

JANUARY 3, 2021

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

Happy New Year my friends. Hopefully spring training isn't too far away. Some fun stuff this week, but first...

A Correction. Last week highlighted Johnny Mize's 1947 season (51 HRs and just 42 strikeouts). Mize played that season for the New York Giants (managed by Mel Ott), not the New York Yankees (who Mize joined in 1949).

The 1954 Cleveland Indians advanced to the World Series for the first time in six years. It was the team's third American League championship in franchise history. The Indians' 111–43 record is the all-time record for winning percentage by an American League team. Manager Al Lopez, GM Hank Greenberg.

[Larry Doby](#) led the league in home runs (32) and RBIs (126). [Bobby Avila](#) was second in batting average (.341) and [Al Smith](#) was tied for second in doubles (29) with Chicago's [Minnie Minoso](#).

The Indians' strength was their pitching staff. They had strong pitching staffs from 1948 through 1956, as they boasted 16 20-win seasons, three strikeout leaders, and four ERA champs.

In 1954, [Early Wynn](#) and [Bob Lemon](#) tied for the league lead with 23 wins apiece. [Mike Garcia](#) was the ERA leader with a mark of 2.64. Lemon also bested all other pitchers with 21 complete games.

The Indians dominated most of the AL in 1954 with the exception of New York and Chicago. Both the Yankees and White Sox finished the season with 11-11 records against Cleveland. The Indians had their way against most of the other teams, posting superior records against Boston (20-2), Baltimore (19-3), and Philadelphia and Washington (18-4). The Tribe put together two 11-game winning streaks, May 13-23 and September 8-20.

Unfortunately for the Indians, the winningest season did not mean a world championship. They were swept in the World Series by the New York Giants.

In 1998, playing a 162-game schedule, the Yankees (114-48) eclipsed Cleveland for most wins in a season in the AL. In 2001, the Seattle Mariners set the bar even higher with a mark of 116-46. Seattle tied the 1906 Chicago Cubs for the major-league record for most wins in a season with 116.

However, the 1954 Indians, playing a 154-game schedule, still own the highest winning percentage, .721.

Fernando Tatis Jr. hit two homers in Game 2 of the 2020 NL Wild Card Series, as did teammate Wil Myers. The last pair of teammates to hit multiple homers in the same postseason game-- Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig in Game 3 of the 1932 World Series

Trevor Bauer and Shane Bieber became the first pair of pitchers to each win Cy Young honors in the year immediately after being teammates, according to Elias. Overall, they were the third pair of former teammates to do so, regardless of how long ago, joining 2016 Max Scherzer and Rick Porcello (2010-14, Tigers) and 1992 Greg Maddux and Dennis Eckersley (1986, Cubs).

They were also the second set of pitchers to win the Cy Young Award pitching for teams in the same state, joining Catfish Hunter and Mike Marshall, who did so for the A's and Dodgers, respectively, in 1974. And the fact that each was born in the state of California made them the fifth duo to win the Cy Young Award in the same year with the same birth state.

Speaking of Catfish Hunter. In 1971 he went 21-11 with the Oakland A's, 2.96 era, batted .350 and did not make an error all season.

In 1974 he went 25-12 for Oakland and won the Cy Young. In 1975 Hunter threw 328 innings with 30 complete games for the Yankees while winning 23 games.

In the 1972-73-74 postseasons Hunter was 7-1, in the three World Series, 4-0, including two matchups with Tom Seaver in 1973 in which the A's won a critical Game 3 in Shea Stadium and Game 6 back at the Oakland Coliseum.

On Wednesday, May 8, 1968, Hunter pitched the ninth perfect game in Major League Baseball history, defeating the Minnesota Twins 4-0 at Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum. Hunter struck out 11 batters, including the last two batters he faced

Rookie reliever Tyler Alexander of the Tigers August 2 against the Reds--The Tigers lefty, who had three K's over four innings in his first three appearances of the season, struck out each of the first nine batters he faced and came within one strike of tying Tom Seaver's Major League record, before hitting Mike Moustakas on a 1-2 pitch. Alexander's nine straight K's still tied an American League record and set an MLB mark for relievers. He added one more for good

measure and joined Danny Salazar (2014) as the only pitchers to finish an outing with at least 10 strikeouts in fewer than four innings. But Salazar did it as a starter, and also allowed five runs on six hits.

Bryce Harper September 23 against the Nationals—2 HRs and 3 intentional walks. Harper joined Claudell Washington (1980), David Wright (2007) and Albert Pujols ('13) as the only players to have a two-homer, three-IBB game. Harper's four runs are the most among that group.

Opening day 2020. Toronto Blue Jays. Bo Bichette, Vladimir Guerrero Jr., Cavan Biggio and Travis Shaw batted 1-4. First time in history a team's lead off four hitters were all sons of former major leaguers.

1959. Worst pitching inning in mlb history. Kansas City A's vs. Chicago White Sox. The A's were down, 8-6, to the White Sox entering the seventh inning. That deficit was 19-6 at the end of the seventh inning ... a frame in which the White Sox had managed only *one* hit, a single. Three Kansas City pitchers had allowed 11 runs on one hit, three errors, a hit-by-pitch and 10 walks -- eight coming with the bases loaded. To this day, it remains the most bases-loaded walks allowed in a single inning by a team ...8 -- A's vs. White Sox, 7th inning, 4/22/59

... or by a pitcher ...5 -- George Brunet, 7th inning, 4/22/59

Two players have won MVP as Toronto Blue Jays—George Bell 1987 and Josh Donaldson 2015.

Mike Trout. nine straight seasons with a top-five MVP finish for Trout, the longest streak since the BBWAA began voting for MVP in 1931. And he's done it to start his career.

There are 151 players all-time with at least 300 career homers. There were 168 with 300-plus steals. But there are only eight who belong to both groups.

[Barry Bonds](#) (762 HR, 514 SB) also 40-40 in 1996

[Alex Rodriguez](#) (696 HR, 329 SB) also 40-40 in 1998

[Willie Mays](#) (660 HR, 338 SB)

[Andre Dawson](#) (438 HR, 314 SB)

[Carlos Beltrán](#) (435 HR, 312 SB) career stolen base success rate of 86.4% [ranked first all-time](#) for a player with at least 200 attempts.

[Bobby Bonds](#) (332 HR, 461 SB) Ten seasons at 20-20, tied with Barry for most all time.

[Reggie Sanders](#) (305 HR, 304 SB) I had no idea.

[Steve Finley](#) (304 HR, 320 SB) ditto.

Eight players have reached at least 275 homers and steals without quite cracking 300-300.

[Rickey Henderson](#) (297 HR, 1,406 SB)

[Craig Biggio](#) (291 HR, 414 SB)

[Alfonso Soriano](#) (412 HR, 289 SB) 40-40 in 2006.

[Bobby Abreu](#) (288 HR, 400 SB) His nine 20-20 campaigns are the most all-time in the non-Bonds division.

[Don Baylor](#) (338 HR, 285 SB)

[Eric Davis](#) (282 HR, 349 SB)

[Ryne Sandberg](#) (282 HR, 344 SB)

[Mike Cameron](#) (278 HR, 297 SB) averaged better than 20-20 over a 13-year stretch (1997-2009) in which he played for six teams.

Astros pulled off a postseason first in Game 5 of the AL Championship Series. George Springer led off for the Astros with a homer in the bottom of the first. Then, in the ninth, Carlos Correa won it with a walk-off home run. It was the first time in postseason history that a team had a leadoff and walk-off home run in the same game.

At 21 years and 338 days old on the last day of the 2020 season, Juan Soto of the Nationals became the fifth-youngest player to win a batting title in the Modern Era, and the youngest to do it in the NL. The only younger batting title winners were 1996 Alex Rodriguez, 1955 Al Kaline and 1907-08 Ty Cobb.

[Clayton Kershaw](#) played in 19 postseason series before the 2020 World Series, [the most postseason rounds played for a player before winning his first title](#). Part of that is the sheer number of postseason series that exist these days -- but it also illustrates how much Kershaw went through before finally winning it all. Teammate [Kenley Jansen](#) is second on that list with 16 rounds prior to the '20 Fall Classic.

Active highest career strikeouts-per-nine-innings rate (minimum 1,000 career IP) -- Yu Darvish (11.1 strikeouts per 9 IP).

The HOF argument for Billy Wagner--Start with this: Among relievers who pitched at least 750 innings, his 11.9 strikeouts per nine innings, .187 opponents' batting average and 0.998 WHIP are the best in history. Yes, better even than the great Mariano Rivera (1.000 WHIP), who in 2019 became the first unanimous HOF selection. Rivera and Trevor Hoffman, elected in 2018 in his third year on the ballot, pitched into their early 40s and retired as the all-time saves leaders. Rivera had 652 saves in 19 seasons, plus 42 in his remarkable postseason career, and Hoffman had 601 in 18 seasons. Wagner retired at age 39 after 422 saves in 15 seasons. His 903 innings would be the fewest of any Hall of Famer. Notwithstanding Hoffman's advantage in saves and 186 1/3 more innings, Wagner was a significantly more dominant pitcher, with a fastball that still touched 100 mph late in his career.

Hall of Famers who died this year Phil Neikro, Whitey Ford, Al Kaline, Bob Gibson, Joe Morgan, Tom Seaver and Lou Brock all overlapped playing in 1967.

2020 Fun Facts (from the amazing Jayson Stark)

Anthony Rizzo, Kris Bryant and Jason Heyward are what we like to call “famous Cubs.” Did you know the three of them combined to hit six home runs at Wrigley Field ... all season?

José Abreu is what we like to call “a famous Chicago baseball player but not a Cub.” Did you know he also hit six home runs at Wrigley Field this year ... *in one series*?

Cubs made a visit to Cincinnati. And on Aug. 30, here’s what happened: Their center fielder (Ian Happ) hit two home runs ... and their right fielder (Jason Heyward) hit two home runs ... so obviously, their left fielder (Kyle Schwarber) was required to hit two home runs. Which he then did, via a cinematic grand slam with two outs in the ninth.

So you might be thinking: Has any team ever had all three of its outfielders hit two home runs (or more) in the same game? That answer was: Of course not.

RBIs became an official stat a century ago. Until that day, how many times would you think any team’s No. 1 and No. 2 hitters drove in at least five runs apiece? Yep. That would be none. So naturally ...

SEPT. 15: Less than a week later, as the Yankees were squashing Toronto, 20-6, their trusty leadoff man, DJ LeMahieu, drove in five runs. Want to take a wild stab at how many runs their No. 2 hitter, Luke Voit, knocked in? Right. That would also be five. In other words ...

There was this thing in baseball that happened *zero times in 100 years*. And then it happened *twice in six days*.

On July 28, Corey Seager of the Dodgers got a hit with the bases loaded. But that, of course, isn’t the Strange But True part. The Strange But True part is that he got a hit with the bases loaded *and didn’t drive in a run*.

How’d that happen? Because he managed to drill his teammate, Chris Taylor, in the leg with that hit. Which meant Taylor was out and the inning was defunct. Oh, and one more thing: That was the only hit Seager got with the bases loaded all season. RBI not included.

On Sept. 10, reliever Jimmy Herget got the last three outs for the Rangers in a game against the Angels. Then, the next night, that same Jimmy Herget got the *first* three outs in the Rangers’ game against Oakland. That in itself has been done before. But the part that got him into this Strange But True column was this:

He didn't even *start* that second game.

Wait. What? Yep. Seriously. Luis Garcia started that night, went walk-walk-walk-grand slam-get me outta here. Which meant Herget had to come in and rescue him — with nobody out in the first — and spin off a little Strange But True history.

CHASE ANDERSON of the Blue Jays had a Sept. 17 outing for the ages — by serving up five home runs to the Yankees ... *in one inning ... in relief*. How many other active relievers have ever given up five home runs in one game? Yes, none. But Chase Anderson did it *in 14 pitches*.

ROEL RAMIREZ of the Cardinals arrived on the mound on Aug. 16 to face the White Sox in his major-league debut ... and struck out the first hitter he faced ... and probably should have announced his retirement right there ... because he then went single-single-walk to the next three hitters, and then ... *allowed four home runs in a row*.

MATTHEW BOYD sure knew how to make an entrance for those Tigers this year. First, here's Boyd versus the first two hitters of his Aug. 12 start against the White Sox: Home run, home run. ... Now, here's Boyd versus the first two hitters of his next start, five days later, also against the White Sox: (Yep) home run, home run. ... Complete list of all pitchers in history to allow back-to-back homers to kick off back-to-back starts: Matt Boyd.

THE STRANGEST 1-2-3 INNING EVER Presenting an all-time all-timer. Mets-Yankees, Sept. 3 at Citi Field.

TOP OF THE 10th: Yankees bat. Ghost runner on second. Line-drive double play ... Luke Voit strikeout ... and we'd just seen one of my favorite 2020 things: *The old two-up, three-down inning!*

BOTTOM OF THE 10th: Meet the Mets. New ghost runner on second. Pete Alonso makes the second pitch of the inning disappear. Which meant ...

- Somehow or other, Alonso had made it through his entire 53-homer rookie season without hitting any walk-off home runs. So could it be that his first ever was a *two-run* walk-off *leading off an inning*? Sure it was ... because 2020!

But even stranger (and truer) than that, we'd just witnessed an extra inning in which an entire inning — top and bottom half — consisted of a *total* of just three hitters (two in the top half, one in the bottom). Remember back in the olden days (like, oh, 2019), when that used to be impossible? Well, then, for the first time ever, it happened in this game ... because 2020!

THE STRANGEST PERFECT OUTING EVER Here's another thing that used to be impossible back in the before times. On Sept. 12, the Orioles brought Hunter Harvey in to pitch the 10th inning against the Yankees. He allowed no hits, no walks, no base runners of any size or

shape. So how'd that work out? Don't ask. He still wound up *as the losing pitcher* ... because of A) the ghost runner, B) a wild pitch, C) a sac fly and also D) ... 2020!

THE STRANGEST SAC FLY EVER It used to take an actual rally to make stuff like sacrifice flies possible. But man, how 2012 was that? Here's what it took for Max Muncy to hit an extra-inning sacrifice fly against the Angels on Aug. 15:

Ghost runner heads out to second. That's Chris Taylor. Third pitch: Taylor steals third. Fourth pitch: Muncy lofts what once upon a time would have been a routine fly ball to right. Instead, it becomes the first *leadoff sac fly* in baseball history ... because 2020!

THE STRANGEST GHOST-RUNNING RUN-SCORING RELIEVERS EVER Boy, did the Yankees ever manufacture some weird extra-inning stuff this year. So this one just fit right in. When a Sept. 4 game against the Orioles headed into extras, both teams got into that wacky 2020 spirit by abandoning their DH and sending in their relief pitchers to do the ghost running. You can guess what happened next.

- The Yankees' ghost runner, Jonathan Holder, would get transported around the bases and become the first Yankees reliever to score a run since Mike Stanton got an actual hit against the Expos, on June 6, 2000, and came around to score. (Hits by Holder in this game: Zero. But remember, *it was 2020!*)

- Then the Orioles' pitching ghost runner, Travis Lakins, would do the same and score the tying run. So now we had some serious Strange But True history on our hands — because that made Holder and Lakins the first two AL relievers to score a run in the same game in 50 years! (Last two to do it: Sparky Lyle and Barry Moore in a Red Sox-White Sox game on Aug. 30, 1970.)

- Oh, and one more thing. That run Holder scored meant that we could sum up his career offensive accomplishments this way: One run scored ... *but zero plate appearances* ...

- Should we just declare Oct. 5 as Alex Bregman Day in America? *Of course* he hit a postseason homer on Oct. 5 this year — because he has now done that *four* Octobers in a row. And how many times did he homer on any of the other 12 days he played in this postseason? That would be zero.

- There have now been 1,670 games in postseason history. But until Game 5 of the 2020 NLCS, not one of them had ever featured a hitter digging in to face a pitcher with the same first and last name. Then Will Smith the Dodgers catcher faced Will Smith the Braves reliever.

There was a time this October when it appeared we might make it through the entire postseason without a sac bunt, for the first time ever, until ... we finally got one, in Game 3 of the ALCS, from ... *a team that never bunts*.

That would be your Tampa Bay Rays, an outfit that had 309 plate appearances this season with runners on and first base open — and passed up the chance to square around in every darned one of them. And then the only AL team that laid down zero sacrifices in the entire regular season dropped down *the first sac bunt of this postseason* ...

Fasten those seat belts if you have any seat belts handy, because here it comes — the Strange But True Game of the Year (and practically any year): Braves 29, Marlins 9, on Sept. 9 in Atlanta. What made this game so Strange But True? Hahahahaha. Well, it had something to do with ...

THE SAVE: Sean Doolittle saved no games this year. But Bryse Wilson saved this game ... *which his team won by 20 runs!*

THE BOX SCORE LINE OF THE CENTURY: Here was Marlins reliever Jordan Yamamoto's contribution to these festivities: 13 runs, 8 outs! You should know that no starting pitcher has given up that many runs in more than 25,000 games since 2014. But Jordan Yamamoto managed to give up 13 *in relief*.

THE BULLPEN: Not to pick on the Marlins here, but yikes! How many runs did their bullpen cough up in this game? That would be a modest ... 22! Which had something to do with how the Marlins would allow more runs in this game than they'd given up in *any of their previous 25 series!*

THE LEADOFF MAN: Here's what isn't surprising: The Braves became the first team since the 1945 Cubs to have three different players score at least five runs in a game. But here's the part that *is* surprising. Their amazing leadoff hitter, that Ronald Acuña Jr. guy, wasn't one of them. And that's not just shocking because he's Ronald Acuña Jr. It's because he became the first man in the last half-century to reach base in *the first, second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth innings* of any game (but only scored in four of them)!

THE THREE-HOMER MAN: Finally, Hank Aaron once played more than 3,000 games for the Braves. ... Chipper Jones once played nearly 2,500. ... They finished their careers with one three-homer game apiece. ... But in this game, Adam Duvall would hit three home runs for the Braves — *for the second time in a week and a half ... because baseball!*

And then, a couple of months later, the Braves would reward Duvall for his two spectacular long-ball trifectas — *by non-tendering him* ... because, well, repeat after me: 2020!

Phil Neikro

Phil Niekro reached the 300-inning mark four times in his career. The most recent pitcher to throw 300 innings in a season was Steve Carlton in 1980.

Niekro pitched for the Braves, Indians, Yankees and Blue Jays in his career. He was a five-time All-Star, won five Gold Glove Awards, and led the Majors in ERA at 1.87 in 1967. He was elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1997.

Here are 11 amazing facts about Niekro's career.

- He threw 1,977 innings after turning 40, the most of any pitcher all time. The next-most such innings belong to Jack Quinn, in a distant second place with 1,566. With all of those innings, Niekro also tallied the most wins after turning 40, with 121. The only other pitcher with even 100 such wins was Jamie Moyer, with 105.
- And it isn't just the over-40 crowd where Niekro was among the innings leaders. His 5,404 career innings pitched are fourth most all time behind Cy Young (7,356), Pud Galvin (6,003 1/3) and Walter Johnson (5,914 1/3). Johnson is the only other pitcher of that quartet who debuted in the modern era (since 1900), along with Niekro. And Niekro is the only one to debut in the live-ball era (since 1920).
- Niekro didn't just pitch a ton of innings -- he did it at a high level. The knuckleballer accumulated 97.0 career WAR as a pitcher according to Baseball Reference, 11th-most among pitchers all time. He had a 3.35 ERA over 24 seasons.
- Niekro reached heights we haven't seen lately with his innings totals. He threw 300 or more innings in a season four times, in 1974 and 1977-79. How different is that from today's game? No pitcher has thrown 300 innings in a season since 1980, when Steve Carlton did it, and Niekro is the last to throw 300-plus innings in consecutive seasons. In 1980, there had been at least one individual 300-inning season each year since 1962.
- Part of how he totaled so many innings? Complete games. He pitched 245 complete games in his career, including 65 in a three-season span at ages 38-40. He's the last pitcher to throw 20 or more complete games in consecutive seasons, doing so from 1977-79. The most complete games of any active pitcher for his *entire career* is 26, by Justin Verlander -- over the course of a 16-year career.
- Niekro threw 104 complete games after turning 40, third-most in the modern era behind Cy Young (178) and Warren Spahn (114).
- It wasn't all innings, though. Niekro racked up 3,342 career strikeouts in his career, 11th-most all time. He's one of 18 pitchers to reach the 3,000 strikeout plateau, and one of 10 of those to also notch 300 wins, with 318.
- In 1979, Niekro had a particularly unique season. He led the National League in wins with 21 while leading the Majors in losses with 20. He's the only pitcher in the modern era to lead his league in both wins and losses in the same season, according to Elias. And he did it for the last-

place Braves, making him one of nine pitchers to [win 20 games for a last-place team](#) (division since 1969, league prior to that) in the modern era.

He made 44 starts that year, the most in any season of his career, and threw a career-best 23 complete games. His 1979 campaign was the last time a pitcher made more than 40 starts in a season.

- Two of his milestone games are worth calling out specifically. On Aug. 5, 1973, Niekro threw a no-hitter for the Braves against the Padres. And on the final day of the 1985 season as a member of the Yankees, he recorded his 300th career win -- infamously not throwing a single knuckleball until the [final batter of the game](#).
- Niekro's brother Joe also pitched in the Majors and totaled 221 wins. Together with Phil's 318 wins, the two combined for 539 wins, the most by any brother combination in Major League history.
- Niekro spent almost his entire career with the Braves, pitching the first 20 years of his career for them, as well as the final game of his career in 1987. He threw 740 games in a Braves uniform, the most in franchise history. His 2,912 career strikeouts with the club are second behind John Smoltz (3,011). And his 268 wins rank third behind Warren Spahn (356) and Kid Nichols (330), who pitched from 1890-1901.

More from Joe Posnanski's series on Hall of Fame cases for players looking in:

Manuel Aristides (Manny) Ramírez Onelcida

Cleveland—Boston—Los Angeles Dodgers—Chicago White Sox—Tampa Bay, 1993-2011

One of the greatest hitters in baseball history. Retired as one of only five players to have hit .300 with 500 doubles and 500 home runs. Led Cleveland to first World Series appearance in more than 40 years and led Boston to first World Series championship in more than 80 years. In 1999, he drove in 165 RBIs, most for any player since the 1930s. "Manny Being Manny."

In 1999, Manny Ramírez drove in 165 runs, making him the first player since [Jimmie Foxx](#) in 1938 with more than 160 RBIs in a season. He finished tied for third in the MVP voting.

The next year, he led the league in slugging and OPS, hit .351/.457/.697 with 38 homers and 122 RBIs. He finished sixth in the MVP voting.

In 2002, he led the league in batting average (.349) and on-base percentage (.450) and hit 33 homers. He finished ninth in the MVP voting.

In 2004, he led the league in homers (43), slugging (.613) and OPS for the third time. He led the Red Sox to the playoffs where they eventually won the World Series (with Manny winning the World Series' Most Valuable Player award). He finished third in the MVP voting even though he outhomered and had a higher OPS than the runaway winner, Vladimir Guerrero.

