Many days, weeks, months and raindrops later, they finished playing this same game in Oakland — on Sept. 6. So what's so Strange But True about a game that literally gets suspended in time for 3 1/2 months? Oh, only pretty much everything.

- A's outfielder Chad Pinder hit a home run that came down in the seats in Oakland in September. But according to the box score, it was hit in May in Detroit.

- David McKay pitched for the Tigers in this game. That wasn't easy — seeing as how he didn't make his big-league debut until May 20. For the Mariners. But baseball history will forever insist that he played in a game on May 19. For the Tigers. In Detroit. By pitching off a mound in California.

- Josh Harrison struck out in this game. For the Tigers. That took some doing, too, since the Tigers had released him four weeks earlier. But back on May 19, he was hanging out in the batter's box, with a 2-and-2 count, when the raindrops arrived. So when Jordy Mercer pinch-hit for him on Sept. 6 and whiffed, it was Harrison who got credit for the strikeout. Even though he never got within 2,000 miles of strike three.

- J.B. Wendelken also pitched in this game. For the A's. Even though he also pitched for the Las Vegas Aviators on May 19. In Salt Lake. Which has never been mistaken for Oakland or Detroit.

- But none of those men can top the time-traveling heroics of reliever Jake Diekman. If you spend your winters digging through those alluring May 19 box scores — and why wouldn't you? — you'll find that Diekman pitched the eighth inning for the Royals that day. In Anaheim. But if you keep digging, you will also find that, thanks to his July 27 trade to the Athletics, he also pitched the eighth inning for the A's on May 19. In Detroit. Which looked suspiciously like Oakland at the time. So according to STATS, he joins the immortal Buddy Groom as the only men known to have pitched for two big-league teams on the same day. And that's truly a beautiful claim to fame, even though, thanks to baseball's sense of suspended-game animation, neither of them ever did any such thing in actual life.

- Wait, though. That's not all. As Diekman himself pointed out, he also pitched for the A's later that day (meaning that Sept. 6 day) in their regularly scheduled game. So that means, he decided, that he also "pitched on two different days on the same day." Which sounds like maybe the most innovative feat in the history of human life. Except we're still trying to figure out if that's what he really did.

Asked how cool or confusing it was to think he'd traveled back in time to do whatever the heck he did, Jake Diekman pronounced: "Teleportation is a real thing," even though, well, no, it isn't — except when those Strange But True suspended-game rules start working their magic!

Strangest But True Yaz-A-Palooza of the Year

It felt like a movie — but it happened in real life in 2019. On Sept. 17, the San Francisco Giants rolled into Boston. Which meant that, for the first time in nearly 4,000 games, a guy named Yastrzemski was going to get to play baseball in Fenway Park. Awesome.

But then, in Mike Yastrzemski's big-league Fenway debut, something really, really Strange But True happened. The Red Sox and Giants played a 15-inning game that night, which took a delightful 5 hours and 54 minutes to play. Now here's the Strangest But Truest part:

Did you know that Carl Yastrzemski started 1,631 regular-season games for the Red Sox at Fenway Park — but *none* of them lasted 5 hours and 54 minutes? You could look it up. But don't bother. I already did that.

So you know what that means, right? It means that the *first* game Mike Yastrzemski ever started at Fenway lasted longer than *all* the games started there by his grandfather. Which can only be explained in one word:

Baseball!

Albert Pujols, only active player with 500 HRs. He has grounded into 395 double plays--the only player in history to exceed 350 GIDPs.

Ron Gardenhire, manager of the Tigers has been ejected 83 times. He needs four more to make the top five all time behind Bobby Cox at 158, John McGraw 132, Leo Durocher 96, Earl Weaver 94.

Most recent ROY to make the Hall of Fame is Mike Piazza. 1993

Hall of famer who played most games with just one team, Carl Yastrzemski at 3308 with Boston.

Gardner, Munson, Jeter, Posada, Mattingly. Five players drafted by Yankees who had more than 1,000 hits as Yankees.

Willie McCovey. 521 career HRs. He led the league in HRs and slugging three times, in RBIs twice. From 1959 to 1962 he rode the Giants' bench behind Orlando Cepeda.

Mickey Mantle in 1956: .353 average, 52 homers, 130 RBIs, 112 walks, .464 on base percentage. (topped only by 37 year old Ted Williams who had .479 OBP).

Sandy Koufax led the league in ERA five times. Clayton Kershaw led the league in ERA five times. Kershaw led the league in WHIP four times, Koufax led the league in WHIP four times. Koufax won three Cy Young Awards and an MVP, Kershaw won three Cy Young Awards and an MVP.