The next year, he hit 45 homers, drove in 144 RBIs and scored 112 runs. He finished a distant fourth in the MVP voting.

In 2008, after being traded to Los Angeles, he hit .396/.489/.743 with 17 homers and 53 RBIs in 53 games. He almost single-handedly carried the Dodgers from a struggling team into the playoffs. He finished fourth in the MVP voting.

All of which is to say that while everybody understood Ramírez's unique talent as a hitter — honestly, there has never been any hitter who was quite like him — he never won an MVP because people couldn't help but believe that there was something, er, insubstantial about him. People were not wrong. He seemed entirely uninterested in playing defense, he ran the bases dubiously (once trying to run to third on a ground-rule double) and barely a week would go by without him doing something like getting pulled over by police for having car windows that were tinted too dark and then getting pulled over *again* for making an illegal U-turn as he drove off.

"Manny being Manny" was what we all said.

We can get into the failed drug tests in a minute.

The thing is that Ramírez defies category. Yes, he was widely understood throughout his career to be a difficult teammate and a chemistry wrecker. But at the same time, Ramírez's teams always won. Cleveland made the playoffs five straight years and won two pennants as Manny crushed the ball. He signed the second-biggest contract in baseball history to that date with Boston and while his time there was filled with feuds, eccentricities and countless near-divorces, his Red Sox made the playoffs almost every year and won their first two World Series since the world was young.

Then he went to the Dodgers, and they went to the playoffs two years in a row.

Ramírez brought this astonishing persona to the game. He was weird. He was brilliant. He was impossible. He was larger than life. When there was nobody on base or the game was not especially competitive, he often seemed sleepy, unconcerned, indifferent, bored. But when there were runners in scoring position, everything about him seemed to transform. I've never seen a player who loved driving in runs more than Manny.

Highest career OPS with runners in scoring position (min. 1,000 PAs)

1. [Babe Ruth](#), 1.195

2. [Ted Williams](#), 1.123
3. [Barry Bonds](#), 1.121
4. Jimmie Foxx, 1.088
5. [Mike Trout](#), 1.082
6. [Lou Gehrig](#), 1.079
7. [Rogers Hornsby](#), 1.074
8. Mark McGwire, 1.058
9. Manny Ramírez, 1.048
10. Joey Votto, 1.040

Votto has never gotten the credit he deserves for being absolutely fantastic in high leverage situations ... but that's a story for another day.

Ramírez did get credit for this. Legends built around him. Pitchers would insist that in spring training or a non-competitive game, he would purposely look bad on a certain pitch in order to get that same pitch later when it actually mattered. I can remember one scout telling me that every hitter — every single one — has a weakness, “except Manny Ramírez.”

“If he wanted to hit .400,” the scout said, “he’d hit .400. That just doesn’t interest him.”

I’m not sure that last part is entirely true. Ramírez was flaky, yes, but not when it came to his hitting. He worked relentlessly at that; his batting practice sessions were legendary. While he didn’t hit .400, he did hit .351 in 2000 with Cleveland, and he won a batting title in 2002 with Boston at .349. When he was traded to a flailing Dodgers team in 2008, he hit .396 the rest of the way. His lifetime .312 batting average is sixth among right-handers since 1950. And among those players (including three Hall of Famers in Vlad Guerrero, Kirby Puckett and [Roberto Clemente](#), along with future Hall of Famer in [Miguel Cabrera](#)) he has the best on-base percentage, the best slugging percentage, the most home runs, the most runs, the most RBIs, etc.

Now we get to the drug part. There has always been — at least in the minds of many — an uncertainty of how to deal with the Performance-Enhancing Drug questions surrounding players like Barry Bonds, [Roger Clemens](#), Mark McGwire, [Sammy Sosa](#), [Gary Sheffield](#) and so on. None of them ever tested positive for PEDs. All of them spent the bulk of their careers at a time when Major League Baseball — at the very least — was cavalier about PED use. There was no drug testing, no official punishment for steroid use, no public campaign to rid the game of drugs. Many substances that are now banned, such as andro, were being used in the open. The popularity of the game was growing rapidly and the proliferation of home runs and the late-career success of legendary players was certainly a part of the record-setting attendance figures.

This is not to say that players who used steroids and other illegal PEDs during this time were unaware that they were cheating the game and breaking laws. It’s just to say that it was a

baseball problem as much as an individual problem, that drug use was pretty widespread then, and that there unquestionably are players, managers and executives in the Hall of Fame who quietly used these same PEDs and actively or passively encouraged others to do so.

There are no such ambiguities when it comes to Ramírez. He *twice* tested positive, and this was in 2009 and 2011, long after MLB (after much pressure) had gotten more serious about trying to stop the use of steroids and other PEDs. It is interesting that he already has gotten significantly more Hall of Fame support than McGwire or Sosa, who were perhaps baseball's biggest stars during the Wild Wild West days. It makes me wonder if some voters prefer Ramírez's case because, unlike Sosa and McGwire, he did receive suspensions for his failed drug tests. Maybe because there was no way to retroactively punish McGwire, the Hall of Fame voters felt it was incumbent for them to do so.

It's also possible that Ramírez is getting more support because he was a more pivotal figure in baseball lore. Like I say, there has never been a hitter quite like him.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Manny Ramírez is how hard he worked to stay in baseball. After his second suspension and "retirement" in 2011 — his team, Tampa Bay, was informed of that retirement not by Ramírez, but by MLB — he played in the minor leagues for Oakland, Texas and the Chicago Cubs. He kept playing Dominican Winter League baseball, connected with an independent team in Japan, played for a while in Taiwan's CPBL, and tried to jump to a team in New Zealand.

He's 48 now and as of a couple of weeks ago, he was a member of the Sydney Blue Sox in Australia. That seems up in the air right now because of what the team calls "sensitive and confidential medical reasons," but the point is that there is something touching about Ramírez refusing to let go of the game.

Ramírez was not easy, to say the least, but the man made hundreds of millions of dollars in baseball, and yet he keeps going, keeps swinging, keeps traveling all around the world looking for one more at-bat with the bases loaded.

Robert Anthony (Bobby) Grich
Baltimore—California, 1970-1986

Brilliant fielder who is also the only second baseman in American League history to lead the league in home runs. Walked often, hit with power, played Gold Glove defense. Set a record in 1973 for highest fielding percentage for a second baseman and, a dozen years later, broke his own record. "I was short on talent," he said, "so I had to be long on intensity."

Let's talk for a minute about Bobby Grich's 1973 season for Baltimore because it probably is the best way to explain the phenomenon that was Bobby Grich.

Nobody at the time particularly thought that Grich had a great season. He hit .251 with 12 homers and 50 RBIs. That was certainly not bad for a second baseman in those days, particularly a good fielding one like Grich. He did win his first Gold Glove that year, in large part because he only made five errors all season (he would later say he remembered every single one of those errors). But he wasn't picked for the All-Star team. He was barely mentioned in the MVP voting. He was a useful player, not unlike his brilliant double-play partner Mark Belanger, but that was as far as it went.

And yet, Baseball-Reference WAR has him as the best position player in the American League.

Fangraphs WAR has him as the best position player in the American League.

So what gives? Was Grich a good player or a great one in 1973?

Here's the great player case: Grich played all 162 games at second base and was a defensive marvel. He not only set the record for highest fielding percentage, he also had spectacular range. By Baseball-Reference calculations, he was worth 29 runs above average on defense alone, which remains the highest total for any second baseman in American League history.

Beyond that, no, he was not a *great* offensive player that year — Grich would have a half dozen better offensive seasons — but he was so much better than his baseline statistics suggested. He walked 107 times. He was a good base runner. He rarely hit into double plays. He got hit by some pitches. He stole some bases. He added 29 doubles and seven triples to his 12 home runs.

And when you put all of it together — legendary defense, good offense, solid base running — you have a truly great season.

Or maybe you don't think so — you might just see a player who played good defense and hit .251, making him not significantly different from dozens and dozens of other seasons in the 1970s.

That is the conundrum of Bobby Grich.

He has an argument as the best player in the American League in 1974 too. He led the league in Fangraphs WAR and was second by a sliver to Rod Carew in Baseball-Reference WAR. By advanced statistical measures, he was much better than the American League MVP in 1974, Jeff Burroughs.

Nobody saw him that way then, though. Grich only hit .263. Yes, he walked 90 times and was hit by pitch 20 more times. Yes, he posted a 135 OPS+, cracked 19 homers, stole 17 bases, won another Gold Glove. But Burroughs hit .301 and led the league in RBIs and so what if he was a real problem in right field and a sofa on the bases?

Grich has an argument as the American League's best player in 1975 too. Again, nobody noticed because he hit .263. But great defense, 100-plus walks, some power, some speed, I mean, you either believe this stuff adds up to something or you don't.

After he turned 30, Grich started doing more noticeable things. He hit 30 homers and drove in 101 RBIs in 1979 while doing all his other things. It didn't help: He finished eighth in the MVP voting behind two of his teammates. In 1981, shortened season, he became the first second baseman to lead the American League in homers, and he hit .300 for the first time in his career. Didn't matter. He finished 14th in the MVP balloting.

No matter what Grich did, he just couldn't get people to see what a great player he was.

Then, when his career ended, the Hall of Fame voters saw the .266 lifetime average, the 1,833 hits and decisively determined that he was a good but not great player. He got 11 votes.

By JAWS — the excellent Jay Jaffe system that combines career and peak WAR to give you a fuller view of the player — Grich was one of only three players on the ballot who was better than the average Hall of Famer at his position. No. 1 was Tom Seaver, who set a record for highest vote percentage. No. 2 was third baseman Ron Santo who was not voted into the Hall of Fame until after his death.

No. 3 was Grich. Again, he got 11 votes.

I don't know how you turn around a hardened opinion of a player. It took 14 years for people to accept that Bert Blyleven, who is fifth all-time in strikeouts and 12th all-time in pitching WAR, was not some mediocre .500 pitcher but was, in fact, one of the best in the history of the game. It took too long for people to appreciate that Santo was a fantastic player who mixed a unique blend of third-base defense, on-base percentage and power. It took too long for people to move Alan Trammell out of the very good box and put him in the Hall of Fame box.

I don't know if such a realization will ever happen with Bobby Grich. I hope it does. Take a look through baseball history and see how many other second basemen you can find who did all of the things Grich could do. Or I can save you the time: It's a very short list.

Todd Lynn Helton
Colorado, 1997-2013

As much a scientist as a batter, he constantly experimented with different approaches and hit .316 over his career. Flirted with .400 in 2000. Walked more often than he struck out in a time when that was virtually unheard of for a power hitter. Played quarterback at the University of

Tennessee and, when he got hurt, was replaced by one of the NFL's all-time greats, Peyton Manning.

Todd Helton tells a great story about how he became such a great opposite-field hitter. His father Jerry Helton, who played catcher in the Minnesota Twins system in the late 1960s, fashioned a hitting tee for young Todd in front of the garage. The tee was set up so that if young Todd pulled the ball, he would hit it directly into his father's fiberglass boat.

So young Todd hit the ball the other way.

So let's start with this: Here are the highest averages for players in the last 100 years who are not in the Hall of Fame (min. 2,000 games)

1. Todd Helton, .316
2. Manny Ramírez, .312
3. Ichiro Suzuki, .311

Here are the highest on-base percentages for players in the last 100 years who are not in the Hall of Fame:

1. Barry Bonds, .444
2. Todd Helton, .414
3. Manny Ramírez, .411

And here are the highest OPS for players in the last 100 years who are not in the Hall of Fame:

1. Barry Bonds, 1.051
2. Manny Ramírez, .996
3. Todd Helton, .953

Ichiro will, of course, be voted into the Hall of Fame the minute he's eligible, perhaps unanimously. Bonds is his own thing. Ramírez is his own thing.

So what do we make of Todd Helton?

Well, consider this: In 2000, Helton had an absolutely absurd season. He created 192 runs. Only eight players in Major League Baseball history have created so many runs in a season, and just about all of them obviously won the MVP award.

1. Bonds, 2001, 230 runs created, won MVP
2. Bonds, 2002, 208 runs created, won MVP
3. Bonds, 2004, 203 runs created, won MVP
4. Jimmie Foxx, 1932, 202 runs created, won MVP
5. Sammy Sosa, 2001, 193 runs created, lost MVP to Bonds
6. Mark McGwire, 1998, 193 runs created, lost MVP to Sosa
7. Todd Helton, 2000, 192 runs created

8. Stan Musial, 1948, 192 runs created, won MVP

I left off Helton's MVP status that year because it's quite remarkable. He hit .372/.463/.698. He led the league in all three splits and also in hits (216), doubles (59) and total bases (405). He almost certainly should have won the first base Gold Glove — it might have been his best defensive season in a career of award-winning defense — and he led the league in WAR by a fairly substantial amount. He also threatened into September to become the first MLB player since Ted Williams to hit .400.

Helton finished *fifth* in the MVP voting.

Fifth. How do you make sense of that? He finished behind Jeff Kent, Bonds, Mike Piazza and Jim Edmonds. He got one first-place vote. This is one of the greatest seasons in baseball history, and people barely cared. What gives?

If you were following baseball at the time, you know exactly what happened: People didn't take Helton's numbers seriously because he played half his games at Coors Field. The park, particularly in those years before the humidors, was an absurdity. And by 2000, it seems, many had just decided to write off *anything* that happened there. You couldn't exactly blame them. In the previous five years:

— Dante Bichette had hit .340 with 40 homers and 128 RBIs (1995).

— Four different players— Andres Galarraga, Vinny Castilla, Ellis Burks and Bichette — hit 30-plus homers and drove in 113-plus RBIs (1996).

— Larry Walker hit .366/.452/.720 with 49 homers, 143 runs, and 130 RBIs, and he didn't even lead the team in RBIs because Galarraga drove in 140 (1997).

— Castilla hit .319 with 46 homers and 144 RBIs (1998).

— Walker hit .379 with 37 homers, Bichette drove in 133 RBIs, Helton himself hit .320 with 35 homers and 113 RBIs (1999).

So, it was all just kind of silly at Coors Field. Walker had won an MVP award and Bichette came close, but then the voters just stopped putting stock into any of these Coors Field numbers, no matter how extraordinary they might have been.

In 2003, Helton hit .358 with 49 doubles, 33 homers, 117 RBIs, 135 runs scored and he finished seventh in the MVP balloting behind, among others, relief pitcher Eric Gagne.

In 2004, Helton hit .347 with 49 doubles, 32 homers, 115 runs scored and he won a Gold Glove. He finished *sixteenth* in the MVP voting behind, among others, relief pitcher Eric Gagne again.

In 2005, Helton led the league in on-base percentage and didn't get a single MVP vote.

Yes, the Coors Field effect had worn everyone down. It was confusing and exhausting trying to figure out what Helton's extraordinary numbers actually meant, and the Rockies were terrible in his prime anyway, so people mostly chose to mostly ignore Helton. That would continue for the rest of his career.

But that might have changed in 2020. In January, the BBWAA finally voted in Helton's teammate Larry Walker after 10 years of dickering and bickering. Walker's big Hall of Fame drawback was the inflated numbers he put up Coors Field, and the voters managed to see past that and realize that Walker was an astounding all-around player.

Can they do that with Helton? I believe Walker has some advantages as a Hall of Fame candidate. He was a better base runner. They were both terrific defenders; Walker provided more value because he was a right fielder.

But they provided similar value as hitters. Helton ranks 19th all-time in doubles, 36th all-time in walks, 33rd all-time in runs created and 40th all-time in extra-base hits. He is among Hall of Famers in every one of these categories. Plus, as mentioned, he's at the top or near the top of the list among non-Hall of Famers in batting average, on-base percentage and OPS. He had a fantastic prime, even if it was largely overshadowed by Barry Bonds and the park where he played. I believe Todd Helton belongs in the Hall of Fame.

JANUARY 10, 2021

while you prep for NFL playoffs or PGA Tournament of Champions, some baseball reading to enhance your Sunday.

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

RIP Tommy Lasorda, oldest-living Hall of Famer (that now passes to Willie Mays). Over two decades at the helm, he won eight division titles, four pennants and two World Series championships, in 1981 and 1988. A Dodger longer than even Vin Scully, he joined the organization when Truman was president, 71 years.

He was 3-1 as an All-Star manager. His 1,599 wins rank 22nd all time. Tommy Lasorda managed the Dodgers for 21 straight seasons, 1976-1996, among the longest-tenured managers in MLB history, tied for fourth with Bobby Cox of the Braves (Connie Mack, Philadelphia A's, 50 years; John McGraw, NY Giants, 31 years; Walter Alston, Brooklyn-LA Dodgers, 23 years).

Modern Era pitcher collected the most wins from his age-30 season onward--Phil Niekro (287 wins).

Lefty Grove (45 K's in 148 plate appearances) struck out Babe Ruth more than any other pitcher.

Last Mets shortstop to win a Gold Glove Award was Rey Ordonez, who won three in a row from 1997 to 1999

More interesting arguments from Joe Posnanski on HOF outsiders (his argument for Mark McGwire is a good read).

Luis Clemente Tiant Vega

Cleveland—Minnesota—Boston—New York Yankees—Pittsburgh—California, 1964-82

El Tiante was giant, an overpowering pitcher when he was young and a magician after he grew older. Won 20 games three times, led the American League in ERA twice, and was a force of nature in the classic 1975 World Series. A master of gyrations and arm angles, and hitters never knew what was coming next. Reggie Jackson called him the Fred Astaire of baseball.

William Edward (Billy) Wagner

Houston—Philadelphia—New York Mets—Boston—Atlanta, 1995-2010

One of the hardest throwing pitchers in baseball history, Billy The Kid was only 5-foot-10 but would put all of that into every pitch. Struck out at least a batter an inning every year of his career. Retired as one of only two pitchers in baseball history to allow less than one walk and hit per inning pitched.

Now you ask: What in the world do Luis Tiant and Billy Wagner have in common?

I guess I would say put it this way: Both had lousy Hall of Fame timing.

One of the themes of this series is that timing often plays a huge role in a player's Hall of Fame journey. Let's go into some depth on that idea.

As you no doubt know, Hall of Fame voting works like so:

- A candidate (a player who has played at least 10 seasons and is determined by a committee to be worthy of consideration) is added to the ballot after being retired for five seasons.
- If the player gets 75 percent of the vote from the Baseball Writers' Association of America, he is elected to the Hall of Fame.
- If the player gets between 5 percent and 74 percent of the vote, he is automatically placed on the next year's ballot. This continues for up to 10 years.
- After 10 years, if a player has not been elected, he is dropped from the ballot.
- Various veterans' committees — created by the Hall of Fame itself — will annually consider the Hall of Fame cases of those who have fallen off the ballot.

OK, so here's something obvious: The greatest of the greatest are, with very few exceptions, elected to the Hall of Fame in the first year they are on the ballot. Since 1970, 48 players have

been elected on the first ballot. I'm going to list them all here so you can clip it and keep it for reference.

First-ballot Hall of Famers:

1970s (5): Sandy Koufax (1972); Warren Spahn (1973); Mickey Mantle (1974); Ernie Banks (1977); Willie Mays (1979)

1980s (10): Al Kaline (1980); Bob Gibson (1981); Henry Aaron and Frank Robinson (1982); Brooks Robinson (1983); Lou Brock (1985); Willie McCovey (1986); Willie Stargell (1988); Johnny Bench and Carl Yastrzemski (1989)

1990s (10): Jim Palmer and Joe Morgan (1990); Rod Carew (1991); Tom Seaver (1992); Reggie Jackson (1993); Steve Carlton (1994); Mike Schmidt (1995); Nolan Ryan, George Brett and Robin Yount (1999).

2000s (10): Dave Winfield and Kirby Puckett (2001); Ozzie Smith (2002); Eddie Murray (2003); Paul Molitor and Dennis Eckersley (2004); Wade Boggs (2005); Cal Ripken Jr. and Tony Gwynn (2007); Rickey Henderson (2009).

2010s (12): Greg Maddux, Tom Glavine and Frank Thomas (2014); Randy Johnson, Pedro Martínez and John Smoltz (2015); Ken Griffey Jr. (2016); Iván Rodríguez (2017); Chipper Jones and Jim Thome (2018); Mariano Rivera and Roy Halladay (2019).

2020s (1): Derek Jeter (2020).

As you can see, the per-decade number of first-ballot Hall of Famers — after the incredibly frugal 1970s, when the BBWAA did not vote in Duke Snider, Yogi Berra, Whitey Ford, Robin Roberts or Eddie Mathews on the first ballot — has stayed quite consistent. It's true that the 2010s would have had an even larger run of first-ballot Hall of Famers had all-time greats like Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens not been entangled in the PED scandal. But that's a different story.

Our story here involves those players *not* selected on the first ballot. There are those who would prefer the Hall of Fame vote stop after one ballot; their view is that unless a player is a no-doubt Hall of Famer, he is not a Hall of Famer at all. That's a perfectly acceptable perspective, as far as that goes, but a Hall of Fame without Berra, Mathews, Ford, Juan Marichal, Harmon Killebrew, Phil Niekro, Gary Carter, Carlton Fisk, Ryne Sandberg and Jeff Bagwell, along with dozens of other great players, might not serve baseball all that well.

So players stay on the ballot. Some get elected quickly. Some get elected after a long and drawn-out fight. Some fall just short. Some never get any momentum. And some lose steam and fall off the ballot after flickering there for a short time.

What determines a player's chances once he finds himself in ballot limbo? That is a tricky question. Since 1970, 18 players have received more than 50 percent of the vote on their first ballot, and every one of them was elected, some the very next year afterward. Some took five years.

Once you get to 50 percent and below, it becomes trickier.

Tony Pérez got exactly 50 percent of the vote in 1992, and it took him nine years to get elected.

Ryne Sandberg got 49.2 percent of the vote in 2003, and it took him three years.

Andre Dawson got 45.3 percent of the vote in 2002, and it took him nine years.

Gary Carter got 42.3 percent of the vote in 1998, and it took him six years.

Lee Smith *also* got 42.3 percent of the vote in 2003. He was not elected by the BBWAA (though he was later elected by a veterans' committee).

And now we are finally getting to the crux of things. Between 1970 and 2020, 50 players have received between 15 percent and 42.3 percent of the vote. Of those 50, 15 have been elected by the BBWAA to the Hall of Fame and 35 have not.

So what separates those 15 Hall of Famers from the others?

Jim Rice got 29.8 percent of the first vote; Steve Garvey got 41.6 percent.

Rice was elected. Garvey was not.

Luis Aparicio got 27.8 percent of the first vote. Maury Wills got 30.3 percent.

Aparicio was elected. Wills was not.

Bruce Sutter got 23.9 percent of the first vote. Don Mattingly got 28.2 percent.

Sutter was elected. Mattingly was not.

Larry Walker got 20.3 percent of the first vote. Fred McGriff got 21.5 percent. Roger Maris got 21.4 percent. Dale Murphy got 19.3 percent.

Walker was elected. McGriff, Maris and Murphy were not.

How do you make sense of such things? Well, there are many factors. But the big one, I think, is timing. Luis Tiant and Billy Wagner, they had bad timing.

Tiant's bad timing is quite legendary. If you have spent some time looking at Luis Tiant's career, you will find that numerically it was virtually identical to that one of his contemporaries, Catfish Hunter:

Catfish: 224-166, 3.26 ERA, 42 shutouts, 3,449 innings, 2,012 Ks, 954 walks, 1.134 WHIP.

El Tiente: 229-172, 3.30 ERA, 49 shutouts, 3,486 innings, 2,416 Ks, 1,104 walks, 1.199 WHIP.

There's not much to separate them there. If you want to go deeper, Tiant was really quite a bit better than Hunter. By WAR, he's worth between 17 and 29 more wins over his career. Bill James has him worth 50 more Win Shares. But let's not get too far from the point.

When they each came on the ballot, Hunter certainly was viewed as the better candidate. Not by a lot. But somewhat. He had won a Cy Young Award while Tiant had not. Hunter had pitched in six World Series, Tiant in only one. Hunter led the league in wins twice; Tiant had led the league in losses once.

But the difference in their Hall of Fame fates is not related to those slight and not especially compelling arguments. No, it all came down to timing. Though Tiant was five years older, Hunter retired three years earlier. That put Hunter on the ballot for the first time in 1985 ... and that was a *great* ballot for a starting pitcher like Hunter. The only comparable pitcher on the 1985 ballot was Jim Bunning, who was on his ninth go-around. Bunning was certainly a better pitcher than Hunter or Tiant, but the voters were torn on his case, probably because he won only 224 games.

Hunter *also* won 224 games, but his winning percentage was better, and he had that Cy Young Award and those World Series appearances. In that first year, Hunter got 53.7 percent, basically matching Bunning's vote percentage.

In Hunter's second year, with no competition coming on the ballot, he raced ahead of Bunning and put himself on the cusp of Cooperstown.

And in Hunter's third year — *again* with there being no great starters added to the ballot — Hunter was elected with 76.3 percent of the vote.

That was 1987. That was the last year a pitcher like Catfish Hunter could stand out.

The next year, 1988, Tiant came on the ballot. He, like Hunter, came on as the best pitcher on the ballot along with Bunning. The voters liked El Tiente. They gave him 30.9 percent of the vote. No, that percentage wasn't as high as Hunter's first year, but it was a good number, one that put Tiant in a position to gain a little every year and get elected within the decade.

Instead, Tiant never again came close to getting 30 percent of the vote.

Why not? Because in 1989, the greatest wave of starting pitchers ever to hit the Hall of Fame ballot began. In short order, Gaylord Perry, Ferguson Jenkins, Jim Palmer, Tom Seaver, Jim Kaat, Phil Niekro, Steve Carlton, Don Sutton and Tommy John all came on the ballot.

And suddenly, Luis Tiant's stats — which looked so Hall of Fame-worthy in the mid-1980s — did not seem even close. What are 224 wins when put against five 300-game winners? Tiant's vote dropped below 10 percent, and that was that.

Billy Wagner has a different kind of timing issue. First of all, let's just say that judging the Hall of Fame case of a relief pitcher is baffling, and this is particularly true of Wagner. Most of the great relief pitchers, particularly in recent years, do not even throw 1,500 career innings. Wagner takes that to a whole new extreme: He only pitched 903 innings over 16 years.

More than 1,200 pitchers in modern baseball have pitched more innings.

That said, his 187 ERA+ ranks second all-time to that of Mariano Rivera, who you know was elected unanimously. Wagner is the only pitcher in the past 100 years to finish his career with a WHIP below 1.000. He is in the discussion for fastest pitcher ever, and his 11.92 strikeouts per nine innings are tops among those with more than 750 innings.

Billy Wagner was a beast.

But ... timing. Wagner played at the same time as Rivera, who changed the entire conversation of what greatness means for a closer, and Trevor Hoffman, who saved more than 600 games in his Hall of Fame career. In much the same way that Tim Lincecum was overshadowed by Rickey Henderson and Gary Carter was overshadowed by Johnny Bench and Carlton Fisk, Wagner was overshadowed by the great closers of his day.

Is that right? I don't think so. Wagner was, in my view, even better than Hoffman. Sure, Hoffman was more consistent for a longer period, which is why he has 180 or so more saves. But Wagner has more strikeouts despite pitching almost 200 fewer innings, and his ERA, WHIP and Fielding Independent Pitching numbers are significantly better.

Which pitcher inspired more dread among hitters? I believe it was Wagner.

And yet: Hoffman got 67 percent of the vote his first year and sailed into the Hall of Fame in his third. Wagner, meanwhile, got just a touch over 10 percent his first year and hovered around there until he got a nice bump in 2020.

Interestingly, Wagner's timing now seems to be improving. With Rivera and Hoffman safely in the Hall of Fame, there is a lot of open road ahead on the ballot for Wagner. The next big-name relievers to come on the ballot will be Joe Nathan (2022), Jonathan Papelbon (2022), Francisco Rodríguez (2023) and Huston Street (2023). I guess Fernando Rodney is retired (2025), though

would anyone be surprised if Rodney returned to get 37 saves for the Rockies or some such team next year?

Anyway, none of them was as good as Wagner. You could definitely see Wagner building momentum.

Tiant's case, meanwhile, is in the care of the veterans committees. He must not have done well when he appeared on the 2018 Modern Era Committee ballot because he was dropped from the ballot in 2020. I hope he resurfaces. I realize that I've been so busy talking about timing that I haven't really made his case. I'd make it with these four points:

- Tiant's 1968 ERA of 1.60 is the best in the American League since the end of the Dead Ball Era.
- His 65.6 bWAR places him fifth among eligible non-Hall of Famers, and of those five he had *by far* the best facial hair and windup.
- Roger Angell wrote this about him: "His repertoire begins with an exaggeration mid-windup pivot, during which he turns his back on the batter and seems to examine the infield directly behind the mound for signs of crabgrass. With men on bases, his stretch consists of a succession of minute downward waggles and pauses of the glove, and a menacing sideways, slit-eyed, Valentino like gaze over his shoulder at the baserunner. The full flower of his art, however, comes during the actual delivery, which is executed with a perfect variety show of accompanying gestures and impersonations."
- He was awesome.

Kenneth (Kenny) Lofton

Houston—Cleveland—Atlanta—Chicago White Sox—San Francisco—Pittsburgh—Chicago Cubs—New York Yankees—Philadelphia—Los Angeles—Texas, 1991-2007

Speedster led the league in stolen bases five times and seemed to cover the entire outfield when he played center. College basketball star who played in the 1988 Final Four. His great speed, high batting averages and ability to draw a walk made him an ideal leadoff hitter for 11 different playoff teams.

Here is a fun bit: Only two players have ever competed in a Final Four *and* a World Series. You already know that Lofton is one of them. If you are up on your trivia, you might know that the other is Tim Stoddard, who was a forward on David Thompson's national championship team at NC State and pitched relief for the 1979 Baltimore Orioles.

But here's the best part: Lofton and Stoddard both attended Washington High School in East Chicago, Indiana.

I spent so much of the last essay on Luis Tiant and Billy Wagner talking about timing that I am loath to return to the subject: But there's really no way to tell Lofton's Hall of Fame story without talking at least a bit about it. Kenny Lofton is one of the great victims of bad Hall of Fame timing.

First, we need to say that his Hall of Fame case is a subtle one that requires some explanation. He doesn't have the 3,000 hits (or even 2,500 hits) that put him prominently in the conversation. He never won an MVP award or even a batting title. He generally played with more famous teammates (and seemed determined to avoid fame himself). And on top of that, he played for a whole bunch of different teams so there's a camouflage effect happening.

But Lofton was a fantastic player, a Gold Glove center fielder, basically a .300 hitter who walked quite a bit and was one of the greatest base runners of all time. The other players knew how good he was. Pedro Martínez called him one of the toughest hitters he ever faced. Jim Thome called him the most talented player in baseball.

But Lofton had absolutely no shot at the Hall of Fame, none, because he retired at the end of the 2007 season.

Others who retired (or were forced into retirement) at the end of the 2007 season: Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens, Curt Schilling, Craig Biggio, Mike Piazza and Sammy Sosa.

And so five years later, you had an absolute train wreck in Cooperstown. You had all seven of those players come on the ballot in a cacophony of brilliant baseball and human flaws. Jeff Bagwell, Tim Lincecum, Jack Morris, Edgar Martinez, Alan Trammell, Lee Smith, Mark McGwire, Fred McGriff, Don Mattingly, Dale Murphy, Rafael Palmeiro, Don Mattingly and Larry Walker were all on the ballot already, waiting. It was an absolute disaster. Everything melted down. Not one of those players was elected.

And Kenny Lofton didn't have a chance. He got just 18 votes and fell off the ballot. I imagine many people never even noticed he was on the ballot in the first place.

Would it have been different in another year? I think it depends on the year, but the best answer is, yes, it would have been different. Imagine if Lofton was coming on the 2021 ballot. The best everyday player to come on this year's ballot is unquestionably Torii Hunter.

Hunter was a really good player, a Gold Glove center fielder with a 50.7 career WAR and 40.7 JAWS.

Lofton was a Gold Glove center fielder with a 68.4 career WAR and 55.9 JAWS.

That's not close. There would be a lot of talk about Kenny Lofton if he came on the ballot for 2021. There was almost zero talk about Lofton when he actually came on the ballot in 2013.

But maybe that fits Kenny Lofton's career better. People never fully appreciated how great he was. Take 1994, the strike year. You might remember that year for Frank Thomas' legendary season. In 113 games, Thomas hit .353, walked 109 times, slugged 38 homers, drove in 101 runs and scored 106 runs. He was the runaway MVP award winner; it's hard to imagine how anyone could have been better.

Kenny Lofton might have been better.

How? He hit .349 himself, slugged .536, stole 60 bases, scored 105 runs. Obviously, great as that is, it isn't nearly the offensive season that Thomas had. Baseball-Reference has Thomas worth an astounding 72 runs above average as a hitter, and Lofton worth a still excellent but much less impressive 34 runs. That 38-run difference in their hitting seems about right to me. In fact, let's round up and make it an even 40-run difference.

But baseball is not only hitting. Lofton was a sensational base runner — Baseball-Reference gives Lofton a 12-run advantage on the bases, and again, that seems right to me. Thomas couldn't run. His lead is down to 28 runs.

Baseball-Reference adds four more runs to Lofton's ledger because Lofton was considerably less likely to hit into a double play. Do you think that's fair? I think it's about right, but for argument's sake, I'll knock it down to two runs. Thomas' lead is now 26 runs.

Lofton was obviously a much, much better fielder at a much more important position. By defense and position, Baseball-Reference gives Lofton a 26-run advantage. Is that too much? Too little? I don't know but Lofton was a Gold Glove center fielder at the height of his powers and Thomas was a subpar first baseman on his way to becoming a full-time DH. There has to be a big gap.

In all, I'd call it a tie but Baseball-Reference thinks Lofton was a more valuable overall player than Thomas — or anyone else — in 1994. He finished fourth in the MVP voting (though he did get one first-place vote).

People have just had a hard time putting together the full picture of Lofton's greatness. In 1992, Lofton as a rookie hit .285 with a .362 on-base percentage, scored 96 runs, led the league with 66 stolen bases and was absurdly wonderful as a defensive center fielder. He still lost the Rookie of the Year award to Milwaukee shortstop Pat Listach, who had a fine year and all but, I mean, come on.

In 1993, Lofton hit .325, walked 81 times, stole 70 bases, scored 116 runs and was the best defensive outfielder in the American League. He didn't make the All-Star team. He was 15th in

the MVP balloting even though, again, you could make a compelling argument that he had a better year than the winner, Frank Thomas.

Lofton put up four or five other seasons that were about as good. But it mostly went unnoticed. He mostly went unnoticed. That was his curse.

Andruw Rudolf Jones

Atlanta—Los Angeles Dodgers—Texas—Chicago White Sox—New York Yankees, 1996-2012

Breathtaking defensive center fielder who some believe surpassed even Willie Mays with the glove. Won Gold Gloves 10 consecutive seasons. Powerful slugger who hit 50 homers in a season and 434 over his career. Announced his presence as a 20-year-old by hitting two home runs in his first World Series game.

James Patrick (Jim) Edmonds

California/Anaheim—St. Louis—San Diego—Chicago Cubs—Milwaukee—Cincinnati, 1993-2010

Slugging center fielder who overcame countless injuries to hit 393 home runs and make a couple of the signature catches of his day. Jimmy Baseball grew up a long home run away from Angels Stadium and became an Angels star before becoming an icon in St. Louis. Played with a chip on his shoulder.

I actually thought about putting Kenny Lofton, Andruw Jones and Jim Edmonds all in one entry since I think they were all center fielders with similarly compelling Hall of Fame cases. But it seemed to me that Lofton's case is different from these two guys. He was a speed guy, a setup man, etc.

Jones and Edmonds, meanwhile, have precisely the same case. You can argue that one's case is better than the other — we'll get into that in a minute — but the cases themselves are almost identical. They were both great defensive center fielders who hit a lot of home runs in relatively short careers.

Jones is definitively winning the Hall of Fame battle of perception. He has been on the Hall ballot for three years now and, if last year was any indication, he is rapidly gaining support. He got just 7 or so percent of the vote his first two years, but last year jumped to almost 20 percent. Early signs from Ryan Thibodaux's Hall of Fame tracker suggest he could make another big jump this year now that the Hall of Fame ballot has thinned significantly.

Edmonds, meanwhile, got just 11 votes in 2016 and promptly fell off the ballot.

Why is this happening? Was Jones a better player than Edmonds? It shouldn't be that hard to make a determination; they played at the same time and played roughly the same number of games (Jones played in 185 more games, basically his two seasons with the Yankees but he was more or less done by then).

Edmonds: .284/.376/.527, 1,251 runs, 437 doubles, 25 triples, 393 homers, 1,199 RBIs, 998 walks, 1,729 Ks, 303 batting runs above average.

Jones: .254/.337/.486, 1,204 runs, 383 doubles, 36 triples, 434 homers, 1,289 RBIs, 891 walks, 1,748 Ks, 119 batting runs above average.

There's really only one way to look at these: Jim Edmonds was a much better hitter than Andruw Jones. This is not especially close — 30 points in batting average, 40 points in on-base percentage, 40 points in slugging percentage. Edmonds's OPS+ is 132 to Jones' 111.

OK, but now let's look at defense, best we can figure it. We know they were both wildly celebrated as defensive outfielders in their time. Edmonds won eight Gold Gloves; Jones won 10. Let's try to differentiate them by using Baseball-Reference's runs above average, FanGraphs' runs above average, Bill James' Fielding Win Shares and a Tom Tango invention called "plays made above average."

First, by Baseball-Reference fielding, it isn't close at all:

Edmonds: 68 runs above average

Jones: 251 runs above average

FanGraphs gives Jones a similarly dominant edge:

Edmonds: 73.3 runs above average

Jones: 278.8 runs above average

Yikes. What about Bill James' Fielding Win Shares?

Edmonds: 62.5 Fielding Win Shares

Jones: 90.5 Fielding Win Shares

That seems closer but Win Shares is figured differently and this is still an overwhelming win for Andruw Jones. Finally, there's the Tom Tango method of simply figuring out — based on range factor per nine innings — which player made more plays as a center fielder.

Edmonds: 179 career plays above average

Jones: 297 career plays above average

So, it's clear that while they were both good fielders, Jones was the much better center fielder. Then again, by the numbers, you can make the compelling case that Jones was the best center

fielder of all time. So it's an open question: Does Jones' fielding advantage make up for Edmonds' hitting advantage? Baseball-Reference and FanGraphs WAR suggest it does. Bill James' Win Shares system says it does not — he has Edmonds as the better player.

And now we ask something: Is “who was better” the *right* question when it comes to the Hall of Fame?

For argument's sake, let's say the following two statements are true — I'm not saying they *are* true, I'm talking about this hypothetically:

1. All-in-all, Jim Edmonds was a better player than Andruw Jones.
2. Andruw Jones is the greatest defensive center fielder of all time.

Now, let's ask the question: If you could vote only one of them for the Hall of Fame based on those factors, which one would you choose? I see two conflicting but powerful arguments, the first being the obvious one: You *have* to choose Edmonds because, come on, you're saying right up front that he was the better player. You have to choose the better player.

But the other argument should be heard: Even if you believe that Edmonds was better in total, you could still vote for Jones in the belief that he is the one with the singular Hall of Fame credential. He is, in this scenario, the *greatest center fielder ever*. I mean, doesn't that player have to be in the Hall of Fame?

In this argument, it doesn't really matter that Edmonds was a better enough hitter to win the individual match-up because Jones isn't going in for his overall value. He's going in because in addition to being a fearsome power hitter he is the greatest defensive center fielder ever. If you believe that, nobody can take that away from him. He is going in for his place in baseball history and lore. This is the same argument for why Bill Mazeroski goes into the Hall of Fame when his doppelgänger Frank White does not.

I am not sure which way I go on this. On the one hand, I do think the Hall of Fame should be about more than a player's raw value. On the other, I think you could make a case that while Jones was the greater outfielder, Edmonds made the more compelling plays — he made a couple of the greatest catches I've ever seen, and I can't really remember Jones' greatest catches because he had the knack for making it look easy.

Plus Edmonds really was a much better hitter.

I did put this puzzle up in a Twitter poll and [Jones won decisively](#), though I'm not sure how many people really followed the instructions.

Who knows? I think if you put one in, you put the other in. It's too close to call. Does that mean I'm going to cop out here and not tell you which player I would vote for? I probably should

leave it here with two things I think we can all agree on: Jones is likely to keep gaining support and Edmonds got a raw deal falling off the ballot in his first try.

But I'll tell you: If I absolutely *had* to choose one, I'd pick Edmonds. It's the tiniest of differences but I believe he was the better player.

Mark David McGwire
Oakland — St. Louis, 1986-2001

Perhaps the greatest pure home run hitter the game has ever known. Big Mac's homer per 10.6 at-bats is by far the best rate in the history of baseball, ahead of even Babe Ruth. Became an American sensation when he broke Roger Maris' single-season home run record. Admitted using steroids: "It was foolish, and it was a mistake," he said.

I'll say this right up front: I've never fully understood why Mark McGwire hasn't separated from the other players of his time who used steroids and other PEDs. I realize this might make me sound naive and easily duped, which I undoubtedly am.

But my thinking is this: McGwire, unlike pretty much every single other player of his time, admitted using steroids. He apologized for using steroids. He didn't just admit it in passing or apologize as some sort of half measure. There was no, "I only did it once and I didn't even know they were steroids" in his apology and admission. No, the guy sat down with Bob Costas for an in-depth television interview. He gave various other interviews on the subject (full disclosure: including one with me). He called it the worst mistake of his life. He said he would for the rest of his life speak out against PEDs. He blamed no one but himself. He called Roger Maris' widow Pat to apologize for claiming to be clean while breaking her husband's cherished record of 61 homers in 1961.

Costas: "The (Maris sons) consider their father's 61 the authentic single-season record."

McGwire: "They have every right to."

Now, I'm not saying McGwire's apology was perfect. It wasn't close to perfect. McGwire, for instance, was not specific about the drugs he used. He refused to say that steroids turned him into the mash bro he became, even though Costas gave him numerous opportunities to do so. He kept insisting that he used steroids (and HGH) in order to get healthy, not to get superhumanly strong, which seems a half-truth at best. McGwire was defiant in his belief that he turned himself into a home run hitter with countless hours of study and practice and experimentation and work.

And it is also fair to say that his apology was not entirely altruistic; he had been hired to become the hitting coach for the St. Louis Cardinals and it was reported that a public apology

was a condition for the job. Also his brother, Jay, was publishing a book called “Mark and Me: Mark McGwire and the Truth Behind Baseball’s Worst-Kept Secret.” So it was good for him to get ahead of that.

But to all these fair criticisms, I would counter with this: Who else has come even close to doing what McGwire did? Sure, it would have been better if he had been more forthright, but on the most basic points — he admitted using, expressed regret, apologized without limitation, promised to make amends and asked for people to forgive him so he could be around the game he loves — he went further than anyone who comes to mind. It has been more than two decades since the height of the Steroid Era in baseball, and in that time just about everyone else involved in that era has denied, distracted, lied, obstructed, stayed silent and admitted as little as possible. McGwire stepped forward. He talked about righting his wrong. He talked about giving back to the game.

And he accepted that people would never look at him the same way.

And that is *something*. You will often hear people say how much good would come if players would just acknowledge what they did and sincerely apologize. But McGwire’s effort, whatever you think of it, suggests this is not what people want at all. I mean, look, McGwire wasn’t going to get elected to the Hall of Fame anyway, but his numbers tanked after his apology. Most people wrote him off as a fraud. Few seem interested in taking up his Hall of Fame case now.

In 2017, Mark McGwire was included on the “Today’s Game Era” veterans committee ballot.

Two years later, he and Joe Carter were the only two players dropped from the ballot. Realistically, McGwire might never appear on another Hall of Fame ballot.

And, best I can tell, he seems at peace with that.

I’m fine with that too — I mean if people don’t want to put McGwire in the Hall of Fame because he used steroids, then so be it. But I’d put him in. I’d put him in because he was the greatest home run hitter I ever saw.

From 1996 to 1999, four seasons, he hit a home run every 8.13 at-bats. Ruth never managed that kind of ratio for even one season. Mickey Mantle, Hank Greenberg, Roger Maris, Sammy Sosa, Jimmie Foxx, none of them ever came close even for one season. These were not normal-sized home runs either; they were moon-landings, again and again. After one of McGwire’s titanic home runs, the pitcher who gave it up had a genuine impulse to go out and high-five the guy.

He was such a phenomenon that people would fill the stadium just to see him take batting practice. As absurd as Barry Bonds became, as prolific a home run hitter as Sammy Sosa became, as famous as Reggie Jackson or Harmon Killebrew or Darryl Strawberry were for hitting home runs, no one else ever drew the kind of attention that McGwire did.

And I'd put him in because his steroid use was a reflection of his times and the way that baseball was being run. Here are a few things I suspect about the pre-testing baseball era:

- Many players used steroids and other PEDs. I don't know the percentage, obviously. I don't know that it was in that 50 percent range that has been thrown around, though I would not be *surprised* if it was that high. There was no testing. There was no oversight. There was no public campaign against it. Heck, supplements like Andro — which were banned in the Olympics — were perfectly legal in baseball and being used in the open.
- Some players got their names caught up in the steroid scandal. Others didn't. There was nothing at all scientific about how a player became categorized. People would suspect a bulky player who hit an unexpected number of homers but completely overlook a regular-looking reliever who threw 93 mph and had a 3.68 ERA. If there's anything that has been proven by drug testing, it is that it doesn't work like that, you can't simply pick steroid users out based on their stats.
- Almost nobody has come forward voluntarily. Yes, a handful of players have made grudging admissions involuntarily, after they were caught, usually by downplaying their own level of participation. They tried PEDs once, you know, on a bad day, when they were down on their luck, and they didn't even know they were PEDs really, and someone talked them into it, and really the whole thing was just a misunderstanding.