Koufax finished 165-87 in his career.

Kershaw is 169-74 in his still-active career.

Koufax pitched in a time when a great starting pitcher's singular task was to finish the task — he had 27 complete games in 1965 and then again in '66. Kershaw has only 25 complete games in his entire career (despite being one of the most durable pitchers of his time). Koufax pitched 335 innings in a season. Kershaw has pitched about that many over the past two seasons.

Starting at age 23 Frank Thomas, for 7 straight seasons hit .300, scored 100 runs, drove in 100 runs and walked 100 times. (no one has ever done that 7 years in a row including Ruth, Gehrig, Williams, Aaron). He is the largest player to win a batting title. He won two MVPs.

Two unreal 2019 pitching performances:

May 14 against Rockies, Chris Sale of the Red Sox became first pitcher ever to strike out 17 while completing only 7 innings.

September 8 against the Mariners, Gerrit Cole became only the third pitcher ever to strike out 15 and allow just one base runner. (the others are Max Scherzer and Clayton Kershaw).

Jeter

Derek Jeter had 734 post season at bats

Jeter had ten seasons with 700 Abs, only Pete Rose had more.

Of the 2,747 regular-season games he played, he got at least one hit in 2,114 of them. He has had multiple hits in more than 1,000 of them.

Eight times Derek Jeter got 200 hits in a season. No other shortstop has done that more than four.

Jeter hit double-digit homers 16 times, most ever for a shortstop. Jeter stole double-digit bases 17 times, most ever for a shortstop. Jeter scored 100 runs 13 times, most ever for a shortstop.

He was the 14th man to get 3,000 hits with one team. He was the second to do it with a home run. He was the first to do it as a Yankee.

He had 3,465 hits and 200 postseason hits

Good bar trivia, which is greater?

23 perfect games have been pitched

24 pitchers have 300 wins (9 have more than 350)

27 hitters have 500 career HRs (9 have more than 600)

32 hitters have 3,000 hits (5 have more than 3,500)

64 managers have 1,000 wins or more (11 have more than 2,000)

Interesting Comparison

Catfish Hunter, 224 wins, 2,012 strikeouts

Bob Gibson, 251 wins, 3,117 strikeouts

Bob Feller, 266 wins, 2,571 strikeouts

Ferguson Jenkins, 284 wins, 3,192 strikeouts

Bert Blyleven, 287 wins, 3,701 strikeouts

Hall of Famer Brooks Robinson had the most starts all time at 3B (2,870 starts for the Orioles in his 23-year career). He won his first gold Glove in 1960 and then won it the next 15 straight seasons.

On [May 24, 1928](#), the Yankees beat the (Philadelphia) A's 9-7 in the first game of a doubleheader. It's not a game you'd think about nearly a century later, if not for this fun fact: It included **12** future Hall of Fame players, including all-time legends Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig and Tris Speaker -- plus both managers, plus two pitchers who didn't appear in the game, *plus* an umpire. It's the [greatest collection of future Hall of Famers in one game](#) in history. (link is to a Sports Illustrated article that is worth a read).

Yankees

CF Earle Coombs

LF Babe Ruth

1B Lou Gehrig

2B Tony Lazzeri

Bullpen Waite Hoyte, Steve Coveleski, Herb Pennock

A's

RF Ty Cobb

CF Tris Speaker

C Micky Cochrane

P Lefty Grove

Bench – Al Simmons, Eddie Collins, Jimmie Foxx

Managers Miller Huggins and Connie Mack, umpire Tom Connolly

I love arguments about who should and shouldn't be in the HOF. And I am a huge fan of writer Jason Stark who writes for The Athletic. Thought you'd enjoy this--some persuasive arguments for exclusions and exclusions. Enjoy.

My 2020 Hall of Fame ballot sat on my desk for six weeks. Every once in a while, I could almost feel it staring at me, no doubt wondering when the heck I'd get around to filling it out. Can't blame it.

I know some people rush to fill out that ballot. I'm not one of those people. I never will be.

Here's why: This isn't just a vote. This is a process — a process that comes with immense responsibility. When we cast a vote for the Hall of Fame, we aren't just expressing an opinion. We're changing lives. So the names on that ballot, every one of them, deserve a long, serious look. And I commit every year to giving them that look.

Doesn't matter if it's Derek Jeter or Heath Bell. Every player on this year's ballot played at least 11 seasons in the big leagues. That's 11 more than I played. I owe it to every one of them to give them all their due. Then, after weeks of thought and research, I feel like I'm ready to cast my vote.

But I also think part of that responsibility, as a voter, involves not just revealing my vote but explaining my vote, as completely and transparently as possible. So here it comes — my ballot *and* all the thinking that led to it.

The 10 I voted for

The first five names I checked were the simplest part of this process:

Derek Jeter — that's a check! An easy check!

Larry Walker and Curt Schilling — two more checks!

Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens — two more checks!

I'll discuss all of them later. But back to The Ballot, because the next two names weren't quite as automatic:

Todd Helton — voted for him last year. He hasn't made a single out since. Check!

Scott Rolen — as I wrote a year ago, I wanted to vote for him last year. Ran out of room on my list of 10. Glad that wasn't a problem this year. Check!

But then came the final three votes, all of which involved way too much agonizing. More on that shortly. First, here they are:

Billy Wagner — check!

Jeff Kent — check!

Omar Vizquel — check!

That's two men (Wagner and Kent) I'd voted for in the past — then ran out of room to vote for over a few cycles of overstuffed ballots — plus Vizquel, an excruciatingly difficult choice for my 10th and final slot.

To be honest, the decision to cast those final three votes took me hours of thought and internal debate over more than a week. What about Gary Sheffield? What about Andruw Jones? Did it make sense to vote for Bonds and Clemens but not Manny Ramirez and Sammy Sosa?

I had to answer all of those questions before I could send off my ballot. So how did I get to those answers? I'm here to lay that out for you.

Trust the process

Every year, I feel obliged to explain my voting philosophy. It's the least I can do. I started my time as a Hall of Fame voter with one clear goal: Just be consistent! So for years, I voted like this:

I dug deep into every player's life and times. Then I asked one basic question: Did I think this guy was a Hall of Famer or not? And if that answer was yes, I wouldn't just cast a vote for that player on that particular ballot. I'd vote for him *every year, on every ballot*.

Nothing looks or feels worse than voting for a guy one year, then not voting for him the next, over some gimmicky reason like *I think Jeter should go in alone, so I'll make sure of that by not voting for anyone else, even if I think they're Hall of Famers. How brilliant am I?*

Nooooo! Not brilliant! That's a horrible way to vote. At least it always felt horrible to me. It's not my place to tell anyone else how to fill out their ballot, but I will never, ever be *That Guy*.

That philosophy served me well for a long time. Then 2014 arrived. Suddenly, it became impossible to vote that way. Between 2014 and 2019, so many historically elite players appeared on this ballot that we elected 20 of them — in six years. That was the good news.

The bad news was the number of players we were allowed to vote for every year was still capped at 10. Which meant I wasn't allowed to vote anymore in a way I'd think the Hall of Fame would *want* me to go about this: by voting for every player I thought was a deserving Hall of Famer. Period. No agendas. No gimmicks. No stunts.

Instead, the Rule of 10 forced me to make choices that made no sense to me, by pushing players I wanted to vote for — or even had voted for in the past — off my ballot because I had only 10 slots. Awful.

Then this year came along, a year in which only one first-time candidate (that Jeter dude) was an obvious Hall of Famer. So whaddayaknow! We'd finally made it through those six years of ballot gridlock and had room again to cast our ballots the way most voters have always preferred to cast them: by honoring the players we thought deserved our vote, not just the players we had room to vote for.

For like 30 seconds, I thought that would make this year easier than the previous six. Boy, did I get that wrong. One trip through the qualifications of this group of candidates was a reminder that these choices are always difficult.

We're still talking about the greatest players who ever lived. We're still talking about finding that subtle line between the Greatest of the Great and a group of Still Great But Not Quite Hall of Famers. It's incredibly hard to draw that line.

So how did I finally arrive at a place where Wagner, Kent and Vizquel were the last three names I checked? I'll gladly walk you through that now ...

Wagner, Kent and Vizquel

I decided, in the end, that I wanted the final three spots on my ballot to go to players with a unique claim to historic greatness. That's a tricky quality to define. But here is how I thought it applied to these three:

Billy Wagner

What would qualify Billy Wagner as historically great? Oh, only this:

- He happens to own the *lowest WHIP of any pitcher in the entire live-ball era (0.998)*. Which means, among pitchers with 900-plus innings, he's the only man in the past 100 years — starter or reliever — who allowed fewer baserunners than innings. Incredible.
- In a related development, he also allowed *the fewest hits per nine innings of any pitcher since 1900 (5.99)* — also among pitchers with at least 900 innings.
- Oh, and also this: His strikeout rate (11.92 per nine innings) is *the best in the history of baseball* among pitchers with 900-plus innings.
- Not to mention his 2.31 career ERA ranks No. 1 among a portion of the population I like to describe as *all left-handed pitchers in the live-ball era* (once again, among pitchers with at least 900 IP).