Most players do not even do that. They deny, deny, deny, deny, even when their denials are obviously preposterous. I do not think many people doubt there are multiple players who used steroids and are now in the Hall of Fame. Everyone knows it is irresponsible to postulate who these people are, and it's comfortable enough for them to hide behind that cloud.

And don't get me wrong: I'm not suggesting that I would be better than any of them. Sure, I would like to believe that I would have not used steroids even though there was no chance of me getting caught and it might have meant the difference between a big-league career and a job selling furniture. I would like to believe that I would have not used steroids even if it meant the difference between being healthy, strong and an All-Star versus being injured, brittle and a waiver wire candidate. I would like to believe that I would have seen players all around me — players I considered no better than myself — using steroids and breaking records and making hundreds of millions of dollars and I would have stayed clean.

I'd like to believe all of that.

And I'd like to believe that if I *had* used steroids, that I would come clean, accept the consequences, do what I could to make amends.

But here's what I know: All of that cuts hard against human nature. There's a reason they make movies about people who go against the tide like that.

To be clear: I am NOT saying they should make a movie about Mark McGwire. I don't think his admission or apology was heroic or anything like that. Neither does he, by the way. All I'm saying is that he is the one who came closest to taking responsibility for what happened to baseball in the 1990s. That puts him in a different category for me.

He was also the most remarkable home run hitter I ever saw.

Gilbert Raymond (Gil) Hodges

Brooklyn/Los Angeles Dodgers — New York Mets, 1943-63

Perhaps the most beloved player of his time, he drove in 100-plus runs in seven consecutive years for the Boys of Summer Brooklyn Dodgers of the 1950s. Was one of only two players — along with his teammate Duke Snider — to hit 300 home runs in the decade. Exquisite defensive first baseman. Managed the 1969 Miracle Mets.

In 1973, there were a bunch of stories written by Hall of Fame voters about the Hall of Fame voting system being broken. This happens periodically. The impetus for the cyclical self-loathing that year was a loaded ballot that included 15 future Hall of Famers ... with only one of them, Warren Spahn, receiving enough votes to be elected that year.

"The fact that Spahn was the only man to be inducted into the Hall of Fame this time around is valid evidence that our Baseball Writers Association should change its rules," Hank Hollingsworth wrote in California.

"The fact that Spahn was the only man to enter those sacred portals this year reveals again the one weak chain in the selection procedures," Regis McAuley wrote in Ohio. "It's time to change the system. ... The way it is set up now, too many players who did so much for baseball will only see the Hall of Fame if they pay their way in."

"Spahn's election Wednesday," United Press International wrote, "raised questions about the rigid qualifications by the Baseball Writers Association of America."

So who else was on that ballot? Well, two pretty good pitchers — Whitey Ford and Robin Roberts — came on the ballot that year, and somehow neither one made it. Ralph Kiner and Johnny Mize had been on the ballot forever and were still just treading water.

Bob Lemon, who won 20 games seven times (a big thing in the Hall of Fame voting then) fell way short as did Richie Ashburn, Nellie Fox, George Kell, Enos Slaughter, two-time MVP Hal Newhouser and so on.

But the *big* issue that year was that a whole bunch of players who had starred in the so-called Golden Age of baseball — which was centered in New York in the 1950s — fell short. You

already know about Whitey Ford; it's hard to explain Ford not getting into the Hall of Fame on the first ballot. But the list also included Yankees shortstop Phil Rizzuto, Dodgers shortstop Pee Wee Reese, Brooklyn's great center fielder Duke Snider ...

And most of all, the list of misses included the most adored player of them all, the first baseman for the Brooklyn Dodgers, the manager of the 1969 Miracle Mets, a winner of the Bronze Star for Valor when he fought in Okinawa, the most admired man in the room, Gil Hodges.

Hodges' failure to get elected in 1973 stood out for a couple of reasons. One, everybody loved Hodges. But two, more emotionally, Hodges had died of a coronary failure just months earlier at age 47. His premature death had jolted the entire baseball world, and it just seemed natural that the baseball writers would honor the man's life by putting him in the Hall of Fame.

Even the famously cynical baseball writer Dick Young — who was the opposite of being a softy — campaigned for Hodges.

"Perhaps there is a measure of sentiment in a vote for Gil Hodges," he wrote. "I will not deny that. In the rules governing election to the Hall of Fame, paragraph 4 states: 'Candidates shall be chosen on the basis of playing ability, integrity, sportsmanship, character, their contributions to the team on which they played, and to baseball in general.' Gil Hodges scores big points in all departments. If stats are demanded, I offer his 370 home runs, his 14 grand slams which only last year were matched by Hank Aaron and Willie McCovey, and his dozen Gold Gloves, for Gil Hodges was the complete ballplayer."

Hodges only won three Gold Gloves — the award wasn't even invented until he was 33 years old and in his 10th full season — but Young's general points remain.

In any case, Hodges got 57 percent of the vote, a good total and a decent jump from the year before but still nowhere close to election. It was, for so many, a huge disappointment.

And the disappointment would hover. Over the next decade, he would annually get between 49 and 63 percent of the vote, never more, never less. Every year, there would be a few people — mostly New Yorkers — who would pound on the table and shout out how there shouldn't even *be* a Hall of Fame if a player and manager and person like Gil Hodges wasn't invited. But through it all, Hodges could not break through.

There have been various efforts to put Hodges in the Hall of Fame since then, but they too have fallen well short, I'm afraid.

Here's the trouble with Hodges: His career stats (273/.359/.487 with a 120 OPS, 43 WAR, never led the league in any important category) feel smaller than his reputation. And, as we have discussed many times during this series, Hall of Fame voters have a hard time putting full lives

together. The complete Gil Hodges — great player, great manager and, in Roy Campanella's words, "a Hall of Fame man" — seems long overdue for the Hall.

But if you break him down to pieces, as so many do, each seems to fall short. His career numbers just short. His time as a manager just short. His contribution to baseball as a person, well, you wonder how much people take that into account.

There is something else: As mentioned, Hodges is, perhaps, the ideal of that time known as the Golden Age of Baseball. Countless stories have been told of Hodges walking through Brooklyn neighborhoods, playing a little catch or stickball with the kids, then heading over to Ebbets Field where he would crack a home run, beat the Giants, then he'd walk home with a band of kids behind him, and he'd find a stoop to sit on and talk a bit about the game.

I have no doubt that this happened. But there's a nostalgia about the Golden Age that doesn't match up with reality. In 1947, the year of Jackie Robinson, the Brooklyn Dodgers drew more than 23,000 fans per game. Over the next decade, they put one of the best teams in baseball history on the field day after day, a team of extraordinary players and captivating men, Robinson, Hodges, Pee Wee, Duke, Campy, Newcombe, even a young Koufax.

By 1955, they were drawing about 10,000 fewer fans per game.

This was even more true of the New York Giants. In 1948, the Giants drew almost 1.5 million people to the Polo Grounds. Then they got Willie Mays, for crying out loud. They won two pennants, a World Series, they had perhaps the most exciting player the game has ever known, and by 1957 they were drawing *less than half* of the crowds they had drawn in '48.

The same pattern holds with the Yankees. In 1948, they drew almost 2.4 million people. Ten years later — with Mickey Mantle in center field, Yogi Berra behind the plate, Whitey Ford on the mound and the team having appeared in eight of the previous nine World Series — the Yankees drew about a million fewer people.

Baseball was *dying* in the Golden Age ... or anyway, attendance was dying. Why do you think the Dodgers and Giants left New York? Why do you think the league was so desperate to expand in the 1960s? There are all sorts of reasons for the free fall — the emergence of television, the lack of variety in the game, etc. — but the point is that so much of that Golden Age talk is pure and unfiltered nostalgia. A million people would claim to have been there when Hodges hit four homers off four different Boston Braves pitchers on Aug. 31, 1950, but in fact there were fewer than 15,000 people at Ebbets Field that day.

I think this is part of what has hurt Hodges. The people who believe he is a Hall of Famer believe it passionately, deeply, they feel it in their very souls. But the number of people who feel that way, who have an emotional attachment to that team and that age of baseball, has never been as large as reported. The number of people who know and love Gil Hodges has never been quite enough to get him to Cooperstown.

That's a shame, I think. More people should know *that* Hodges, I think.

Here are a few quotes from Marino Amoruso's book "Gil Hodges: The Quiet Man." Amoruso, one of those people who grew up idolizing Hodges, makes it clear right upfront that, "this book is not a detailed biographical study ... rather it's a tribute."

And if that isn't clear enough, he titled his Hall of Fame chapter "A Grave Baseball Injustice."

"Gil was the only man I can remember whom the fans never, I mean never, booed," his teammate Clem Labine said.

"He gave everything he was capable of giving all the time," another teammate, Carl Erskine, said.

"He taught me more about being a big leaguer than anyone else in my life," his Mets ace Tom Seaver said. "His leadership, without question, was the reason we became World Champions in 1969."

"We used to marvel at the way Gil could play defense," Duke Snider said.

"He belongs in the Hall of Fame," Joe Torre said.

"Maybe someday they'll find a way to measure other things besides statistics," Hodges' relief ace for the Mets, Tug McGraw, said. "Maybe they'll find a way to identify heart, character, substance, passion, courage and leadership. If they can do that, there's no question Gil belongs in the Hall of Fame."

BEST YANKEE SEASONS

The subscriber list is dominated by Yankee fans. If they aren't your thing feel free to skip the following. (and if you are a fan of another team and would like one columnist's view of your team's best single season here you go <https://www.mlb.com/news/every-mlb-team-s-best-season-at-each-position>).

Imagine if you could put together a roster of the finest years by a Yankee at each position. Now ponder an outfield that features versions of Babe Ruth in both left field and right field, six years

apart, with Mickey Mantle chasing balls in center field. That sounds like the kind of team that would win *a lot* of ballgames.

The Yankees have had no shortage of great single-season performances over the decades, including many players who have landed in Cooperstown or Monument Park. We crunched the numbers to whittle that list down to the best of the best -- let's see if your favorite seasons made the cut:

Catcher: [Yogi Berra](#) (1956)

.298/.378/.534 (142 OPS+), 29 doubles, 30 home runs, 105 RBIs, 6.2 bWAR

The Yankees have been blessed with many terrific performances from their starting catchers over the decades, a group highlighted by Bill Dickey, Thurman Munson and Jorge Posada. Berra was a three-time MVP, and if not for Mickey Mantle's Triple Crown season in '56, he might have earned a fourth.

First base: [Lou Gehrig](#) (1927)

.373/.474/.765 (220 OPS+), 52 doubles, 18 triples, 47 home runs, 173 RBIs, 11.8 bWAR

A member of the celebrated Murderers' Row lineup, Gehrig earned the American League MVP as he paced the Majors in doubles, RBIs, total bases (447) and games played (155). In one of the finest all-around seasons played, Gehrig's 117 extra-base hits that season remain second all-time.

Second base: [Tony Lazzeri](#) (1929)

.354/.429/.561 (160 OPS+), 37 doubles, 11 triples, 18 home runs, 106 RBIs, 7.7 bWAR

The Hall of Famer's .991 OPS during the '29 season is the highest recorded by a Yankees second baseman (minimum 400 plate appearances), edging Lazzeri's .932 OPS from the previous year and Robinson Cano's .929 mark from 2012. Lazzeri's 7.7 bWAR ranked fourth in the AL that season, behind Ruth but slightly ahead of Gehrig.

Shortstop: [Derek Jeter](#) (1999)

.349/.438/.552 (153 OPS+), 37 doubles, nine triples, 24 home runs, 102 RBIs, 8.0 bWAR

Jeter enjoyed his finest all-around season in 1999, helping the Yankees to a third World Series championship in four years. He led the Majors with 219 hits and paced the AL with 739 at-bats, finishing second in the batting race and ranking third in on-base percentage.

Third base: [Alex Rodriguez](#) (2007)

.314/.422/.645 (176 OPS+), 31 doubles, 54 home runs, 156 RBIs, 9.4 bWAR

A-Rod received his third career MVP Award and second as a Yankee, leading the Majors in slugging percentage, OPS, OPS+, runs scored (143), homers and RBIs. Rodriguez also paced the AL with 376 total bases, earning one of his 10 Silver Slugger Awards.

Left field: [Babe Ruth](#) (1921)

.378/.512/.846 (239 OPS+), 44 doubles, 16 triples, 59 home runs, 168 RBIs, 12.8 bWAR

That's right; the Bambino played most of 1921 in left field. In his second year with the Yankees, Ruth powered the club to its first pennant, setting Major League records in homers, runs (177), RBIs, walks (170), extra-base hits, total bases (457), times on base (353) and runs created (229).

Center field: [Mickey Mantle](#) (1956)

.353/.464/.705 (210 OPS+), 22 doubles, 52 home runs, 130 RBIs, 11.2 bWAR

Mantle won baseball's Triple Crown in a season that he'd later refer to as his favorite, earning his first career MVP Award. In addition to batting average, homers and RBIs, Mantle paced the league in slugging percentage, OPS, OPS+, runs (132) and total bases (376). The advanced stats suggest that Mantle's '57 was a slightly better season, but The Mick preferred '56. Who are we to argue?

Right field: [Babe Ruth](#) (1927)

.356/.486/.772 (225 OPS+), 29 doubles, 60 home runs, 165 RBIs, 12.5 bWAR

Most baseball fans can identify '27 as the year Ruth swatted 60 homers, a mark that stood until Roger Maris belted 61 in 1961. But Ruth's season line is littered with bold print, indicative of leading the Majors in runs (158), homers, RBIs, on-base percentage, slugging percentage, OPS and OPS+. He also swung big, leading the Majors with -- get this -- 89 strikeouts in 540 at-bats.

Designated hitter: [Jason Giambi](#) (2002)

.314/.435/.598 (172 OPS+), 34 doubles, 41 home runs, 122 RBIs, 7.1 bWAR

Using a minimum of 35 percent of games played as a DH as a benchmark, Giambi's first season in pinstripes edges other contenders, including Giancarlo Stanton's 2018 season. Giambi scored a career-high 120 runs and posted the third-highest OPS+ of his career, enjoying his most productive season as a Yankee.

Starting pitcher: [Ron Guidry](#) (1978)

25-3, 1.74 ERA (208 ERA+), 248 strikeouts, nine shutouts, 16 complete games, .0946 WHIP, 9.6 bWAR

"Louisiana Lightning" enjoyed one of the finest seasons compiled by any Modern Era pitcher during the '78 campaign, helping bring the Yankees back from a 14 1/2-game deficit in the

division race. The unanimous Cy Young Award winner, Guidry paced the Majors in wins, winning percentage, ERA, shutouts, ERA+, FIP (2.19), WHIP and hits per nine innings (6.1).

.

Relief pitcher: [Mariano Rivera](#) (2008)

1.40 ERA (316 ERA+) in 64 appearances, 39 saves, 70 2/3 innings, six walks, 77 strikeouts, 4.3 bWAR

Selecting Rivera's best season is like being asked to choose your favorite child. Going purely by bWAR, his highest total was 1996, when Rivera set up for John Wetteland. His highest saves total was 53 in 2004, one of three years Rivera led the AL. The Yankees didn't even make the postseason in '08, a time when Rivera truly made his money. Still, his career-best 12.83 strikeout-to-walk ratio and career-low 0.665 WHIP are evidence of Rivera's remarkable skills.

JANUARY 17, 2021

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

A new subscriber sent a note—take away Hank Aaron's 755 career HRs and he still had more hits (3016) than Wade Boggs (3010). Thanks Robb.

Only inside the park HR in all-star game history--Ichiro Suzuki in 2007 (He was also named the MVP).

Over last 10 years have seen an explosion in the percentage of plate appearances that ended with no ball put in play. That number passed the 30 percent mark in 2012 and has climbed each of the last six seasons, hitting a remarkable rate of 36.1 percent in 2020.

Average of 3 minutes, 30 seconds in between balls in play.

Hall of Famers Greg Maddux, Nolan Ryan and Don Sutton share the record with 20 seasons of 10 or more wins and 100 or more strikeouts.

Longest tenure with their teams

Red Sox: [Christian Vázquez](#)

Date acquired: June 5, 2008

Seasons with organization in 2021: 14

Yankees: [Kyle Higashioka](#)

Date acquired: June 5, 2008

Seasons with organization in 2021: 14

Mets: [Steven Matz](#)

Date acquired: June 9, 2009

Seasons with organization in 2021: 13

Was He as Good as I Remember?

Paul O'Neil with the Yankees

9 years

1426 hits

304 2B, 14 3B, 185 HR, 858 RBI

.303 average, .492 slugging pct.

7 Stats that May Never be Topped

1. Sacrifice bunts

Actual record: Ray Chapman - 67 (1917)

Last 40 years: Jay Bell - 39 (1990) (Bert Campaneris just missed the cut with 40 in 1979)

Since 2010: Juan Pierre - 19 (2011)

2. Batting average: (Qualified batters)

Actual record: Nap Lajoie - .426 (1901)

Last 40 years: Tony Gwynn - .394 (1994)

Since 2010: DJ LeMahieu - .364 (2020), Josh Hamilton - .359 (2010)

no batter has topped .360 since Joe Mauer hit .365 in 2009.

3. Stolen bases

Actual record: Rickey Henderson - 130 (1982)

Since 2010: Juan Pierre - 68 (2010)

4. Fewest K's (qualified batters in non-shortened season)

Actual record: Joe Sewell - 3 (1932)

Last 40 years: Felix Fermin - 14 (1993)

Since 2010: Marco Scutaro - 34 (2013)

5. Lowest K/9 for a starting pitcher (qualified ERA title)

Actual record: Ernie Wingard - 0.95 (1924)

Last 40 years: Nate Cornejo - 2.13 (2003)

Since 2010: Brad Penny - 3.67 (2011)

In last year's shortened season, Antonio Senzatela had the lowest mark among qualified pitchers with just 5.03. The league-average pitcher, though? A highest-of-all-time 9.1 K/9.

6. Innings pitched

Actual record: Ed Walsh - 464 (1908)

Last 40 years: Steve Carlton - 304 (1980)

This decade: Justin Verlander - 251 (2011)

In 1980, when Carlton threw 304 innings, 56 pitchers reached the 200-inning threshold. In 2019, just 15 pitchers did. No starting pitcher has topped 230 innings since David Price did it in 2016.

7. Team Complete Games:

Actual record: 148 CG by 1904 Red Sox (An old enough record that they were known as the Boston Americans)

Last 40 years: 94 CG by 1980 A's

Since 2010: 18 by 2011 Phillies

Rick Langford, Mike Norris and Matt Keough pitched for the 1980 A's and had 20 or more CG each. Note none of them won 100 games in the majors. In 2019, the White Sox and Indians tied for the league lead with just six complete games.

From mlb.com, HAVE A DAY

RED SOX: Fred Lynn -- June 18, 1975 at Tigers

Lynn simply went off, going 5-for-6 with three homers, a triple and 10 RBIs. The 16 total bases Lynn accumulated that night set a Red Sox record that still hasn't been broken. Dustin Pedroia and John Valentin came the closest, with 15. The 10 RBIs tied him with three other players for a team record.

BLUE JAYS: Carlos Delgado -- Sept. 25, 2003 vs. Devil Rays

Delgado was chasing 40 home runs down the stretch in 2003, and entered this late September game against the Devil Rays sitting at 37. A few hours later, Delgado sat at 41, having just launched four home runs in a single game for the first time in Blue Jays history. At the time, only 14 other players in Major League history had accomplished the feat.

YANKEES: Reggie Jackson -- October 18, 1977 (World Series Game 6) vs. Dodgers

Lou Gehrig claimed the only four-homer game in Yankees history, achieved on June 3, 1932, at Philadelphia's Shibe Park, a diamond where Tony Lazzeri slugged two grand slams and collected 11 RBIs a few years later on May 23, 1936. Yet when factoring in the stage and importance of the contest, "Mr. October" takes the prize for his epic performance in the clinching Game 6 of the 1977 World Series.

With the Yankees' 21st championship hanging in the balance, Jackson capped an eventful first season in pinstripes by belting three home runs off three different Dodgers hurlers, all on the first pitch. Jackson hit a fourth-inning homer off Burt Hooton, a fifth-inning shot off Elias Sosa and connected for an eighth-inning blast off Charlie Hough -- a shot that landed in Yankee Stadium's distant center-field batters' eye

TIGERS: Ty Cobb -- May 5, 1925 at St. Louis Browns

Cobb was a 38-year-old player-manager with one double-digit homer season in his 20-year career, most of it in the Deadball Era, when he stepped to the plate against the St. Louis Browns. His 6-for-6, three-homer game that Tuesday afternoon produced 16 total bases, an AL record then and still a Tigers record now.

TWINS: Kirby Puckett -- Aug. 30, 1987 at Brewers

Normally, the act of going 6-for-6 -- as Puckett did on that Sunday afternoon at Milwaukee County Stadium -- would be impressive enough, but the Hall of Fame center fielder's feat is best appreciated in context. In the previous night's game, Puckett had gone 4-for-5, meaning that he tallied 10 hits in 11 at-bats (including four homers) in the span of less than 24 hours.

ANGELS: Garret Anderson -- Aug. 21, 2007 vs. Yankees

Anderson became just the 13th player in Major League history to record 10 RBIs in a game when he accomplished the feat in an 18-9 win over the Yankees at Angel Stadium. He went 4-for-6 with two homers -- a grand slam and a three-run blast -- and two doubles.

RANGERS: Josh Hamilton -- May 8, 2012 at Orioles

Hamilton had five great seasons for the Rangers but was at his best on May 8, 2012, when he tied a Major League record with four home runs in a 10-3 victory over the Orioles at Camden Yards. At the time, Hamilton became the 16th player in MLB history to hit four home runs in one game. It has been done twice since. He also had a double to give him a 5-for-5 night. He became the seventh player with at least five extra-base hits in a game and the 18 total bases were the most ever in an AL game. He fell one short of the MLB record held by Shawn Green (see below) of the Dodgers. All four home runs came with Elvis Andrus on base, giving him eight RBIs on the night.

METS: Edgardo Alfonzo -- Aug. 30, 1999 at Astros

Only 13 Mets players have hit three home runs in a game. Only two have collected six hits. Only one accomplished both feats on the same day. In a Monday night game at the Astrodome, Alfonzo went 6-for-6 with three homers, driving home five runs and scoring six times in the Mets' 17-1 rout of the Astros.

NATIONALS: Anthony Rendon -- April 30, 2017 vs. Mets

Rendon arrived at Nationals Park without a homer on the season. He left the stadium with a new Major League record following a historic 23-5 Nats win. On that day, Rendon became the first big league player to go 6-for-6, belt three home runs and record 10 RBIs.

PHILLIES: Mike Schmidt -- April 17, 1976 at Cubs

Schmidt hit a franchise-record four home runs in a legendary 18-16 victory over the Cubs in 10 innings at Wrigley Field. There are plenty of crazy things about this game, but how about the fact that Schmidt led the big leagues in home runs in both 1974 and 1975 and somehow only hit sixth in the Phillies' lineup? This is back in the day when speedy, bat-control guys hit in the top two spots (i.e. Dave Cash and Larry Bowa). Jay Johnstone hit third. Schmidt flied out in his first plate appearance in the second inning and singled in the fourth when the Cubs held a 12-1 lead. But Schmidt hit homers in his next four plate appearances -- he hit a two-run homer in the fifth, a solo homer in the seventh, a three-run homer in the eighth and a two-run homer in the 10th.

Hall of Fame outfielder Chuck Klein (July 10, 1936) is the only other Phillies player to hit four homers in a game.

CARDINALS: Matt Carpenter -- July 20, 2018 at Cubs

The Cardinals have had some great offensive performances in their history. Mark Whiten, a journeyman outfielder, hit four home runs and had 12 RBIs in a game in 1993, and Jim Bottomley went 6-for-6 with 12 RBIs in 1924. Stan Musial hit five home runs in a doubleheader in 1954, and Albert Pujols had five three-home run games in his time with the Cardinals. But on this day at Wrigley Field, Carpenter stuffed the box score like no Cardinals hitter had before. On the third baseman's 5-for-5 day, he hit three home runs and two doubles for 16 total bases and seven RBIs.

CUBS: Kris Bryant -- June 27, 2016 at Reds

In an 11-8 win on the road in Cincinnati, Bryant churned out five hits, including two doubles and three homers, scored four runs and collected six RBIs along the way. Two of his hits gave Chicago the lead and two others helped spread the game open. It is the only time in Cubs history a player has amassed at least 16 total bases in a game. There have only been 24 such games in recorded MLB history, tracing back to 1901, with greats like Ty Cobb, Lou Gehrig, Jimmie Foxx, Willie Mays and Mike Schmidt on that list.

Bryant's showing is also just one of three instances since 1901 in which an MLB player had two doubles and three home runs in the same game. St. Louis' Matt Carpenter also achieved the feat on July 20, 2018, vs. the Cubs and San Francisco's Alex Dickerson did so against the Rockies on Sept. 1 last year.

REDS: Scooter Gennett -- June 6, 2017 vs. Cardinals

Still a utility player who was starting in left field before eventually becoming the regular second baseman, Gennett did something no Reds player had ever done. He became the 17th Major League player to hit four home runs in one game during a 13-1 rout of the Cardinals at Great American Ball Park. Gennett, who was 5-for-5 in the game overall, tied a franchise record with 10 RBIs and set a new one-game franchise record with 17 total bases.

DODGERS: Shawn Green -- May 23, 2002 at Brewers

This not only was the greatest offensive game in Dodgers history, but probably in history, period. In a day game at Miller Park against the Brewers, Green launched four home runs with a double and a single. He went 6-for-6 with six runs scored, seven RBIs and a record 19 total bases. It was part of a seven-homer spree in three consecutive games and a league-record nine in a week. Green hit 17 home runs in a 23-game span, and he finished that year with 42.

PADRES: Nate Colbert -- Aug. 1, 1972 at Braves

The Padres' all-time home run leader, Colbert was a power-hitting force during the early years of the team's existence. He authored one of the best single-day performances in baseball history in August 1972. Colbert started his day going 4-for-5 with a pair of homers and five RBIs in a day game against the Braves. Evidently, he was just getting warmed up. In Game 2 of the doubleheader, Colbert cranked three more homers and finished with a remarkable single-day line of 7-for-9 with seven runs, five homers, 13 RBIs and a walk. The Padres would win both games, and Colbert joined Stan Musial as the only players in baseball history with five homers in a doubleheader.

GIANTS: Willie Mays -- April 30, 1961 at Braves

Mays hit four home runs, drove in eight runs and tallied 16 total bases as the Giants routed the Braves, 14-4.

ROCKIES: Nolan Arenado -- June 18, 2017 vs. Giants

Rockies history is full of cycles and big offensive performances. Coors Field, you know. Coors has hosted more cycles than any other park -- 19, 10 by opponents. So there are plenty of cycles to choose from, as there are high-production games -- six hits by Andres Galarraga (6-for-6 on July 3, 1995) and Charlie Blackmon (6-for-6 in his first home opener on April 4, 2014), reached base seven times in a game by Todd Helton (in a 13-inning game on April 8, 2003). The one we've picked was one of two cycles to finish with walk-off homers. The other was fashioned by Carlos González to beat the Cubs on July 31, 2010. The nod goes to Arenado's Father's Day cycle because his three-run homer to beat the Giants, 7-5, came with the Rockies behind in the bottom of the ninth.

BREWERS-- Christian Yelich has a case here, either with his six-hit cycle in an epic, extra-inning win at the Reds on Aug. 29, 2018, or another cycle against the Reds at Miller Park less than three weeks later -- making him the first player ever to achieve that statistical oddity twice in the same season against the same team.

More from Joe Posnanski's series on players not in the HOF and the arguments that maybe they should be.

Joseph Walker (Shoeless Joe) Jackson
Philadelphia Athletics—Cleveland—Chicago White Sox, 1908-1920

One of the greatest pure hitters in baseball history, Shoeless Joe hit .356 in his career, third highest in baseball history behind only his great rival Ty Cobb and Rogers Hornsby. Babe Ruth copied his swing. Became a movie icon long after his death. "The thrill of the grass." Took money from gamblers to throw the 1919 World Series.

In one of my early attempts to do the Baseball 100, I included Shoeless Joe Jackson. This is an updated version of the essay I wrote:

*Deep down in Louisiana close to New Orleans
Way back up in the woods among the evergreens
There stood a log cabin made of earth and wood
Where lived a country boy named Johnny B. Goode
Who never ever learned to read or write so well
But he could play guitar just like a-ringin' a bell
— "Johnny B. Goode," Chuck Berry*

Joe Jackson could play baseball just like a-ringin' a bell. Nobody knows how he learned to play. Nobody knows who coached him. He shows up in his story a complete ballplayer, 13 years old, entirely unschooled, already a veteran of the Brandon Mill textile factory in his hometown of Greenville, S.C.

He can throw so hard the mill team makes him a pitcher — and he breaks a batter's arm by plunking him with a fastball.

He hits so well the people in town chant his name and throw coins at him.

He is so beloved a local artisan named Charlie Ferguson decides Joe Jackson deserves the grandest and most beautiful baseball bat ever made. He sculpts and whittles a perfect 48-ounce bat, then darkens it with tobacco juice. Joe falls in love with the bat and would use it for the rest of his baseball life, even after it broke (he sent it to a bat company to fix). Joe calls it "Black Betsy."

This is a folk hero's story. I think that's why so many people are drawn to it even now, more than 100 years later. Joe Jackson's baseball life starts with the innocent exuberance of a boy who plays ball for the pure joy of it. Every minute on the field is a minute spent in the sunshine and on the grass, far outside the dank and gloomy confines of Brandon Mill. He plays baseball with boundless talent; there is nothing he cannot do in the game. He swings Black Betsy with such force and rhythm — "I copied my swing after Joe Jackson's, it is the perfectest," Babe Ruth once said — that people come from all over South Carolina to see him play. They call his longest home run drives "Saturday Specials."

And here's the heart of the story: All of this was enough for Joe Jackson. He would always think of this as the best time of his life. He is getting paid \$2.50 a game — double his pay sweating at Brandon Mill — and opportunities are endless. Other mills hire him to play ball, too. Crowds chant his name. He plays ball and drinks corn whiskey and lives a bigger life than he ever could have hoped for, a bigger life than his father, George, who toils unhappily in the factory every day with no baseball to brighten things.

Three days after his 21st birthday, Joe Jackson marries Katie Wynn, and for the rest of his life, Katie will read to him, write for him, protect him, defend him. It would have been enough for Joe.

But you couldn't play ball like Joe Jackson and stay a secret. Even before he marries Kate, a man named Tom Stouch — who had played ball for almost two decades from Philadelphia to Atlanta, Providence to Selma — offers Jackson a job playing baseball full time for his team, the Greenville Spinners. Jackson turns him down. He is making 45 dollars every month playing for all those factory teams, more than he ever expected to make, and he is blissfully happy.

"I will pay you \$75 a month," Stouch said.

You can imagine Joe Jackson's eyes opening wider than they ever had before.

"I'll play my head off for \$75 a month," Jackson said.

He signs the contract with an X.

And that's when the story of Johnny B. Goode ends and the story of Shoeless Joe begins.

Joe Jackson insisted all his life he only played one game without shoes, and that was when he played for Tom Stouch's Greenville Spinners. Jackson developed agonizing blisters while wearing a new pair of cleats. He asked to sit out a game in Anderson, S.C., so his feet could recover. Tom Stouch wasn't paying Jackson 75 bucks a month to sit, and he reminded Jackson of his promise to play his head off. So Joe Jackson played in his stocking feet.

"You shoeless bastard, you!" one fan shouted at him as Jackson slid into third for what might be professional baseball's only shoeless triple.

Jackson hated the Shoeless Joe nickname for the rest of his life.

Tom Stouch knew before anybody else just how good a baseball player Joe Jackson was; he knew Jackson was destined to become a big-league star. He almost immediately began writing letters to the biggest man in baseball, Philadelphia manager Connie Mack himself, and

described Jackson's greatness. Mack was intrigued enough to send two scouts to watch Jackson play, and they both immediately wired back: Sign Jackson no matter the cost.

Connie Mack paid Stouch \$900 — about \$25,000 in today's money — for the rights to Joe Jackson. Stouch was thrilled, not only for the money but because he loved Joe and believed he was fulfilling the young man's dreams.

But he was wrong: Joe Jackson was already living his dream.

And he wasn't going to Philadelphia.

"I hardly know as how I'd like it in those big Northern cities," Jackson told Stouch. Joe had never left South Carolina. He had no interest in leaving South Carolina. He had no interest, as the newspapers reported, going up North and "bumping into strangers by himself."

Stouch remained adamant Jackson was just having a little stage fright. He'd get up to Philadelphia and realize he had made the big time. Stouch even took the train up North with Jackson. As David Fleitz wrote in his book "Shoeless," they met at the train station. Stouch made sure Jackson got on. Stouch made sure Jackson got seated comfortably. Stouch explained the plan a few times: When they got to Philadelphia, he would take Jackson to the ballpark and personally introduce him to Mack, and make sure he was settled.

Then, Stouch left Jackson alone to enjoy the ride. When the train reached Philadelphia, Joe Jackson was gone.

Stouch rushed to the ballpark in a panic; he worried Jackson had been kidnapped or worse. Mack shook his head and showed him the telegram he had just received.

"AM UNABLE TO COME TO PHILADELPHIA AT THIS TIME. JOE JACKSON."

Joe Jackson had jumped the train in Charlotte and returned home.

Mack was outraged. He sent an injured ballplayer, Socks Seybold, down to South Carolina with the orders of bringing Jackson to Philadelphia even if it meant "his whole family to come back with you."

Jackson did go to Philadelphia with Seybold ... and he immediately showed off his great talent ... and he hated every minute of it. Jackson's teammates cruelly mocked him for being Southern, for being odd and, mostly, for being illiterate. Of all the Shoeless Joe images, the one I find most touching and haunting is of him pretending to read magazines on the train, sometimes even shouting out, "Wow, that's some story!"

In all, Joe Jackson tried three times to sneak on a train and go back to the safety and warmth of his South Carolina home.

“Shoeless Joe Jackson has returned to his home in Greenville,” The Washington Post reported. “Big league life wasn’t just to the young man’s liking. ... Joe had just about one week of mingling with city folk when he concluded he was never cut out for the Major League. He told Connie Mack so, and added that he’d rather be a star in the bushes than struggle for a regular place on a big-league team.”

Mack tried to win over Jackson. He offered everything he knew to offer, including a chance to go to school and learn how to read and write. “But the boy refused every inducement,” the Post wrote. “Promises of big salary, education, fine clothes for his girl wife and many other things were ignored.”

In the end, Joe Jackson played only 10 games for the Athletics and wasn’t about to play any more. Mack, at a loss, traded Jackson to Cleveland in 1910. It altered Joe Jackson’s baseball life, but Mack never quite got over it. In 1941, Ted Williams entered his final games against the Athletics in position to hit .400. He famously went 6-for-8 in a season-ending doubleheader to finish at .406, and Mack watched from the other dugout thinking of another lefty hitter.

“I wish I had a Williams,” Mack said. “I had one once. And I lost him.”

I keep him because he reminds me of something.

What?

Something that I don’t want to forget.

What’s that?

That when they come to you sweet-talking, you better not listen to anything they say. I don’t aim to forget that.

— The Boss in “All the King’s Men”

Shoeless Joe Jackson never forgot that they came sweet-talking him. Once he accepted he couldn’t go back to South Carolina, that he was going to be a big-league ballplayer, he focused on two things: One, playing extraordinary, even unprecedented, baseball; and two, keeping an eye on the bastards to make sure they weren’t cheating him.

He hit .408 in his first full season with Cleveland. His friend and nemesis, Ty Cobb, won the batting title by hitting .420. Cobb used his fellow Southerner as a muse to bring out his own best baseball. Cobb had never before hit .400, but faced up against a new rival, he set career highs in doubles, triples, runs, hits and RBIs.

Even though their numbers look similar, Jackson and Cobb played the game differently. Cobb was a man of his time. He hit with hands held apart, and he bunted, slashed, intimidated, and willed his way forward. He had no use for Babe Ruth’s slugging baseball when it was thrust

upon him, and he never stopped railing against it. He saw baseball as a sweet science, much in the same way pugilists of the time saw boxing.

Jackson was a man of the future. It's no accident Ruth copied his swing. Jackson kept his hands together, his stroke was fluid and powerful and, yes, modern. As Fleitz wrote, people heard a different sound when the ball came off Joe Jackson's bat. If Ruth was Elvis, Joe Jackson was the country blues singer who got there first.

Jackson hit .395 and led the league in hits and triples in his second year. He hit .373 and led the league in hits and doubles in his third.

But make no mistake, he wasn't happy. Years later, in the movie "Field of Dreams," Shoeless Joe lamented his life and talk about how he loved baseball so much he would have played it for free. This was probably never true of the real Joe Jackson, but it certainly wasn't true after he made it to the major leagues. By 1913, he was entirely convinced the bastards were cheating him. Cleveland's owner was a man named Charles Somers who had spent a lot of his money just keeping the American League afloat in its early years.

Jackson felt sure Somers was underpaying him. Cobb was making more. The owners were making more. Everybody was making more. He'd had enough.

Jackson threatened to quit baseball to go into vaudeville. He threatened to quit the American League and go play in the Federal League. Finally, he demanded Cleveland deal him to a winner so he could get "some of that sweet World Series money."

Somers, who once was among the richest men in America but had lost everything, had no choice but to give in and trade Jackson to the Chicago White Sox.

And now, the story starts to become familiar, right? The White Sox owner was that famed cheapskate, Charles Comiskey, and everybody knows he treated his players poorly, backed out of giving them bonuses they were promised, made them launder their own uniforms, etc.

Only ... it's not clear any of that is quite right. In studying the Black Sox scandal, and uncovering countless myths about it, the Society for American Baseball Research discovered Comiskey was actually [among the highest-paying owners in baseball](#) (his team had a significantly higher payroll than the Cincinnati Reds, who they faced in the World Series). This is not to say he wasn't cheating the players; of course, he was. He just wasn't cheating the players any more than other owners.

In any case, Comiskey was extremely popular in the press. So when Jackson got into those now-familiar battles with Comiskey over salary, back pay, and other things, reporters sided with Comiskey. They played up Jackson's greed, his ungratefulness and, just to add color to the story, his inability to read. In 1918, with World War I raging on, Jackson — as the sole support

for his wife and mother — was given the option to work for a shipbuilding company rather than going to fight.

Comiskey cruelly called Jackson a coward. “There is no room on my club for players who wish to evade the army draft by entering the employ of ship concerns,” he snarled. It was the harshest insult imaginable, and Joe Jackson would not forget.

Then came the end. Jackson, feeling cheated and betrayed and angry, took \$5,000 from gamblers to help throw the 1919 World Series. There is no question he took the money. Not only that, but he admitted later he threatened to reveal the whole plot unless he got paid. He famously hit .375 for the series with a homer and did not commit an error, but a close look at the play-by-play showed he went hitless with runners in scoring position and didn’t really start hitting until after gamblers failed to come up with the money and the White Sox players decided to try to win.

Jackson always insisted he did not do anything to lose the actual games — which is dubious considering his insistence on getting paid later — but even if it’s true, his agreement was a big reason the fix ever got going in the first place. Once they had the team’s best pitcher in Eddie Cicotte, and the team’s best player in Jackson, the gamblers had what they needed to inspire faith the White Sox were going to lose.

Jackson returned to play ball in 1920 and even while the Black Sox investigation raged on, he had his best season in years. He hit .382, slugged .589, and led the league in triples at age 32.

And then he was banned for life.

After he was banished from the major leagues, Joe Jackson returned to the small Southern towns where his baseball life began. He played ball until he was almost 50. This has been played off as sad — a larger-than-life figure, now out of shape, playing in the sandlots against townsfolk.

But the truth is, those sandlots, that’s where he was happiest. He had known that instinctively, right from the start, even while supposedly smarter people had told him what he wanted. Jackson opened a liquor store a few blocks from where he grew up. He and Katie never had any children, but Shoeless Joe would spend much of his later years teaching the kids in the neighborhood how to play ball. Sometimes he would buy them ice cream.

Late in his life, Cobb and Jackson crossed paths. The story is quite famous, an older Joe Jackson looking away as the legend approached.

“Don’t you know me?” Cobb said.

“Sure I do, Ty,” Joe Jackson said. “But I didn’t think you knew me.”

My favorite part of the story, though, is less known. At one point, Ty Cobb told Shoeless Joe: “Whenever I got the idea I was a good hitter, I’d stop ... and take a good look at you.”

Joe Jackson died four years later. He was 63. Nearly four decades later, Ray Liotta played Shoeless Joe Jackson in the movie “Field of Dreams.” In the movie, he threw left-handed and batted right-handed, the opposite of real life. All of it was the opposite of real life, though.

Should Joe Jackson be in the Hall of Fame? Like with every player in this list, it depends on what you think the Hall of Fame represents. If you are one who believes all the greatest players, regardless of their more human flaws, regardless of how they might have hurt the game, belong in the Hall, then yes, Jackson should be in there.

If you believe the Hall of Fame is, instead, an honor meant for those great players who are, above all else, a credit to the game, then no, you can’t vote for him. Joe Jackson helped throw a World Series and, along the way, endangered the game’s very future. There aren’t many things you can do on the field that are worse than that.

My own view is Joe Jackson is an integral part of baseball history. There are others I’d put in first. But, eventually, yes, I would get to Shoeless Joe.

“If I had been the kind of fellow who brooded when things went wrong,” Jackson said, “I probably would have gone out of my mind ... I would have been bitter and resentful because I would have felt I had been wronged. But I haven’t been resentful at all. ... I gave baseball my best.”

Dale Bryan Murphy

Atlanta—Philadelphia—Colorado, 1976-1993

Two-time most valuable player who was, perhaps, baseball’s most popular player of the 1980s. Twice led the league in home runs and RBIs, won five Gold Gloves, gained national fame as the star center fielder of the Superstation Braves. “If you can’t be impressed by Murph,” contemporary Andre Dawson said, “you can’t be impressed.”

From 1980-90, Dale Murphy hit more home runs than any player in baseball. Let’s get it out there right away that I’m playing around with the numbers a little bit here; most of the time when people talk about decades they talk about 10 seasons, say, the 1980s from 1980-89. Murphy didn’t quite lead baseball in homers in the 1980s; he was just behind Mike Schmidt.

But from 1980-90 — 11 seasons — Murph did hit the most, beating out Hall of Famers Schmidt, Eddie Murray and Andre Dawson. It's just a slightly different way of looking at things:

Most homers, 1950-60: Duke Snider (340); Eddie Mathews (338)

Most homers, 1960-70: Harmon Killebrew (434); Henry Aaron (413)

Most homers, 1970-80: Reggie Jackson (333); Johnny Bench (314)

Most homers, 1980-90: Dale Murphy (332); Mike Schmidt (313)

Most homers, 1990-2000: Mark McGwire (437); Ken Griffey Jr. (422).

Most homers, 2000-2010: Alex Rodríguez (465); Albert Pujols (404).

Most homers, 2010-20: Nelson Cruz (362); Edwin Encarnación (345)

As you can see, most of these guys are in the Hall of Fame. McGwire is not because of steroids. A-Rod, well, we'll have to wait and see. Cruz and Encarnación are unlikely to make it because home runs are pretty much their entire game and they probably won't hit enough of them to win over the voters.

Murphy, though, is a whole different thing. The point I'm going to make here is that it's pretty close to impossible to be as accomplished as Dale Murphy, as well-rounded as Dale Murphy, as popular as Dale Murphy, and as beloved as Dale Murphy and NOT get elected into the Hall of Fame. Bill James has invented numerous methods — Black Ink, Gray Ink and the Hall of Fame Monitor among them — which predict the likelihood of a player getting into the Hall.

By Black Ink (which counts the times you led the league in a major statistical category): Murphy is a likely Hall of Famer.

By Gray Ink (which counts the times you finished top 10 in a major statistical category): Murphy is a likely Hall of Famer.

By Hall of Fame Monitor (which adds up numerous achievements to predict a player's Hall of Fame fate): Murphy is a likely Hall of Famer.

Here's the craziest part of all: It isn't just that Murphy is not in the Hall of Fame. He has never come *close* to getting elected. He has never even received 25 percent of the vote.

I can expound on the reasons why Murphy has fallen so short — reasons that mainly have to do with the relative shortness of his career, his sudden and steep decline after turning 32 and various bits of bad timing on his part — but being a passionate and immovable Dale Murphy

fan, I will not do any of that. You can do your own research on Murphy's shortcomings if you like.

Instead, I'm going to talk about just how wonderful a player Murphy was and how the Hall of Fame is incomplete without him. There really isn't another non-Hall of Famer like him, not one. So before getting to it, let me reiterate that I'm talking about prime Murphy, eight seasons from 1980-87.

Before those eight seasons, Murphy was a catcher who couldn't really catch and a slugger who didn't make enough contact.

After those eight seasons, Murphy was worn out, the pounding he had taken as a 6-foot-4 center fielder who played hard every single day had aged him prematurely.

But for eight years — wow. He was, well, I'm going to go through this step by step. Watch me closely because I'm telling you upfront that there will be a little sleight of hand happening; I'm going to steer this argument precisely the way I want it steered. But I still hope to get the point across:

Step 1: Here is a list of the 31 players who have won multiple MVP awards, divided by Hall of Fame and non-Hall of Fame:

In the Hall (23): Ernie Banks; Johnny Bench; Yogi Berra; Roy Campanella; Joe DiMaggio; Mickey Cochrane; Jimmie Foxx; Lou Gehrig; Hank Greenberg; Rogers Hornsby; Carl Hubbell; Walter Johnson; Mickey Mantle; Willie Mays; Joe Morgan; Stan Musial; Hal Newhouser; Cal Ripken Jr.; Frank Robinson; Mike Schmidt; Frank Thomas; Ted Williams; Robin Yount.