I know there are voters who don't think Wagner pitched enough innings or made a big enough October impact to be considered a Hall of Fame closer. But look at those numbers one more time. Within the context of his job, Billy Wagner achieved a level of historic dominance. You'd need to come down with a serious case of anti-closer-itis not to acknowledge that.

Jeff Kent

So what's so historically special about Jeff Kent? That's not that complicated, either.

- Who hit more home runs than any second baseman who ever played baseball? Jeff Kent did (with 351).
- Who ranked No. 1 in extra-base hits among all second basemen in history? That, too, would be Jeff Kent (with 902).
- Rogers Hornsby retired 83 years ago. Want to guess who is the proud owner of the best slugging percentage of any second baseman since Hornsby retired? How'd you know? It's Jeff Kent (at .509).

I'm absolutely aware there is literally no other resemblance between Kent and Hornsby. Yep, I got the memo that Kent ranks behind second basemen like Ian Kinsler and Willie Randolph in

total Wins Above Replacement. Yessir, I noticed Kent wasn't Bill Mazerowski or Roberto Alomar or even Chase Utley when it came to his leatherworking skills.

But within the framework of his position, Kent carved out a set of offensive credentials that separate him from the pack. *The most home runs in the history of men who played second base for a living?* Sounds like a historic claim to fame to me.

Omar Vizquel

OK, here comes the portion of this column that is going to lead the league in *What the hell are you thinking, Stark?!* tweets, comments and emails. Why would I dare to argue that Omar Vizquel was historically great? I don't mind telling you why. It's what we're here for.

Omar Vizquel was *the most sure-handed shortstop in the history of baseball*.

That's why.

There are so many ways I could make that case. But I'm just going to roll out my favorite Vizquel tidbit of all time:

Seasons of 140-plus games with 5 errors or fewer *(all SS since 1900)*

Omar Vizquel: 3

All other shortstops combined: 3

I unearthed that astonishing nugget when I was writing my "Stark Truth" book over a decade ago. It still blows my mind every time I repeat it — because it hasn't changed.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know we have many, many cool, next-level metrics that measure defense in more sophisticated ways than, say, errors. Got it. I know all about it. I'm not arguing that Vizquel was better than Ozzie Smith, or a better defender than every shortstop except Ozzie Smith, or whatever advanced metric you'd like to cite to prove to me I'm nuts. I think I have a good feel for what Vizquel *wasn't*, if that helps calm you down.

But I also got to watch Vizquel play in the big leagues for nearly a quarter-century. It tells me a lot about him that there were teams that *wanted* to let him play for nearly a quarter-century. It tells me what his peers thought of him that they handed him 11 Gold Glove Awards. It isn't lost on me that there are only two other players in history with as many hits (2,877) *and* Gold Gloves as Vizquel — and their names are Willie Mays and Roberto Clemente — even though some people would dismiss that as just "compiling."

I've thought about this a lot. And you know what the Omar Vizquel debate feels like to me? It falls into a really strange category. It's about a bunch of people using numbers to try to convince me that my eyes didn't see what I thought they saw.

And what I thought I saw was a player with spectacular hands, genius-level baseball IQ and a level of professional dependability that allowed him to do things that the shortstops around him didn't do — never even thought of doing, in fact.

Feel free to disagree. It's cool. But my definition of a Hall of Fame shortstop is allowed to differ from yours. And it's extra cool if it does in this case — the unique case of Omar Vizquel.

So why not Andruw, Sheff, Manny or Sammy?

Now, here's the most challenging part of the decision to check those last three names: When you choose to vote for players as you're running out of slots, the ripple effect is that you can't vote for other players because ... have I mentioned we still get to vote for only 10? So here's why I *didn't* vote for these men:

Andruw Jones

The Andruw Jones Fan Club is undoubtedly looking at that Vizquel vote and concluding I've lost my mind. I know what they're all thinking: How can I honor Vizquel's defensive brilliance but not Andruw's, when one of those guys was clearly a superior offensive player — and it wasn't the guy I voted for?

Well, I agree with this part: There was a period in his 20s when Andruw Jones was the best defensive center fielder I've ever seen, and that put him on what could have been a Hall of Fame path. Unfortunately, Jones then turned 30.

Vizquel did his thing until age 45, even won a Gold Glove at age 39. Here's what Jones did after turning 30: bat .214, with 115 more strikeouts than hits. And had zero seasons in which he even got 340 plate appearances. That was some cliff he hurtled over.