Not yet eligible for the Hall (4): Miguel Cabrera; Albert Pujols; Alex Rodriguez; Mike Trout.

Not in the Hall of Fame (4): Barry Bonds; Juan González; Roger Maris; Dale Murphy.

OK, we know why Bonds is not in the Hall, that's a separate issue. The other three are González, Maris and Murphy. Of the three, Murphy was certainly the best player.

Step 2: Here is a list of the players who have won multiple MVP awards *and* have won multiple Gold Gloves:

In the Hall (5): Johnny Bench; Willie Mays; Joe Morgan; Cal Ripken Jr.; Mike Schmidt.

Not yet eligible for the Hall of Fame (2) Albert Pujols; Alex Rodríguez.

Not in the Hall of Fame (1): Dale Murphy

Murphy won five Gold Gloves in his career. Now, it's true there are guys here like Joe DiMaggio and Roy Campanella who *would* have won multiple Gold Gloves had the award been around when they were playing, but no matter, we are moving on.

Step 3: Here is a list of players who have won multiple MVP awards *and* won multiple Gold Gloves *and* stolen 30 bases in a season.

In the Hall (2): Willie Mays; Joe Morgan.

Not yet eligible for the Hall of Fame (1): Alex Rodríguez.

Not in the Hall (1): Dale Murphy.

Murphy had a 30 homer, 30-stolen base season in 1983 — he was just the sixth player in baseball history to do that. We're getting down to the nitty-gritty here.

Step 4: Here is a list of players who have won multiple MVP awards *and* won multiple Gold Gloves *and* stolen 30 bases in a season *and* received the most votes for the All-Star Game in a season.

In the Hall (1): Joe Morgan.

Not yet eligible for the Hall (1): Alex Rodríguez

Not in the Hall (1): Dale Murphy.

I didn't actually need this step, but I wanted to put it in to make a specific point: Dale Murphy is one of the most *famous* players not in the Hall of Fame. He was selected by the fans to start every All-Star Game of the mid-1980s and he always had either the highest or near-the-highest vote total. If a vote had been held in 1983 or 1984 or 1985 for the greatest player in the game, he probably would have won.

Through the years, almost all of the eligible top vote-getters — Aaron, Bench, Reggie Jackson, Rod Carew, George Brett, Gary Carter, Robin Yount, Ryne Sandberg, Ozzie Smith, Ripken, Ken Griffey Jr., etc. — are in the Hall of Fame. There are exceptions. Bobby Bonds was the top vote-getter one year, José Canseco another year, Will Clark yet another.

But they are exceptions.

Step 5: Here is a list of players who have (deep breath now) won multiple MVP awards *and* won multiple Gold Gloves *and* stolen 30 bases in a season *and* received the most votes for the All-Star Game in a season *and* won the Lou Gehrig Award for best exemplifying the spirit of Gehrig *and* won the Roberto Clemente Award for combining good play with strong work in the community.

Hall of Fame (0): None.

Not yet eligible for the Hall of Fame (0): None.

Not in the Hall of Fame (1): Dale Murphy.

And, finally, we're here. It's Dale Murphy alone. As I admitted at the top, it is true that you can do this sort of sleight of hand for lots of players and knock out the competition with trick categories such as "hit more than 27 triples in career" or "led league in sacrifice hits." But in this case, the categories I think fully express the depth and breadth of one of the most remarkable careers in baseball history.

- He was a great hitter, as attested by leading all of baseball in homers from 1980-90 and winning two MVP awards.
- He was an excellent fielder as attested by his five Gold Gloves (you can say he didn't deserve all of those, and maybe he didn't, but he was a really good center fielder until his body broke down and then a very good corner outfielder for a while after that).
- He was a good and aggressive base runner, as you can tell by his 30-30 season and 161 career stolen bases.
- He was extraordinarily popular and beloved, as he received the most All-Star votes one year (and was always near the top).
- He represented baseball with grace and class and dignity ... and still does.

That hits all the Hall of Fame notes, particularly the last part. It's funny, whenever I hear people invoke the Hall of Fame character clause as a disqualifier, I can't help but think that they're missing how the clause was *intended* to be used. The character clause — that players should be elected not only on their playing ability but also their integrity, sportsmanship and character — was meant to honor players who might not have been great ball players but were exemplary men. One of commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis' grand missions was to get Harvard Eddie Grant into the Hall.

Grant hit .249 and slugged .295 as a utility infielder in the 1910s. After he retired, he graduated from Harvard Law. He enlisted in the Army at age 33 while stating, "I believe there is no greater duty than I owe for being that which I am — an American citizen." Though he became seriously ill, he refused to leave the front lines and was shot and killed in the Argonne Forest of France. Landis believed wholeheartedly that Grant believed to be in the Hall of Fame as much as Babe Ruth or Ty Cobb.

People didn't agree with him, and through the years I cannot really think of any many (any?) borderline players who were elected because of their character. Murphy was obviously not an

American hero like Eddie Grant, but he did bring honor to the game and he inspired countless people, particularly in the South, to become baseball fans. Like I say, there are a handful of non-Hall of Famers who had better careers than he did, but I don't think there's anybody who has as many good Hall of Fame arguments as Dale Murphy.

Dwight Michael Evans
Boston—Baltimore, 1972-1991

Possessor of a breathtaking outfielder arm, Dewey patrolled Fenway Park's right field with grace and style. At different times, he led the American League in runs, homers, on-base percentage, total bases and OPS. Hit .300 and slugged .589 in two World Series appearances. Winner of eight Gold Gloves.

The MVP voters of 1981 had no idea just how pivotal that vote would turn out to be. You might remember, 1981 was a mess of a season: a midseason strike split the season in half, canceled 50-plus games for each team, and turned the postseason into a strange deal with double the normal number of teams.

The BBWAA decided to vote for the awards like always, and among the best American League candidates were three superb veterans who were on their way to perhaps their best seasons.

- California's [Bobby Grich](#) tied for the league lead in homers, led the league in slugging, and played his usual excellent defense — but his Angels were not really a factor in either half.
- Texas' Buddy Bell hit .294 and was on pace for 100 RBIs, and he had a spectacular defensive season, a [Brooks Robinson](#) kind of defensive season. His Rangers *were* in contention, but they didn't win the division in either half.
- Boston's Dwight Evans had the best season of them all, tying for the league lead in homers, and leading in walks, OPS and total bases. He was typically brilliant in right field. His Red Sox made a run in the second half but fell short of the Milwaukee Brewers.

These three were not necessarily the *top* candidates for the MVP award — [Rickey Henderson](#) had a sensational year, too — but looking back they were certainly three viable candidates. You couldn't really have argued with any of them winning.

And as it played out, Grich finished 14th, Bell finished 17th and Evans finished third behind ... a relief pitcher, Rollie Fingers. And look, Fingers had a fine year. But ... come on.

Why was this pivotal?

Well, you're probably way ahead of me on this. Fingers was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1992, the second relief pitcher elected. There is absolutely no doubt his MVP award played a significant role in his election.

Meanwhile Grich, Bell and Evans ... all of them disappeared from the Hall of Fame ballot with almost no fuss. Would it have made a difference for any of them — and *particularly* for Evans — if they had won the MVP award instead? I say yes. I'm not saying Dewey with an MVP award would have been elected. But I feel sure he would have been given a much fairer hearing.

You have probably seen the comparisons between Evans and his longtime teammate Jim Rice. They hit almost the exact same number of home runs (385 for Evans; 382 for Rice) and totaled similar total bases numbers (4,230 for Evans; 4,129 for Rice). Rice accomplished these in a significantly shorter career; he hit for a higher average with a higher slugging percentage. But Evans walked much more and hit into many fewer double plays, and so was able to do more damage on the bases. Evans scored 221 more runs than Rice.

But even if you give Rice a slight edge at the plate — and I'm not sure you can — it is more than made up in the field. Rice was a better left fielder than he was given credit for in his time, but Evans was a breathtaking defensive player with a golden arm. I don't really see any way that you could rate Rice a better player than Evans. Bill James has Evans ahead by 65 Win Shares, a substantial total, and that seems about right to me.

So why did Rice get elected while Evans barely drew any notice at all?

I think it comes down to:

- Rice's famous 1978 season when he won the MVP Award. Evans never had a season quite that good and, as pointed out, his best season was shortened by the strike and he didn't get the MVP award.
- Rice had a great narrative as perhaps baseball's most feared hitter while Evans did a lot of little things — like walk and play sound defense — that don't easily make great storytelling.
- Rice was more famous than Evans and, as such, got enough early support to stay on the ballot. Then things began to turn his way. The steroid scandal rocked baseball and people became more nostalgic for power hitters like Rice, who would lead the league with 39 homers.

Meanwhile, Evans was more or less forgotten.

He does seem to be making a comeback now. He got on the Modern Era Hall of Fame ballot in 2019 and, though he fell short of election, he did get eight of the 16 votes, suggesting that he just might get elected his next time around.

He should. Now that Larry Walker has been elected, Evans has the highest career WAR for any right fielder not in the Hall of Fame, and that includes [Ichiro](#). Not that WAR is everything, but it's worth noting that he also has a higher WAR than Dave Winfield, Vladimir Guerrero, Enos Slaughter and eight other Hall of Fame right fielders.

He earned that WAR by doing everything well, with his defense, his power, his patience at the plate, his intelligent baserunning and, yes, that arm. What an arm. I recently put together, completely off the top of my head, the 13 greatest right field arms in baseball history. I readily admit that I put absolutely no research behind this; it's all based on my own memories and what I've read. Here they are:

13. [Al Kaline](#)
12. [Larry Walker](#)
11. [Babe Ruth](#)
10. Cory Snyder
9. Carl Furillo
8. Dave Winfield
7. Rocky Colavito
6. [Dave Parker](#)
5. Dwight Evans
4. Ichiro Suzuki
3. Jesse Barfield
2. Ellis Valentine
1. [Roberto Clemente](#)

If I wanted to round out this list to 15, I'd add Vladimir Guerrero and then perhaps Raul Mondesi or Ollie Brown or Jay Buhrner or Hard Hittin' Mark Whiten. Of course, Mookie Betts will soon be on this list, too.

Peter Edward (Pete) Rose
Cincinnati—Philadelphia—Montreal, 1963-1986

Nobody in the history of baseball cared more about hitting baseballs than Charlie Hustle, the Hit King himself, who cracked 4,256 hits in his long career. He batted .300 in a season 15 different times, leading the league in hits seven of those times. Provided several of the most indelible moments in baseball history. Banned for gambling on baseball.

I feel certain that [Pete Rose](#) would be in the Hall of Fame today had he even pretended to apologize and accept responsibility in 1989 when MLB first began investigating his gambling. There is no question commissioner Bart Giamatti was willing — eager even — to be extremely lenient and just give Rose a one-year suspension, let him put his life back together, and then welcome him back into the game he loved.

But Rose is a Rose is a Rose is a Rose.

As you probably know, there are two different punishments offered in Baseball's famous Rule 21, the one that is posted in every clubhouse. The rule's main line is actually not about gambling itself.

Rule 21 begins like so:

"Any player or person connected with a Club who shall promise or agree to lose, or to attempt to lose, or to fail to give his best efforts towards the winning of any baseball game with which he is or may be in any way concerned, or who shall intentionally lose or attempt to lose, or intentionally fail to give his best efforts towards the winning any such baseball game, or who shall solicit or attempt to induce any player or person connected with a Club to lose or attempt to lose, or to fail to give his best efforts ... shall be declared permanently ineligible."

That's the focus of the rule — if you throw a game, if you try to throw a game, if you purposely don't give your best effort for whatever reason, you are out. The rule is not as concerned with gambling per se as it is with making sure the games are on the level, making sure players understand that throwing baseball games is the game's ultimate sin and it will lead to immediate and irrevocable expulsion.

Of course, gambling is the most obvious reason why someone would try to lose a game, and so after dealing with other things — like offering another team a gift for winning or losing or offering a gift to umpires — the rule takes on gambling head-on. And it goes like this.

- If you bet on a game that you are not involved in, you shall be declared ineligible for a year.
- If you bet on a game you *are* involved in, you shall be declared permanently ineligible.

So, yes, while betting on baseball is a serious offense because of the game's ugly history with gambling, it doesn't invoke MLB's death penalty. In fact, the league has not shown much public concern about baseball gambling itself; heck, in 2019, MLB inked a deal with the sportsbook FanDuel. The problems come when gambling might lead to questions about the trustworthiness and legitimacy of the games.

I don't think Giamatti — at least at first — believed that Rose ever did anything to throw a game. Baseball's investigation had led Giamatti to conclude that Rose had bet a lot of money on baseball *and* that Rose had bet a lot of money on the Reds. That combination was enough to permanently ban Rose, but Giamatti didn't want that. He preferred to find Rose guilty of betting on other teams, give him the lighter one-year suspension, and hope that he learned his lesson. That, he figured, was better for baseball and better for Rose.

But Rose would have none of it. As the decades passed, Rose would — in stages — admit to betting on baseball, admit to betting on the Reds (always to win, he still insists) and sign

countless baseballs with the phrase “I’m sorry I bet on baseball” scribbled on them. But each admission came only when he felt cornered and saw no way out; in 1989, Rose still felt invincible. He was the Hit King! He was the manager of his hometown Cincinnati Reds! He was a sure-thing first-ballot Hall of Famer!

He refused to even meet with Giamatti.

Those months in 1989 were ugly. Rose sued baseball. He managed to get an injunction placed against Giamatti. Ugly details of Rose’s life spilled out in public. The IRS was looking into Rose’s tax evasion, an investigation that would lead to Rose spending time in jail.

And somewhere along the way, Giamatti realized there was no way to quietly make this go away. Rose wanted to make it a fight, and Giamatti knew that MLB could not lose such a fight. By the end of the bitter battle, Giamatti almost certainly had come to the conclusion that Rose had not only bet on the Reds but had bet on them to lose at some point. There was no turning back: Rose would have to be permanently banned.

Rose and his lawyers, for their part, believed they had cut some sort of deal with MLB. Yes, Rose had been permanently banned which seems like a pretty definitive loss, but they felt like they had won three major concessions.

1. MLB would make no *official* finding that Rose bet on the Reds.
2. Rose would be allowed to apply for reinstatement after one year.
3. Rose was accepting the punishment without admitting that he bet on baseball.

All three of those so-called concessions, though, were phantoms. While Giamatti danced around the question of whether Rose bet on the Reds — “I believe he bet on *baseball*,” he said when asked the question directly — the lifetime ban spoke for itself. The opportunity to apply for reinstatement meant nothing; Giamatti made it entirely clear that while, sure, he would keep an open mind, it would be a longshot for Rose to be reinstated.

And finally, yes, it’s true that Rose didn’t have to admit he bet on baseball. “Rose escapes without admission,” was The Des Moines Register’s main headline. But, in the end, this made things worse, not better. It seemed to convince Rose that he would be allowed back into the game without *ever* admitting that he bet on baseball. And that was never a possibility. Giamatti died of a heart attack eight days after banning Rose — his friends would always be convinced that the stress of the fight with Rose contributed to his death — and Giamatti’s close friend Fay Vincent had no intention whatsoever of letting an unapologetic and deceitful Rose back into the game.

Instead, things went the other way. Rose didn’t just lose baseball, he lost the Hall of Fame, too. When he agreed to the lifetime ban, Rose had been assured that his name would be on the Hall of Fame ballot, and he seemed convinced that, in the end, the writers would vote him into Cooperstown. We’ll never know for sure because, instead, his name was pulled.

I've thought about this probably as much as anyone other than Rose himself — after all, I did write a book about Rose and the 1975 Reds — and my conclusion is unavoidable.

Pete Rose is never getting into the Hall of Fame.

And it really and truly didn't have to be that way.

Curtis Charles (Curt) Flood
Cincinnati—St. Louis—Washington, 1956-1971

A defensive genius in center field who led the Cardinals of the 1960s to three pennants and two World Series titles. His refusal to accept a trade to Philadelphia began a chain reaction that led eventually to the abolishment of the reserve clause, though he did not get to enjoy the players' newfound rights. An artist on and off the field, he was one of the most pivotal figures in baseball in the second half of the 20th century.

We as baseball fans concentrate so much on the story of [Jackie Robinson](#). That is, of course, as it should be — if there would be a Mount Rushmore for baseball, Robinson would be the first person you would put on it, followed I think by [Babe Ruth](#), Branch Rickey, and we can fight about the fourth.

The trouble with focusing entirely on Robinson's extraordinary story is that it leaves the impression that he fully integrated baseball. And, of course, he did not. Robinson broke through with the Dodgers in 1947. By 1950, only three of the 16 teams had a Black player. The Chicago Cubs didn't integrate until '53, the Cardinals and Reds until '54. The New York Yankees — the only team that really mattered in the American League — did not have a Black player until '55, and you probably know that the Boston Red Sox with Hall of Fame owner Tom Yawkey didn't have a Black player until '59.

But even when you get through all of that, we are still missing a huge part of the story — the integration of baseball in the South. There were no Southern Major League teams in those days (Washington was the closest thing) and so integration came slowly and painfully in those cities and small towns throughout the South. [Frank Robinson](#) in Columbia, S.C. Bill White in Dallas. Billy Williams in San Antonio. Dick Allen in Little Rock.

Then there was Curt Flood in High Point-Thomasville, N.C. in 1956.

Flood was just 18 years old that year. He had signed with the Cincinnati Reds out of high school; Flood had been a high school teammate of Frank Robinson's in Oakland and was eager to join him on the Reds. He had never been on a plane before he flew to Tampa, Fla. for spring training. In the Tampa airport, for the first time, he saw water fountains labeled "White" and "Colored." He went to the hotel to check in, and a mortified porter pushed him into a cab and

sent him across town to Ma Felder's boardinghouse, where the Reds' Black players had to stay. Flood felt utterly humiliated.

Flood's baseball hero was Jackie Robinson; he so deeply admired Robinson's strength, will, his refusal to let the bigots and the system break him. The 18-year-old Flood didn't feel like his own strength could match his hero's. "I am pleased that God made my skin black," he would famously say, "but I wish he had made it thicker."

When spring training ended, the Reds sent Flood to High Point-Thomasville, sister towns in North Carolina still known for furniture making. The experience just about broke him. He was separated from his teammates, refused service at restaurants and hotels, not allowed to use the restrooms at gas stations when the team bused to their next town. All his life, he would remember one family — a father and four boys — that would sit behind near the field and yell "Black bastard" at him. The face of the father, in particular, burned in his memory. "I noticed that he eyed the boys narrowly," Flood would write, "as if to make sure they were learning the correct intonation."

As a man, the treatment wrecked him — he would talk about crying literally every night. As a ballplayer, it fueled him. He hit .340 with 29 homers though pitchers threw at him seemingly every night. In one game in Kinston, N.C., a pitcher hit him in the head. He promptly stole second and then stole third and he would have stolen home had the batter not singled him in. His next at-bat, to make sure the point wasn't lost, he homered.

Curt Flood wasn't *ever* coming back to High Point. He was going to make sure of that.

The Reds called him up for five games at the end of that season; Flood was only 18. He intended to make the Reds the following year — but Cincinnati already had an All-Star laden outfield with Robinson, Gus Bell and Wally Post. The Reds briefly moved him from center field to third base to make room for him, which is a bit like moving Thelonious Monk to saxophone to make room for him in the band. Thankfully for baseball, the move was short-lived and Flood was put back in center field, where he was a genius.

But it led to more pain for Flood, who was returned to the South, this time in Savannah, Ga. "When I saw how uptight the Black community was, and how hostile the Whites were," Flood would say of the first moment he arrived in Georgia, "I realized that Cincinnati had arranged another full dose for me." It was another year filled with indignities, including a moment when a team trainer screamed at him between doubleheader games after he threw his uniform onto a pile with his teammates. The trainer removed the uniform with a long stick, and from then on Flood dressed and undressed in an area of the clubhouse that had been crudely separated.

A few months after the season ended, the Reds traded him away to St. Louis in one of the worst trades in Reds history. It is entirely unclear from the reports at the time why the Reds would have dealt Flood but in retrospect, it is pretty obvious when you see the Reds packaged Flood

with another African American outfielder, Joe Taylor. “Flood,” the St. Louis Dispatch dutifully reported, “was one of two Negro outfielders obtained.”

This was a tiny part of what Curt Flood had to endure to follow his dream of playing Major League Baseball. How could anyone else in baseball — other than those Black players who encountered the same treatment — truly understand? They couldn’t, of course, couldn’t comprehend the spirit that drove him to become an All-Star, couldn’t grasp the pain he hid daily, couldn’t see that there were things that mattered more to Flood than baseball.

From 1961-69 — a time that was mostly dominated by pitchers — Flood was a .300 hitter, a sensational base runner and a dream of a center fielder. His teammates named him co-captain along with Tim McCarver, and his Cardinals won pennants in 1964, ’67 and ’68.

Then things began to change a bit. He had a terrific year in ’68, the Year of the Pitcher. He was one of only five players to hit .300 in the National League. (Only [Carl Yastrzemski](#) hit .300 in the American League.) He won his sixth of seven Gold Gloves. He was a beloved player in St. Louis, at least until 1968. He was second on the Cardinals in runs and stolen bases behind only Hall of Famer Lou Brock and third on the team in RBIs behind Mike Shannon and another Hall of Famer, Orlando Cepeda. The team went back to the World Series, but in Game 7 with the game still scoreless, he misplayed a ball hit by Jim Northrup. The triple scored two runs, and the Cardinals never recovered. It is a sad irony that such a breathtaking center fielder would stand out for a single play he could not make. But such is baseball and such is life.

In the offseason, he got into a bitter salary dispute, and he threatened to retire at age 30. The Cardinals believed he was bluffing ... and out of line. During spring training, the Cardinals owner Gussie Busch addressed the team — with the press invited in — and told the two-time defending National League champions that they were selfish and needed to reach out more to the community.

Flood, rightfully, believed he was the focus of the speech. Later that year, he was stripped of his captaincy after missing a team banquet.

Flood was roughly the same player in ’69 as he had been but he only hit .285 — just the second time since ’63 that he had not hit .300 — and he didn’t make the All-Star team and Cardinals general manager Bing Devine sensed that time was running out. Without even alerting Flood — a sportswriter actually broke the news — Devine traded Flood to Philadelphia in a massive deal that would bring back Dick Allen.

And Curt Flood refused to go.

"I really feel for Curt Flood," UPI's influential columnist Milt Richman began his piece on the last day of 1969. "I feel all the more for him because he has always been the kind of ballplayer who gave his very best every time he walked on the field.

"Curt Flood, who was paid \$90,000 by the St. Louis Cardinals this year and traded by them to the Philadelphia Phillies in October, says he 'won't be bought and sold like cattle.'