So he hasn't earned the right to be compared to Mays or Ken Griffey Jr. or Joe DiMaggio or Mickey Mantle. He's a guy we should be comparing with Jim Edmonds, who played in the same era but was still collecting Gold Gloves at 35. Edmonds won eight Gold Gloves, had a 132 career OPS-plus and *didn't even make it to a second year on the ballot*. Jones won 10 Gold Gloves but also had a 111 OPS-plus and ceased being even a league-average *defender* in his 30s. So sorry. I went into this thinking this would be the year I'd vote for this guy. Just couldn't get there.

Gary Sheffield

This was really my toughest call, because Sheffield's offensive credentials are staggering. Here's the list of hitters with 500 homers and Sheffield's career slash line (.393/.393/.514): Barry

Bonds, Babe Ruth, Manny Ramirez, Mantle, Jimmie Foxx, Frank Thomas, Ted Williams and Mel Ott. So that's six Hall of Famers and two PED-stained candidates who are still keeping Sheffield company on the ballot. Good group.

But even if you put Sheffield's own PED questions aside, I'm still troubled by this: The metrics say he was possibly the [worst defensive outfielder](#) of anyone who has ever appeared on a Hall of Fame ballot! And on almost every team he ever played on, it ended badly — with grumbling about money, disputes with management, even a bizarre confession that *he committed errors on purpose* in Milwaukee so he could get himself traded.

I'm not saying that would keep me from voting for Sheffield in the future. But as a tiebreaker this year, it left him on the wrong side of my line.

Manny Ramirez

There wasn't just one PED era, in my mind. There were really two. There was that era with no testing, no discipline and no way of knowing who the heck was doing what. But then there was that era that began in 2005, when baseball finally implemented testing, suspensions and a legitimate effort to grapple with its darkest scandal in a generation.

If our friend Manny had just done what he'd done — by which I mean compile numbers that rank him among the greatest right-handed hitters who ever stepped into a batter's box — in that first era, I'd vote for him, for exactly the same reasons I vote for Bonds and Clemens. But that isn't Manny's story. He didn't merely get himself suspended twice in that second era. He racked up more PED suspensions *than everyone else on this ballot combined*. So ... no check for him!

Sammy Sosa

All right, what about Sammy, a man with 609 career home runs and more 60-homer seasons (three) than anyone who ever lived? He never tested positive, never got suspended, never admitted to PED use. So on that front, he falls into Bonds/Clemens territory. But on another note ... a vote for Sosa is a wasted vote. He missed getting elected by 283 votes last year. He's never getting elected. I know it. He knows it. Every voter knows it. And have I mentioned lately that I have only 10 spots? So no point in wasting one on him. Sorry!

The rest of my ballot

Derek Jeter

Back in November, [I wrote](#) I'd be shocked if Jeter didn't get elected unanimously, just like his amigo Mariano Rivera. I'd like to thank everyone who responded to those words by going to great lengths to inform me that Jeter wasn't really as good as all us dopey baseball writers made him out to be. Well, I sincerely appreciate your input. But now allow me to respond to your eloquent responses.

Honus Wagner stopped playing baseball in 1917. Our assignment today: Who was the greatest offensive shortstop in the 103 seasons since?

Offensive WAR leaders

Derek Jeter: 96.3
Robin Yount*: 83.1
Cal Ripken Jr.*: 78.1

**Includes other positions besides SS*
(Source: [Baseball-reference.com](http://baseball-reference.com))

Seasons with an OPS-plus of 120 or better

Derek Jeter: 9
Alex Rodriguez: 8
Cal Ripken Jr.: 6
Alan Trammell: 6

200-hit seasons by a shortstop

Derek Jeter: 8
Michael Young: 4

Seasons with a .300 average, last 50 years

Derek Jeter: 12*
Nomar Garciaparra: 6
Alex Rodriguez: 6
Alan Trammell: 6

*(*Tied with Wagner and Luke Appling for most all-time by a shortstop)*

Best career OPS-plus (2,500+ games at SS)

Derek Jeter: 115
Cal Ripken Jr.: 112
Ozzie Smith: 87

I could keep rolling, but you should really be catching on by now. No matter how overrated you might believe Jeter to be or how limited defensively we know he was, he is so far above any line you could draw for what a Hall of Fame shortstop looks like that it's hilarious to think anyone is debating whether there's a reason not to vote for him.

Larry Walker

There will be many storylines next Tuesday on Hall of Fame election day. But spoiler alert: The biggest drama revolves around Larry Walker. Either he's about to make a dramatic and historic leap, from 15.5 percent just four years ago to election ... or he's about to join the Nellie Fox/Orlando Cepeda Excruciating Miss Club, in this, his 10th and final year on this ballot.

With 155 public votes counted, Walker is still coasting steadily along at about 85 percent on Ryan Thibodeaux's invaluable [Hall of Fame tracker](#). But he had a 12 percentage-point drop last year after the official vote totals were released. So it'll be close.

Whether or not he gets elected, he's going to make the largest four-year leap in history. But it's still possible he falls just short. And that would be (A) heartbreaking and (B) a sign that a big block of Hall of Fame voters still thinks playing in Colorado somehow disqualifies you from being a Hall of Famer.

Come on, friends. We have lots of tools now that can help us put life at Coors Field into perspective. So let's use a couple to help us properly frame Walker's career.

Best OPS-plus* by outfielders whose career began in the last 50 years

Barry Bonds: 182
Manny Ramirez: 154
Larry Walker: 141

*(min. 8,000 PA/*park adjusted)*

Hall of Famers whose *road* OPS was worse than Walker's career road OPS

Larry Walker: .865
Ken Griffey Jr.: .860
Dave Winfield: .841
Eddie Murray: .838
Rickey Henderson: .836
Tony Gwynn: .835
George Brett: .825
Johnny Bench: .817
Cal Ripken Jr.: .803
Andre Dawson: .800

(Source — Baseball-reference.com)

Get the idea? I could go down that adjusting-for-Coors rabbit hole for hours. But I think there's an even better case for Walker as an easy Hall of Famer that looks at just his all-around brilliance. According to Baseball-reference.com, Walker accumulated 420 WAR Batting Runs in his career ... and 94 WAR Fielding Runs ... and 40 WAR Baserunning Runs. Here's a list of all the players in history who matched or beat those totals in all three categories:

Willie Mays
Hank Aaron
Barry Bonds
Larry Walker

Whoa. Do you really need any more proof that this was one of the most multitalented players of his, or any, generation? Walker is going to end up in Cooperstown. The only question is: Will it be via the writers' ballot next week ... or by the Today's Game Committee in two years?

Curt Schilling

It's Year No. 8 on the ballot for Schilling. And I'm still wondering: If Twitter had never been invented, wouldn't he have been elected long ago?

I'm not planning to be a voter for the Hall of Twitter. But I've cast a lot of Hall of Fame votes for Schilling. And I'm still repeating the same glittering credentials that paint the vivid portrait of a Hall of Fame starting pitcher.

First off, I think there's a case that Schilling was the best October starter of his generation. We're talking 19 postseason starts, just two earned runs allowed or fewer *in 16 of them*? A WHIP under 1.00 *in 19 postseason starts*? Five starts in postseason elimination games, a total of just *six* runs allowed, and *his team won every one of them*? That's greatness.

But Schilling was also a dominator in every healthy regular season of his career, once he became a starter in 1992. He merely owns the greatest strikeout-to-walk ratio *in modern history* among pitchers with 2,000-plus innings. And he would have won *three Cy Youngs in four years* if he'd just managed to avoid having his most dominating seasons in years when Randy Johnson (2001 and '02) and Johan Santana (2004) were even more dominating.

Schilling was 60 votes short of getting elected last year. The Tracker shows he has picked up just seven net votes in the 148 ballots revealed so far. So it looks like we'll be back here, reviewing the same old, same old, next year this time. It's a safer bet he'll rack up more tweets than strikeouts between now and then. And in my view, that should be irrelevant to this discussion. But in the weird case of Curt Schilling, voters seem to pay more attention to the tweeting than the pitching.

Todd Helton

On one hand, Helton has added the third-most new votes this year among all players in the Tracker (29). On the other hand, he was 249 votes below the election threshold in his ballot debut last year. So it's apparently going to take a while before these voters figure out what a special player he was in his day. But I'll volunteer to keep spreading the word.

If Helton had just unfurled this career anywhere else but Colorado, this would be easy, right? This man played 17 seasons, once finished in the NL's top five in OPS *six seasons in a row*, won three Gold Gloves and ended up with a .316/.414/.539 slash line. You should know that only eight players in history compiled 9,000 plate appearances and had a slash line that good. These names might sound familiar:

Ty Cobb
Rogers Hornsby
Ted Williams
Babe Ruth
Lou Gehrig
Stan Musial
Jimmie Foxx
Todd Helton

But I get it. That slash line was altitudinously inflated. So aren't we lucky that we now have all sorts of useful metrics that adjust for altitudinously inflated ballparks? Like OPS-plus, for instance. So let's spin off our handy-dandy list of all first basemen since 1900 with at least 9,000 plate appearances and an OPS-plus as good as Todd Helton (133). It won't take long.