"That's where I stop feeling for Curt Flood."

As the years go along and more people come to understand the absurdity and almost comical unfairness of baseball's reserve clause — which allowed baseball teams to own the rights of players in perpetuity — there is this misperception that Flood had a lot of people on his side. He really didn't. The press, with a few exceptions, was merciless. The fans were almost universally unsympathetic. Numerous players, Yastrzemski, [Joe DiMaggio](#) and [Ted Williams](#) among them, severely criticized him. Baseball — led by commissioner Bowie Kuhn — painted Flood as an ingrate and a man who wasn't willing to live up to his own agreement.

After refusing the trade, Flood wrote a letter to Kuhn that, again with the benefit of hindsight, reads logically and eloquently.

Dear Mr. Kuhn,

After 12 years in the Major Leagues, I do not feel that I am a piece of property to be bought and sold irrespective of my wishes. I believe that any system which produces that result violates my basic rights as a citizen and is inconsistent with the laws of the United States and of the several States.

It is my desire to play baseball in 1970, and I am capable of playing. I have received a contract offer from the Philadelphia club, but I believe I have the right to consider offers from other clubs before making any decisions, I, therefore, request that you make known to all the major league clubs my feelings in this matter and advise them of my availability for the 1970 season.

*Sincerely yours,
Curt Flood*

Kuhn could not wait to make this letter public along with his terse response; he knew that a player who made \$90,000 the year before — \$600,000 or so in today's money — would inspire little but fury by fighting for his rights.

"You have entered into a current playing contract with the St. Louis club, which has the same assignment provisions as those in your annual major league contract since 1956," Kuhn wrote

back. He had no interest in addressing the fact that Flood had no choice but to enter into that contract if he wanted to play baseball.

Flood then sued baseball over the basic unfairness of the reserve clause. He knew that he was fighting a hopeless cause. "It's a million-to-one shot," baseball's union leader Marvin Miller told him, and then Miller made it clear that even if he could somehow make a difference, it would not help his own case. "You're not going to get any damages," Miller told him plainly. He also told him that MLB was vindictive and that if we went through with it, teams would never hire him again as a manager or coach and Busch might very well make it difficult for Flood to do business in St. Louis ever again.

"But it would benefit all of the other players and all the players to come, wouldn't it?" Flood asked back, according to Brad Snyder's fine book, "A Well-Paid Slave."

"Yes," Miller said.

"That's good enough for me," Flood said.

It is pioneers like Flood upon which change comes. Flood himself lost and lost badly. Though his case was eventually heard by the U.S. Supreme Court, and the justices seemed sympathetic to the argument that baseball's antitrust exemption was "an established aberration" but believed it was up to Congress and not the courts to deal with it. Flood himself dealt with numerous personal problems as he quickly ran out of money.

He did return to baseball in 1971 to play for Washington, but by then he was in bad shape — his drinking had become uncontrollable by then, his personal problems had overtaken his life, and he was entirely unready to return to the game. He managed to play in only 13 games, at which point he left the team and fled to the Spanish island of Majorca. He lived an itinerant life after that, and it wasn't until the 1990s that he was able to really find a measure of happiness as he quit drinking and began painting again and came to fully appreciate his place in baseball history.

Curt Flood changed baseball. His quixotic fight was unpopular at the time, but it opened the eyes of many of his fellow players and numerous others — including some influential people in the media — and people began to see the reserve clause for the sham that it had always been. The owners, to disentangle themselves from Flood's arguments, declared that the courts were the wrong place to negotiate the reserve clause. This unquestionably put pressure on the owners to negotiate in other ways, which led to arbitration, which led to the eventual destruction of the clause and free agency and what baseball has become the last half-century.

Would all of that have happened without Flood? I don't think so. This past year, Marvin Miller was finally elected to the Hall of Fame, even though he had insisted before his death that he did not want, nor would accept, induction. "Put in Curt Flood," he said. "There's a hero."

FINALLY THIS WEEK, FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES

[He Just Wanted to Play Catch. They Got Relief From Troubled Times.](#)

A callout on social media for a game of catch in Dallas drew a varied group of strangers who found escape from society's turbulence in the most banal ritual.

DALLAS — For a couple of days in early January, Frank Miller wandered around his house holding a baseball, practicing the grips for a slider, curve and cutter. He'd read a book about pitching and now he was obsessed.

He needed to play catch, stat. So his wife, Alice, more adept at social media, posted a note on Nextdoor, the neighborhood app.

"My 74 year old husband would like to have a partner to throw the ball with. He is a former high school and college pitcher and is looking for a catcher or someone who knows how to throw a baseball." She volunteered that her husband "is in good shape."

In a world with its cover torn off, the idea of a man in his eighth decade yearning for a baseball buddy seemed to spark something in people.

"My son is interested," a woman quickly replied.

A steady flow of messages followed.

"I can throw," a man said.

"I would love to have a catch," another said.

"What a wonderful way to bring people together and start 2021 with a positive note," another neighbor wrote. "This makes me smile."

By confessing his own need, Frank had unwittingly tapped into a longing in others. Not knowing what else to do, Alice welcomed all comers: "How about 3 p.m. Wednesday at Cole Park near the tennis courts?"

They wondered if anyone would actually come.

Not that Frank couldn't endure it if they didn't. He is not some husk of a man aching for a life he never had. A retired civil engineer, he plays golf and tennis, spends summers in Michigan, flies a

Piper Archer, checks items off the honey-do list. He has a son, a daughter, a stepson and three grandchildren. It's an enviable life.

But as Jim Bouton wrote in the classic book, "Ball Four," a lot of people spend a lifetime gripping a ball, only to realize "it was the other way around all the time."

The game got a hold of Frank Miller in the early 1960s, when he pitched for his high school team in Greenville, N.Y., and then for Lehigh University in Pennsylvania. He can describe with cinematic clarity the grand slam he hit in May of his freshman year — and show you the ball, which he keeps in a box marked "memorabilia."

He has visited his enthusiasm upon Alice, his third wife, who knew nothing about baseball when they met 10 years ago. "Frank introduced me to the complexities of the game," she said, managing not to sound like a hostage.

The Millers were surprised by the response to Alice's Nextdoor post, but when they thought about it, it made sense. Between the dual curses of politics ("I've lost friends," Frank said) and the pandemic, people are ticked off, scared and solitary.

"I think people want to reconnect a little bit right now," he said a couple of days before the meet-up.

On Wednesday, he and Alice showed up early at Cole Park, Frank outfitted in a lime green mask, jeans and a Texas Rangers jersey and cap. In his black equipment bag he carried his Nokona glove (a 2019 Christmas gift he'd barely used), four new baseballs as smooth and white as eggs, two older balls, and the Hawthorne catcher's mitt he bought six decades ago at Montgomery Ward. Earlier in the day, he had used Gorilla Glue to close a tear in the thumb.

A local television reporter had seen Alice's post and was waiting for the Millers by a park bench. Frank kidded him about his priorities. "Do you know they're impeaching the president right now?" he said, laughing. Indeed, in Washington at that moment, House members were speaking gravely about enemies, foreign and domestic.

One by one, entering the park from all directions, about 10 more people arrived, many with mitts tucked under their arms. A bearded man in his 30s. Three boys from the North Dallas High School team and the staff member who had encouraged them to come. An older man in a T-shirt that said "ALASKA — The Great Land." A woman in her 60s who had come just to watch.

The players exchanged hellos and elbow bumps, then formed two lines facing each other in the sunny space between oak trees. The nearby thwacking of tennis balls was joined by the slow, steady rhythm of balls popping into mitts, like the last few popcorn kernels exploding in the microwave.

At 74, Frank short-armed his throws a bit, yet managed to deliver the ball with impressive zip. One of his tosses skipped off the glove of an older man, who then hobbled after the ball, threw it back to Frank on a couple of bounces, and shrugged.

This was Rich Mazzearella, 73, who grew up in Astoria, Queens, worshiping the Yankees and playing in a Scrabble board of youth sports leagues: CYO, PAL, YMCA. He hadn't thrown in 35 years and — this is unfortunate, but facts are facts — had long since given his baseball gloves to his grandchildren. He had to borrow Miller's catcher's mitt to play.

Mazzearella was asked why he came.

"Fountain of Youth," he said. "The opportunity to do something that I never expected to do again in my life."

He settled into his best catcher's stance (a little high in the haunches) and caught a few more pitches from Frank, their combined ages about as old as the game itself.

Soon they took a break, their arms wobbly, but the day had gained its own momentum. A few steps away, two strangers separated in age by 46 years lobbed a ball back and forth across roughly the same number of feet.

Chris Barber, 26, who had been prompted to attend by his mother, arrived at the park in an uncertain moment in life. He is unemployed and searching, itching to get to California to find his future. His throwing partner, David Boldrick, is 72, happy and settled, a mechanical engineer enjoying the slow sunset of his working life.

It's not easy to imagine another setting in which these two might have met and talked, but a connection came easily here, the arc of the ball tying them together like a string.

Boldrick asked Barber about California.

"Have you got a job out there?"

"I don't yet."

"What kind of job do you want?"

"I have no idea."

Pretty soon they stopped throwing. They stood and talked. Barber offered that he'd been a chemistry major.

"You can do anything you want with that," Boldrick said.

The players threw for an hour in perfect, springlike sunshine. Finally, their arms sore and the shadows lengthening, they circled up, wrote their names in the notebook Frank had brought, and promised to meet again soon.

As they scattered, Frank said, out loud but kind of to himself, "Isn't baseball beautiful? It's a piece of art, really."

It was time to go. The Millers had an appointment to get the coronavirus vaccine. Frank threw his pitching arm around Alice and they headed off, satisfied that they'd put a little Gorilla Glue on the universe.

JANUARY 24, 2021

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

A longer edition this week. Two lost Hall of Famers. Wraps with three long pieces on the golden age of shortstops, the collective bargaining agreement and what Theo Epstein should consider when he consults to MLB on how to improve the game. Enjoy and stay safe.

CC Sabathia is one of three left-handed pitchers to record 3,000 career strikeouts, joined by Randy Johnson (4,875) and Steve Carlton (4,136). Sabathia finished with 3,093 career strikeouts.

Yankee fans may be excited with the signing of former Cy Young winner Corey Kluber. But be aware he is almost 35 years old, pitched 1 inning in 2020 and 36 innings in 2019.

In 2015 Max Scherzer signed a seven-year deal with the Nationals worth \$210 million, though taking into account how much of it was deferred, [the dollar value at the time](#) was more like \$185 million. Think it worked out?

Six years later, we have the benefit of hindsight. Scherzer, 37 in July, is entering the final season of that contract. Let's take a look to see what it brought the Nationals:

- 1,118 innings, [most in baseball](#)
- 34.5 WAR, [best in baseball among pitchers](#)
- 2.80 ERA, [third-best among starters](#)
- Back-to-back Cy Youngs ([2016](#), [2017](#))
- 5 straight top-5 finishes in the Cy Young (2015-19)
- 5 All-Star selections in 5 years (2020 did not have All-Stars)
- A no-hitter ([2015](#))
- Another no-hitter ([also 2015](#), arguably the [best-pitched game](#))
- A 20-strikeout game, against his former Tigers team, no less ([2016](#))
- 49 1/3 postseason innings, with a 2.92 ERA

- The [2019 World Series](#) trophy
- A nearly assured Nationals cap in Cooperstown in the future

Slow starts

Aaron Judge struck out 42 of his 84 at bats in 2016.

Joey Gallo hit .176 as a rookie.

Xander Bogaerts struck out 138 times as a rookie.

Mike Trout hit .220 in 40 games prior to his rookie year.

Dustin Pedroia hit .191 in 31 game call ups before his rookie year.

Was he as Good as I Remember?

I remember going to Yankee Stadium in 1971 to watch Vida Blue pitch. Dominant. Looking back at Vida Blue with the A's (9 years with Oakland, later 8 years with Giants and Royals)

With Oakland:

124 wins, 86 losses

105 complete games, 28 shutouts (he threw a complete game shutout in over 10% of his Oakland starts).

2.95 ERA.

1945 innings, 1315 strikeouts

In 1971 Cy Young and MVP, 24-8 with 8 shutouts and 1.82 ERA

Joe Sewell

Sewell **holds** the **record** for the **lowest strikeout** rate in **major league history**, striking out on average only once every 73 plate appearances, and the most consecutive games without a **strikeout**, at 115.

Batting average: .312

Hits: 2,226

Runs batted in: 1,054

Home runs: 49

Sewell fanned 20 times in 558 at-bats during the 1922 season, and that would be his career high. He never even reached double-digits in strikeouts in any of his last nine seasons. During the 1929 season, Sewell went 115 games between punchouts. He ended his career with a rate of 62.6 at-bats per strikeout.

He had seven seasons in which he recorded more than 500 at-bats while striking out less than 10 times. From September 1922 through April 1930, Sewell played in 1,103 consecutive games, the second-longest such streak in history at the time.

In the field, Sewell led American League shortstops in fielding percentage three times and finished in the Top 5 six times. He shifted to third base in 1929 and, after signing with the Yankees in 1931, was the regular third baseman for the Yankees club that won the 1932 World Series.

Starting 2021 like 2020 with Dead Hall of Famers (Lasorda, Sutton, Aaron)

Hank Aaron

1954 When outfielder Bobby Thomson, newly acquired from the New York Giants (less than three years after his celebrated pennant-winning homer at the Polo Grounds), broke an ankle during the exhibition season, Aaron took his place.

Aaron remains No. 1 in the major leagues in total bases (6,856) and runs batted in (2,297); No. 2 in at-bats (12,364), behind Pete Rose; and No. 3 in hits (3,771), behind Rose and Cobb. He won the National League's single-season home run title four times, though his highest total was only 47, in 1971. Matching his jersey number, he hit exactly 44 home runs in four different seasons.

He was a two-time National League batting champion and had a career batting average of .305. He was the league's most valuable player in 1957.

1957 In the World Series, Aaron hit .393 with three home runs as the Braves defeated the Yankees in seven games.

Made 21 All-Star teams.

From his age-21 season in 1955 to his age-37 campaign in 1971 — all of them All-Star seasons — he averaged 153 games played and maintained an astonishing .315/.379/.574 output at the plate

Only six players in Major League history have tallied 500 homers *and* 3,000 hits, and Aaron was the first to do it.

Aaron managed that through his relentless consistency. He is one of five players to post at least eight 40-homer seasons, one of two (along with [Alex Rodriguez](#)) to have 15 30-homer seasons and is the only player to go deep 20-plus times in 20 different years.

Aaron's 3,298 games played puts him 10 behind [Carl Yastrzemski](#) for second all time. ([Pete Rose](#) is No. 1 with 3,562 games.) Aaron played at least 150 games 14 times and at least 120 games 21 times, tying Rose for the most such seasons in MLB history. Aaron also ranks third in plate appearances (13,941).

Total domination: the king of total bases

Think about those 6,856 total bases, too. That total is 722 more than second-place [Stan Musial](#) -- about twice the amount produced by 2019 Major League leader [Rafael Devers](#) (359). How much is 6,856? It equates to 1,714 home runs, 2,285 triples or 3,428 doubles. If a player matched Ruth's single-season record of 457 total bases and kept that up for 15 years, he would still be one base short of Aaron.

Aaron didn't get many chances to play in the postseason, but when he did, he took advantage by batting .362/.405/.710 with six homers and 16 RBIs in 17 games. In two of his three series (1957 World Series, 1969 National League Championship Series), he homered three times. Among those with at least 70 career postseason plate appearances, he ranks sixth in average, fifth in slugging and fifth in OPS.

Hank (755 home runs) and brother Tommie Aaron (13) hold the record for most homers by two brothers in MLB history, with 768. The Murrays are second with 508 (Eddie, 504; Rich, 4)

Don Sutton

Sutton was the ninth baseball Hall of Famer to die since last April, a group that includes four other pitchers, [Bob Gibson](#), [Tom Seaver](#), [Whitey Ford](#) and [Phil Niekro](#), as well as [Lou Brock](#), [Al Kaline](#), [Joe Morgan](#) and Lasorda. (then we added Aaron).

Sutton still owns the Dodgers franchise records in wins (233) and strikeouts (2,696), innings pitched (3,816 1/3), shutouts (52)

Third on the all-time leaderboard in games started (756) -- behind just Cy Young and Nolan Ryan

Seventh in innings pitched (5,282 1/3).

He is one of 18 members of the 3,000-strikeout club, finishing with 3,574 punchouts, good for seventh all time.

Sutton logged at least 200 innings during each of his first 15 Major League seasons.

He won at least 15 games a dozen times

A four-time All-Star, he finished among the top five in National League Cy Young Award balloting over five consecutive seasons (1972-76).

Still ranks among MLB's top 10 pitchers all-time in starts, innings pitched and strikeouts

He reached the 200-inning mark in 20 out of 21 possible seasons (the [most 200-inning campaigns in history](#)), with that run interrupted only by the 1981 players' strike.

Sutton also struck out at least 100 hitters in 21 consecutive seasons between 1966 and '86, a streak matched only by Roger Clemens, Greg Maddux and Nolan Ryan.

Think how durable Mark Buehrle was. Threw 200 innings basically every year of his lengthy career. ... Don Sutton threw almost exactly TWO THOUSAND more innings than Mark Buehrle.

More from The Athletic's Joe Posanski's excellent series on players not in the Hof and the arguments that maybe they should be.

Richard Anthony (Dick) Allen

Philadelphia—St. Louis—Los Angeles—Chicago White Sox—Oakland, 1963-1977

A fearsome hitter, his legend lives on in the stories that opposing pitchers tell. At different times in his career, he led the league in triples, homers, runs, RBIs, walks, total bases and OPS. Controversy followed him everywhere. "I'm no angel," he once said. "But I don't think I'm as bad as I'm made out to be."

Dick Allen [died in December](#), before he was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame. That's shameful. He fell one vote short on a Veterans' ballot in 2015, and it was widely assumed that in 2020 he would finally get that final vote. But the Veterans' ballot was postponed due to COVID-19.

Here is an updated version of a long piece I wrote several years ago about one of the few players in baseball history who was truly larger than life.

"That which we call a rose by another name would smell as sweet."
— *"Romeo and Juliet"*

"What's in a name? ... A rose by any other name would wither and die."
— *"My Favorite Year"*

In the dog days of 1969, a ballplayer named Dick Allen (but who was still being called Richie Allen) rather suddenly scratched out a word in the infield dirt. This was a few days after he had been suspended by the Philadelphia Phillies for failing to show up for a doubleheader. He was playing first base, and he had a little time on his hands, and he scraped the word "COKE" with his cleats, so large that everybody in Connie Mack Stadium could read it.

This, it should be said, was on one of the many days when Philadelphia fans were taking particular relish in booing him. It was 1969, so by then, fans booed him every day (that is when they weren't writing angry letters to the newspaper about him). He had taken to wearing a batting helmet throughout games, even when in the field and on the bench because it made him feel safer. Anyway, some days the boos were louder than others, and this was one of the deafening days. Allen raked out his one-word message.

Coke? What did it mean? Was it a drug reference? Sure, most thought it was a drug reference. But maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was a call for a refreshing drink? Did he want to buy the world one?

In his next at-bat, Allen smashed a home run over the Coke sign at the top of the second deck in left-center field.

Allen liked scraping words into the dirt. It was like Twitter. Once he wrote "STOP." Another time, he wrote, "BOO." He wrote "GONE," because that was what he wanted, to be gone from Philadelphia, and he wrote "WHY" and everybody understood. They knew just what he meant when he wrote "OCT 2;" that was the last day of the season and, he believed, his last game playing for the Phillies, his last time having to endure a city's fury.

As you might imagine, MLB wasn't too crazy about Allen's words in the dirt. It had become something of an embarrassment for baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn, who spent roughly 47 percent of his time as commissioner being embarrassed about something in the game. Kuhn and National League president Warren Giles combined their baseball might and ordered Allen to stop writing those words.

That night, Dick Allen scratched out another word. He wrote: "NO."

Dick Allen was controversial. He was many things in his blazing 15-year career. He was fearsome and maligned and, at one point, the highest-paid player in baseball. He was the most disliked man in the sport and also popular enough to be elected by the fans to start in the All-Star Game. He was, in the words of his fans and critics, brilliant, selfish, egotistical, misunderstood, a misanthrope, a charmer, a free-spirit, a jerk, a con-man, a team player, a maverick, a mystery, a Hall of Famer, a non-Hall of Famer and a genius. Many of his fans were his critics. And many of his critics were his fans.

Above all else, Dick Allen was controversial.

"How do you handle Dick Allen?" his manager, Gene Mauch, asked. "Play him, fine him, play him again."

"Closest thing to being a perfect ballplayer that I have ever seen," Luis Aparicio called him.

"The man is undaunted," [Reggie Jackson](#) said.

"I wouldn't touch him with a 10-foot pole," Oakland Athletics owner Charlie O. Finley said (eight days before signing him).

"I think Dick probably hits the ball harder than anyone in the world," Boog Powell said.

"I would pick Richie, all-around, over [Clemente](#), Aaron or [Mays](#)," Cookie Rojas said.

“He had no enemies,” pitcher Wilbur Wood said.

“He danced by his own song,” Carlos May said.

“I believe God Almighty himself would have trouble handling Richie Allen,” his onetime interim manager George Myatt said.

“Don’t talk to me about being handled,” Allen said. “You know what Wilt (Chamberlain) said about that: ‘Animals are handled. Not men.’”

Dick Allen arrived in Philadelphia in 1963, when the Phillies and the city were not yet ready for a Black baseball superstar. They certainly were not ready for a force of nature like Dick Allen.

The Phillies integration story might be the most appalling in the entire sport. The Boston Red Sox are usually torched by history with that shameful label because they were the last team to integrate, but Bob Carpenter’s Phillies were the last National League team to integrate. And, it’s fair to say, they only barely did so.

Throughout the 1950s, the Phillies refused to sign a Black player even though it so vividly wrecked them as a competitive team. The Whiz Kid Phillies of 1950 won the pennant, then were never heard from again. While the greatest influx of talent in the game’s history flowed into the National League — Mays and Aaron and [Campanella](#) and Robinson and Clemente and so on and so on — the Phillies stayed lily-white and became utterly irrelevant.

All the while the Philadelphia newspapers stayed silent.

In 1957, the year after [Jackie Robinson](#) *retired*, a man with a famous name — John Kennedy — became the first African American to play for the Philadelphia Phillies. By then there was real pressure on the Phillies to finally play a Black player — *any* Black player. During spring training that year it became apparent that Kennedy, a 30-year-old former Negro Leaguer who claimed to be 22 just so he might get a chance, had enough talent to play for the Phillies. Reporters warned fans what was coming.

“It will be reported to the point of boredom that John Kennedy, the youngster from Jacksonville, Fla., will be the first Negro to grace the Phillies lineup,” a clearly disgusted Don Daniels wrote in the Philadelphia Inquirer in the spring of ’57.