Lou Gehrig
Jimmie Foxx
Albert Pujols
Jeff Bagwell
Willie McCovey
Fred McGriff

That's six household names, and I'd bet all six of them will have a Hall of Fame plaque to call their own within the next 10 years. Which would make this a list of six Hall of Famers — plus Helton. And let us repeat: That's *after* factoring in Coors Field in all its altitudinous glory.

I wrote a lot more about how unfair it is to apply The Coors Penalty to Helton in last year's Hall of Fame column. Feel free to [plow into it](#) if you're looking for an even greater perspective. But you know what hasn't changed since then? Todd Helton was a Hall of Famer then. And he's a Hall of Famer now.

Scott Rolen

I was still working in Philadelphia when Rolen showed up in 1996. You know what it feels like to watch Nolan Arenado make magic at third base now? That's what it was like watching Rolen then. There wasn't a ball hit to the left side of the infield that he didn't think he could catch. And he was usually right, even if he had to steamroll the nearest shortstop, third-base coach or umpire to catch it.

He played third base with a ferocity and athleticism I hadn't ever seen. It took a while for Sports Info Solutions' Defensive Runs Saved to arrive as a stat to measure all this. But in Rolen's first seven healthy seasons after DRS became a thing, he racked up 108 runs saved. Just for comparison's sake, Arenado had 117 DRS in his first seven seasons. Close enough for you?

Or we could stack up Rolen versus Adrián Beltré, widely viewed as a sure-thing Hall of Famer. Rolen comes out better than you'd think in that Tale of the Tape, too:

Player Gold Gloves OPS OPS-plus

Rolen	8	.855	122
Beltré	5	.819	116

Or we could drop the names of Mike Schmidt and Ron Santo with this nugget:

Most seasons with a Gold Glove and 120 OPS-plus at 3B

Mike Schmidt: 10
Scott Rolen: 8
Ron Santo: 5
Adrián Beltré: 3

It's the offensive side of Rolen's game that you just don't hear enough about. But this was a guy who once rolled out eight straight seasons with an OPS of .846 or better (and at least 490 plate appearances). You know how many other third basemen have ever had a streak that long? That would be *none*. Ever.

The legendary Hall of Fame analyst Jay Jaffe places Rolen among his top 10 third basemen of all time. Obviously, I second that motion!

Bonds and Clemens

Yeah, I saved them for last. I always save them for last — because I feel as if this section is on a continuous-loop highlight reel. Why do I vote for Bonds and Clemens? You can refer back to the

Manny Ramirez portion of this opus for more info. But essentially, for players who played most of their careers in the pre-testing portion of the PED era, my philosophy is this:

There should be a place in the Hall of Fame for the greatest players of that era. In the case of Bonds and Clemens, we're talking about two of the greatest players in any era. Honestly, how can you have a Hall of Fame without the man who hit more home runs than anyone who ever waved a bat? How can you have a Hall of Fame without the pitcher who won more Cy Youngs (seven) than anyone who ever threw a baseball?

I understand that it's complicated. I understand that it's messy. I understand there would be a powerful backlash if Induction Weekend ever arrived for these two men. But they played baseball at a time when we know that hundreds of players were taking something or other — and by the way, there's like a 100 percent chance we've already elected some of them. Right?

I don't know the best way to handle that mess. So I'd rather just vote for two of the greatest players in history and let the Hall of Fame figure out how to explain the PED era — because that's not a job I'd particularly like to volunteer for.

The Tracker exit polls tell us nobody will have to worry about a Bonds/Clemens Induction Day this year. But there are two more Bonds/Clemens elections to go. So cue up that continuous-loop highlight reel again. We'll be back to lay it on you again next year. One. More. Time.

Jeter Stuff to Celebrate Cooperstown

As a rule, offensive production in the postseason goes down, as the pressure and the quality of the pitching go up. During Jeter's career with the Yankees, which spanned from 1995 through 2014, teams across the major leagues scored 4.66 runs per game in the regular season versus 4.19 in the postseason. The collective on-base-plus-slugging percentage plummeted from .749 to .709.

There are 53 other Hall-of-Famers who compiled at least 100 plate appearances in the postseason, spanning from Babe Ruth in the inaugural Class of 1936 to Edgar Martínez and Harold Baines from the Class of 2019. Nearly three-quarters of them saw their batting average decrease in the playoffs, including Mickey Mantle (.298 to .257), Joe DiMaggio (.325 to .271) and Jackie Robinson (.311 to .234). About 70% of the group had a worse OPS in the postseason, some, like Vladimir Guerrero (.931 to .664) and Mike Schmidt (.908 to .690) by a wide margin.

All told, all Hall-of-Fame hitters saw their batting averages drop from .294 to .264 in the playoffs. Their combined OPS went from .814 to .756. That's the same OPS gap between Hall-of-Fame second baseman Roberto Alomar and current Washington Nationals utility infielder Asdrúbal Cabrera.

In other words, almost everybody gets worse in October. Jeter stayed exactly the same.

Jeter remained so consistent in the playoffs despite having more opportunities to fail than anybody in history—158 games, essentially an entire extra season. He had 734 postseason plate appearances, a MLB record, and about 35% more than the player with the second-most, his former teammate, Bernie Williams. His 200 hits are also the most ever. The Yankees won five World Series championships and seven American League pennants with Jeter as their shortstop.

Jeter's place in Cooperstown is undeniable. Jeter was a 14-time All-Star. He finished with 3,465 hits, sixth-most on the all-time list. Jeter also ranks 11th all-time in runs scored and 35th in doubles (544).

We all remember Derek Jeter's iconic flip play in Game 3 of the 2001 ALDS to nail Jeremy Giambi of the A's. Do you remember which Yankee made the sailing throw from right field? (I guessed Paul O'Neil). Correct answer is Shane Spencer.

Derek Jeter on the all-time list of home runs hit as a shortstop--Fifth all-time -- with 255 of his 260 coming as a shortstop behind A-Rod, Banks, Ripken, Tejada.

What to do with Andujar?

The Yankees' [Miguel Andujar](#) spent 2018 at third base, where he endured his fair share of struggles. Andujar posted a horrid minus-25 Defensive Runs Saved and a similarly poor minus-16 Ultimate Zone Rating, but the doubles machine's outstanding offensive production overshadowed his difficulties in the field. While Andujar finished second in AL Rookie of the Year voting in his first season, he wasn't able to follow it up in 2019 on account of shoulder troubles that shelved him for almost the whole campaign.

In Andujar's absence last year, the Yankees saw fill-in [Gio Urshela](#) enjoy an out-of-nowhere breakout. Urshela's now set to enter 2020 as the Yankees' top option at the hot corner, which could force Andujar to another position. Yankees manager Aaron Boone has told Andujar that

he'll have to learn to play first base and left field in spring training, [Randy Miller of NJ.com](#) reports.

Andujar's no sure thing to begin 2020 with the Yankees if he's unable to adapt to his new spots. Considering he has minor league options left, the Yankees could opt to send him to Triple-A Scranton/Wilkes-Barre. But Andujar's *"makeup is off the chart,"* general manager Brian Cashman told the YES Network, so the Yankees are still banking on him doing enough to crack their 26-man roster.

If Andujar does start the season in the majors, it's up in the air how much playing time he'll receive from the get-go. As mentioned, he's now the Yankees' No. 2 guy at third. Meanwhile, the Yankees have fellow right-handed hitter [Luke Voit](#), who has been quite productive since he joined the club in 2018, as well as lefty [Mike Ford](#) as first base possibilities. They also boast [Giancarlo Stanton](#), [Mike Tauchman](#) and [Clint Frazier](#)

as left field choices. So, there doesn't appear to be an easy path to early season playing time in New York for Andujar, despite the .297/.328/.527 line he recorded and the 76 extra-base hits he amassed during his rookie campaign.

More Interesting Stuff

Jeff Kent had more career extra base hits than Mickey Mantle

Ernie Banks—2 x MVP, 2 x led league in HRs, 2 x led league in intentional walks, 2 x led league in RBIs. 717 consecutive games. 40+ HRs 1957-58-59-60. 500+ career HRs, 1600+ career RBIs.

Yankee fans remember Johnny Mize as a super sub/pinch hitter for championship teams in the 1950s. But before he became a Yankee The Big Cat came up with the Cardinals and was traded to the New York Giants. In 1947 Johnny Mize hit 51 HRs and struck out 42 times. The only player in history to hit 50 and strike out less than 50. In 1948 he again led the league in HRs, beating Stan Musial by 1 and denying Musial the triple crown. Mize finished second to Musial that year in RBIs, slugging, OPS, total bases

June-July-August-September 1972. Steve Carlton went 22-4 with a 1.54 ERA, 208 strikeouts, 61 walks and just 10 home runs allowed in 251 innings. He twice threw back-to-back shutouts. He

completed 23 games. In the end, he won 27 games ... and Philadelphia won only 59. Carlton went on to win 329 games, strike out 4136 in 5217 career innings. 10 all star games, 4 cy young awards. He threw 254 complete games and had 55 shut outs.

Luis Rojas, son of Felipe Alou joins five other father-son MLB manager combinations: : the Macks (Connie and Earle), the Sislers (George and Dick), the Skinners (Bob and Joel), the Boones (Bob and Aaron), and the Bells, (Buddy and David).