Yes, Daniels and others were bored by the story of Philadelphia’s integration before it even happened. But they shouldn’t have worried. Not only did Kennedy never grace the Phillies lineup, his breakthrough moment wasn’t reported at all. Kennedy broke the Philadelphia color barrier on April 22, 1957, 10 years to the day after the Phillies’ Ben Chapman had showered racist taunts on Jackie Robinson.*

**That day — revisited in the movie “42” — pushed Robinson as far as any day in his baseball career. He remembered thinking: “To hell with the patient Black freak I was supposed to create. I could throw down my bat, stride over to the Phillies dugout, grab one of those White sons of bitches and smash his teeth with my despised Black fist. Then I could walk away.”*

Kennedy wasn't in the lineup. And he wasn't inserted as a pinch-hitter, either. The Philadelphia Phillies integrated by putting John Kennedy into the game as a pinch-runner and pulling him at the end of the inning before he could take the field defensively.

Not one word of it was reported in the Philadelphia Inquirer.

Two days later, against Pittsburgh, the Phillies used Kennedy as a pure pinch-runner again with the full intention of taking him out before the next inning. But fate took a hand. Richie Ashburn singled. Solly Hemus singled. Stan Lopata got hit by a pitch. After a triple, a single, a strikeout and a long home run by Bob Bowman, the Phillies were in a bind. If Chico Fernández reached base, Kennedy's spot would come up again.

Fernandez grounded to short. Pittsburgh's Dick Groat threw in the dirt.

And John Kennedy made history by becoming the first Black man to bat for the Phillies. He grounded out to Groat. He would get one more big-league at-bat, in the 15th inning of a game against the Reds after Philadelphia had run out of players. He struck out. He was sent to the minors days later.

The Phillies did not play another Black player until 1960. That was the same year the team paid \$60,000 or \$70,000 — the largest signing bonus given to an amateur African American player up to that time — to an athletic phenom [from Wampum, Pa.](#), named Dick Allen.

The Phillies tried to get rid of Dick Allen before he ever got started. Of course they did. It's not entirely clear how his signing had been cleared in the first place. Yes, he was an absurdly talented athlete, nobody would ever deny that. In his school, he would perform such an array of basketball aerials that fans came from 50 miles around to watch him fly and dunk. (Allen was only 5-foot-11.) And he hit baseballs so hard that Frank Lucchesi — a manager, like most managers, who rarely saw eye-to-eye with Allen — called him the greatest young power hitter he ever saw.

Still, the Phillies did not protect Allen for the 1962 expansion draft.

The Mets did not take Allen — they figured *something* had to be wrong with the guy if the Phillies didn't protect him — and so the Phillies found themselves stuck with the greatest young power hitter in the game. They sent him to Williamsport, where he hit .329/.409/.548 with 62 extra-base hits in 132 games.

Allen promptly asked for a \$50-a-week raise.

The Phillies responded by threatening to keep him in the minors in 1963 if he persisted in nagging them about money.

Allen persisted. And the Phillies sent him to Little Rock in what turned out to be the most fateful year of Dick Allen's baseball life.

The Arkansas Travelers, the Triple-A baseball team in Little Rock, had only just been re-formed. They had been part of the Southern Association, a league with some of the biggest cities in the South — the Atlanta Crackers, Birmingham Barons, Chattanooga Lookouts, Memphis Chickasaws, Mobile Bears, Nashville Volunteers, Shreveport Sports, and, yes, the Little Rock Travelers. For 15 years after the signing of Jackie Robinson, the Association had enough juice and power to survive as an entirely segregated league.

After the 1961 season, MLB decided it no longer could work with the Southern Association unless they integrated. That year, the Association chose to disband rather than integrate.

The loss of baseball hurt Little Rock. The Travelers had been playing in town since 1895. So in 1962, with the promise that they would welcome Black ballplayers, the integrated Arkansas Travelers were born — this just six years after Arkansas' governor, Orval Faubus, sent in the state national guard to block nine African American students from entering Little Rock's Central High School.

Dick Allen was the man sent to integrate Little Rock baseball.

And on Opening Day, Faubus threw out the first pitch while, outside the stadium, a white supremacist group picketed while holding up signs that read "Conspiracy at Little Rock to Negro-ize Travelers Baseball Team."

Allen spoke openly about how the treatment he received in Little Rock scarred him for the rest of his life. He talked about the racist notes left on his car window, the vicious things people would shout at him, the fear he felt about being seen around town. Some have pointed out the inconsistencies in his memory (Allen is pretty famous for offering different accounts of different things) and others who were there have said he overstated things.

But, as Allen rightly said, what would others really know about such things?

When he arrived in Philadelphia late that year, he talked about being overjoyed to just be back above the Mason-Dixon line. He announced his intention of becoming a major-league star.

He was surprised to find that people were calling him "Richie Allen" for the first time in his life.

In 1964, Allen had one of the greatest rookie seasons in baseball history. He hit .318/.382/.557 and led the league in runs (125), triples (13) and total bases (352). For most of the year —

almost all of it, in fact — he seemed to be leading the Phillies to their first pennant since 1950. The city was electrified by the team and poured into Connie Mack Stadium in record numbers.

And, even then, many booed the hell out of Dick Allen.

Why? Well, it was Philadelphia, where booing is lifeblood, but there was something else happening, something more personal. Allen was out of position. In order to get him into the lineup, the Phillies put him at third base, and he made errors. Lots of errors. By a more modern reading of defense, Allen probably held his own at the position — he had good range and actually finished third in the league in assists — but he made an astounding 41 errors, and errors were the only defensive stat anybody knew about in 1964. The boos were like background music.

Was it just his defense that sparked the outrage? No. In late August, one of the first race riots of the Civil Rights era broke out in North Philadelphia in the streets around Connie Mack Stadium. Allen, of course, had nothing at all to do with this — the riots were set off by a clash between police and an African American driver who had been pulled over for speeding — but when the Phillies returned to town, the boos for Allen noticeably intensified.

Allen himself would not hide his boisterous personality. Sports Illustrated quoted him saying that he didn't care if he won the Rookie of the Year. "Let them put up \$1,000," Allen said, "and it would be worthwhile." That threw a little more wood on the fire.

"Boo Birds of Unhappiness Find Nest In Allen's Glove," was the headline of an Inquirer story. Race was not mentioned in it.

"I'm confused," his manager, Gene Mauch, told reporters about the booing. "I just don't understand it. I guess when people have exceptional talent, they are expected to be exceptional every minute of the day. And the perfect player hasn't been born yet."

"I don't pay any attention," Allen said. "They pay to get into the park. They can do what they want."

But everybody understood that this was something new, something just a little bit different from anything that had happened in the past. A vocal part of the city was outwardly hostile toward a rookie having one of the greatest seasons in the team's history and leading his team on its first run of glory in nearly a generation. And, again, the local newspaper columnists were mostly silent.

Opposing players and a few fans writing letters to the editor were the ones who seemed to get the absurdity and madness of it all.

"This is my town," Houston Colts outfielder and Philly native Al Spangler said, "but the fans are bush league. How can they boo a guy who may be the most valuable player in the league?"

"The kid is in his first year in the majors, and you know how it will affect him," Colts pitcher Hal Woodeshick added.

"There are many in our fair city who pose as baseball fans," a fan named William J. Kafin wrote to the Inquirer. "They are imposters. They boo Richie Allen. This is comparable to the French booing Joan of Arc."

Then, in the final two weeks of the 1964 season, the Phillies famously blew the pennant. For that, there were Philly boos for everyone.

One year later, Allen had his famous fight with teammate Frank Thomas. The details leading up to the fight are vague, but the general order of events are clear.

1. Thomas made a racist remark toward Allen.
2. Allen followed by punching Thomas.
3. Thomas responded by hitting Allen with a bat.

The rest has been the stuff of arguments for a half-century. Immediately after the fight, the Phillies released Thomas and then forbade Allen from talking about any of it in the press. This combination gave Thomas an open microphone to share his side of the story, which he did with relish. Philadelphia largely accepted Thomas' viewpoint and blamed Allen for the whole thing.

Allen was hitting .341/.426/.570 and seemed like an MVP candidate when the fight happened. He hit .271/.332/.432 the rest of the way, and his relationship with the team, the city and baseball was forever shattered.

Bill James tries, in most cases, to stay out of Hall of Fame debates, because he knows that his words can have an outsized effect. He's not wrong. There are those who believe that Bill has singlehandedly kept Dick Allen out of the Hall of Fame.

That isn't true, not in the least. Allen had been passed over by the Baseball Writers' Association of America again and again long before James wrote his assessment of Allen in his book, "The Politics of Glory."

"Dick Allen was at war with the world. It is painful to be at war with the world, and I feel for him. It's not his fault entirely ... but that's not the issue. Allen was a jerk; that's not the issue either. There are lots of jerks in the Hall of Fame, white and black. There are irresponsible people in the Hall of Fame, and there are alcoholics in the Hall of Fame. That's not the issue."

"He did more to keep his teams from winning than anybody who ever played major league baseball. And if that's a Hall of Famer, I'm a lug nut."

When Bill wrote those words, in fact, they were hardly contentious or disputed. People had been writing stuff like it about Allen for 30 years. But because he's Bill James — and because he tends to cut through BS — his words have survived and are now at the heart of the Hall of Fame debate surrounding Allen.

Bill doubled down in "The New Bill James Historical Abstract," listing Allen as one of the four biggest horse's asses to ever play baseball (two are in the Hall of Fame: Ty Cobb and Rogers Hornsby) and calling him the second most controversial player in baseball history behind Hornsby.

It's harsh stuff, especially in the immediate aftermath of me telling you all of those rotten things that Allen had to endure as a young man, but again ... Bill was hardly the first or the harshest. Allen was, as we say, controversial. There are so many stories — about him missing games, showing up to the park drunk and high, caring only about money — and it's hard to know which ones are true, which ones are exaggerated and which ones are just made up.

But some of them are definitely true.

Let me tell you the bizarre story of how his career ended, and maybe that can help make some sense of the Dick Allen experience.

In 1977, Allen was 35 years old and clearly near the end. He had played for the Cardinals, Dodgers, White Sox and (yes) the Phillies again since leaving Philadelphia the first time after the 1969 season. He was fantastic in Chicago, winning the MVP award in 1972 (the year he appeared on the cover of Sports Illustrated juggling baseballs and smoking a cigarette). His career OPS+ at that moment was 158, the same as [Hank Greenberg](#), ahead of Henry Aaron and Willie Mays and Joltin' [Joe DiMaggio](#).

Even so, baseball was sick of him, and he was sick of baseball. There was a free-agent draft that year. Only one team even put in a bid for Allen.

That was Charlie O. Finley's Oakland Athletics.

Finley was not just controversial. Like Allen, it was his defining feature. "If you stand up and be counted," Finley told reporters, "if you tell it like it is, if you have any red blood in your veins, then you're controversial, I'm proud of the fact that I'm controversial, and I ain't beginning to change."

Finley, at that particular moment, was in the middle of an all-out war with Bowie Kuhn. At different times that year, Finley called Kuhn "the village idiot," "the nation's idiot" and "an idiot with a God complex." Finley focused all of his energy, 24 hours a day, on sticking it to Kuhn, and he figured that signing Dick Allen would annoy the heck out of the commissioner. He was right.

The Finley-Allen negotiations were unsurprisingly bizarre. Finley announced that he had a handshake agreement with Allen before the two had even talked. Then Allen didn't respond because nobody could find him. Days passed, and nothing happened, and then a seemingly outraged Finley pulled out of the deal he had made up in the first place.

"There's an old song," he told reporters, "'Sitting All Alone by the Telephone, Waitin' for it to Ring.' Well, I'm sure as hell not waiting any longer. I couldn't care less where he is."

As it turns out, Allen was on his horse farm. While Finley fiddled, White Sox owner Bill Veeck (controversial, himself) tried to sneak in. He sent baseball icon Larry Doby to talk Allen into returning for a one-year, \$200,000 deal.

"He just stared at me amusingly," Doby remembered. "He then told me, 'I don't move from this farm for less than a million and a half dollars and only a three-year deal.'"

Obviously, the White Sox were unwilling to do that, so it appeared finally that Dick Allen was done.

Nine days later, Allen showed up unannounced at Oakland's spring training facility in Mesa, Ariz., where he and Finley held a press conference to announce a one-year deal with the Athletics. Finley couldn't have been prouder.

"He's kind of like me," Allen said of Finley, "a great phantom."

The phantoms got along beautifully for a time. Allen came out of spring training hitting hot; for a month he hit .300 and averaged an RBI per game. The A's, who everyone expected to be absolutely terrible, found themselves in first place. Finley couldn't stop babbling about how much he loved Dick Allen.

Sure, there were a few quirks along the way. There was the time, for instance, when Oakland manager Jack McKeon wrote in Allen as the designated hitter for the second game of a doubleheader against the Twins. That, it turns out, was a non-starter: Allen was never going to be a designated hitter again. In 1973, in one game, he started as a DH. He went 3-for-4 with a home run, which seems good.

Allen hated it so much he promised that he would never do it again.

"I can't take it," he said of the position. "You hit, it's over, sit down. You get stiff, you run in the tunnel to get loose. You smoke cigarette after cigarette, drink 19 cups of coffee. Get your heart beating again, hit again, sit back down ... no. Not for me."

So after McKeon wrote him into the lineup as a DH, Allen corrected him: "No way, I'm not a DH, I play first or I don't play." McKeon came back with his patented "*Hey, I'm the manager around here*" spiel.

Allen countered by saying that he had it in his contract with Finley that he would never be forced to DH. McKeon checked this out (it did check out) and, defeated, pinch-hit Jerry Tabb in the very first inning and gave Allen the game off. As long as Allen was hitting, he could do pretty much whatever he wanted.

But then, Allen stopped hitting. He hit .195 in May with one homer, and June was going even worse. McKeon sensed an opportunity to assert himself, and he began pulling Allen from games in the late innings.

When Allen complained to the press, everyone rushed to Finley to see which side he would land on. Charlie O. boldly took McKeon's side. "You know, if I didn't like the way he was running the club, I'd fire him," he said. McKeon was pleased to see his owner back him.

Less than two weeks later, Finley fired McKeon.

"I asked him what I had done wrong," a shell-shocked McKeon said. "And he didn't say anything."

Allen made his last controversial move just a few days later. He left the dugout and went to take a shower in the sixth inning of the A's-White Sox game. This time it wasn't the manager who caught him. It was Finley himself. And he was incensed. He suspended Allen without pay.

"I don't care if he ever shows up again," Finley ranted. "I was trying to show the world I could work with him, but I found out I was like the rest of the suckers. If he doesn't like it, he can take a hike."

Allen took a hike. He never showed up again after that, even leaving his old clothes just hanging in his locker. Finley tried to get him to come back to no avail. Finley tried to trade him to the Cubs, who made a big public showing of saying they had no interest. Not long after, Allen sent a polite letter to the A's saying he was retiring from baseball for the year but might go play in Japan in 1978.

But he didn't go to Japan. He didn't go anywhere. He just disappeared. In his last big-league at-bat, Dick Allen pinch-hit for Tony Armas with his team down 4-1. He struck out against a pitcher named Francisco Barrios. And, like that, one of the most feared hitters and controversial men to ever play baseball was gone, leaving behind 351 homers, a .534 slugging percentage and a thousand arguments about what any of it meant.

Many people have come along to counter what Bill James wrote about Dick Allen in the mid-1990s. One of those people is Craig Wright. He went out and interviewed dozens of Allen's former teammates and managers and found that, almost without exception, they loved and/or respected Allen.

"A good man," Gene Mauch said.

“A team player,” Chuck Tanner said.

“I admired him,” Danny Ozark said.

Others have uncovered stories of Allen’s kindness or the way he guided young players or the passion he showed between the foul lines.

“Everybody liked Dick Allen,” Ron Santo said.

“He would come to the ballpark every day and give it his all,” his old Philadelphia teammate John Herrnstein said.

In time, Bill James has unhappily become a part of the story, a place he isn’t comfortable being, but he wrote what he believed to be not only true but obvious. In any case, you rarely see a Dick Allen story these days that does not refer (either angrily or enthusiastically) to Bill’s “did more to keep his teams from winning” scouting report.

I see Bill’s point, but I also don’t see how Allen prevented his teams from winning. He was not a member of many talented teams; there are no “Oh, they would have won the pennant if not for Allen’s negativity” teams that I can find. I have no doubt that his antics were disruptive, but his bat was a pretty good equalizer, and at every point of his controversial career it was noted that he was very well-liked by teammates. Looking back, Allen’s teams sure seem to win and lose about what you would expect.

But it’s hard to know about any of that.

Really, it’s hard to know anything at all about Allen. Every now and again, something would leak out about him (usually against his will), something that didn’t fit into the ringing narrative of selfishness and anger and aloofness and alcoholism. And it would just sit there.

In 1977, for instance, a Phillies scout named John Ogden suffered a massive stroke. Allen was the man by his bedside. Ogden, a journeyman pitcher just after Deadball and a longtime baseball man, had signed Allen and had been his confidant, his conscience and his father figure ever since. “He is my best friend,” Allen had said of Ogden in the mid-1960s, and so it was to the very end.

There would be other stories about Allen befriending a child or about his love of horses or something else, something that just didn’t fit, something sweet. Allen even forgave Frank Thomas, and the two developed something of a friendship in their later years, exchanging Christmas cards.

He disliked much of the press but he was eminently quotable — sort of Yogi-like even.

On Astroturf: “If a horse can’t eat it, I don’t want to play on it.”

On getting old: “Your body is like a bar of soap; the more you use it, the more it wears down.”

On his versatility: “I can play anywhere, except Philadelphia.”

On contract disputes: “They would say, ‘Look at what baseball has done for you.’ And I’d say, ‘Yeah, it’s made a terrible guy of me. People who don’t even know me see me on the street and say they don’t like me.’”

On getting into the Hall of Fame: “They had to damn near hold court to decide whether Satchel Paige got in — I’m not too interested in that Hall of Fame.”

Because he was Dick Allen, nobody quite knew what to do with any of that.

Now, at last, let’s talk about the name.

His name was Richard Anthony Allen, and throughout his childhood, he went by several versions — Dick, mostly, but also Rich and nicknames like “Sleepy.” In the minor leagues, he was generally known as Dick Allen.

When he got to Philadelphia, he was suddenly Richie Allen.

He made it clear, right from the start, that he did not want to be Richie Allen. In his very first interview, he complained repeatedly about the name. “I don’t know how the Richie thing started,” he told one reporter. “My name is Richard and they called me Dick in the minors.”

“I am not Richie,” he told another. “I am not 10 years old. I am a 22-year-old man, and Richie is not a man’s name.”

“I don’t like being called Richie,” he told another. “I’d like to be called Dick.”

“People who call me ‘Richie’ are people who don’t want to see me as anything but a baseball player,” he told another. “They don’t want to see me as a complex man, to take me seriously.”

These quotes and many more appeared in stories all over the country ... but even in those stories, the reporters insisted on calling him Richie Allen. Looking back, that’s kind of shocking. Why wouldn’t they just call the man what he wanted to be called? In an Associated Press story that was published nationwide, the author conceded the Richie Allen name came about because “somewhere along the line, the Phillies goofed.”

That story, too, referred to him as Richie Allen.

Some say he was called Richie to harken back to Phillies star Richie Ashburn. That doesn’t ring true.

Others say the Phillies called him Richie to make him seem less threatening. That does ring true.

But the larger point is, there was nothing Dick Allen could do about it. He had been named. He was Richie Allen on his baseball cards. He was referred to as Richie Allen exclusively in the Philly newspapers. Players called him Richie. Announcers called him Richie. The fans and the booers alike called him Richie.

It wasn't until after he left Philadelphia that he finally got the world to stop calling him Richie ... and even then it wasn't easy. The Topps Baseball Card Company would only meet him halfway at first; they called him Rich for a couple of years. Columnists constantly mocked his desire to be called Dick Allen and would call him "Richie (Call me Dick) Allen" or "Richie-um-Dick Allen."

This essay began with Shakespeare's question: What's in a name?

I think of Roberto Clemente, a proud Puerto Rican who for years saw his name in print as "Bob Clemente," until he demanded that they call him by his real name.

I think of [Henry Aaron](#), from Mobile Ala., quiet, unassuming but driven to succeed, walking through crowds of people shouting "Hank!" and not even hearing them because "Hank" was not his name.

I think of Dick Allen, booed from the start, determined to be his own man, troubled in his own ways, forced to hear himself called Richie because someone on the Phillies goofed and nobody cared enough to correct the error. Did it burn him? Did he feel a small bubble of anger when they called him Richie?

Like with everything else, the answer is unclear. In 1973, Dick Allen had a bracelet made that said "RICHIE." By this time, he had imposed his will and made people call him Dick Allen. Still, he wore the Richie bracelet.

What did that bracelet represent to him?

"Dick Allen is not a common species," his manager Chuck Tanner once said. "He has a very fragile temperament like most artists or geniuses."

I like that. Dick Allen was not a common species; he was a turbulent artist who cracked baseballs and drank too much and fought for the last penny and never gave in and was indeed at war with the world. He would have told you, the world started it.

He is gone now. The image of him that lingers, the one that comes closest to saying it all, is that of a game in 1969, when booing Richie Allen was religion in Philadelphia, and he quietly scratched out that one word in the infield dirt:

"NO."

Louis Rodman (Lou) Whitaker

Detroit, 1977-1995

Sweet Lou was the very center of the powerful Detroit Tigers in the 1980s. He was a rare second baseman who hit with power, ran the bases aggressively and won Gold Gloves defensively. Teamed with Alan Trammell for 16 seasons, making them the most durable and familiar double-play combination in baseball history.

Alan Trammell and Lou Whitaker each cracked singles in their first Major League at-bats, which came on the same day — Sept. 9, 1977. Whitaker came up first between them — he was second in the lineup that day. He singled off Boston's Reggie Cleveland in the first inning. He promptly stole his first base.

Trammell didn't come up until the third inning — he was ninth in the lineup — and he also singled. He scored his first run two batters later when Whitaker doubled. Whitaker scored his first run two batters after that when Steve Kemp singled him in.

Yes, they were there for each other right at the start.

It wasn't until the next day, however, that Whitaker and Trammell turned the first of the 1,300 or so double plays they pulled off together, a Major League record. Jason Thompson was their first baseman the first time — through the years their first basemen would include Richie Hebner, Enos Cabell, Dave Bergman, Darrell Evans, Ray Knight and Cecil Fielder among others. But Thompson was their first at first, and I always felt they deserve their own poem along the lines of "Tinkers to Evers to Chance."

A runner on first is a-pacin'

He is in need of erasin'

It's time for two

Alan to Lou

Trammel to Whitaker to Jason

Now that Trammell is in the Hall of Fame, it seems plainly ridiculous that Whitaker is not. It was ridiculous before Tram was elected — beyond ridiculous that he received just 15 votes his one year on the ballot even though he had the highest WAR of any position player on the ballot, including Dave Winfield and Kirby Puckett, who were elected first ballot.

And no, I'm not saying that Whitaker actually *was* the best player on that ballot — I have him at least third behind Winfield and Gary Carter and in a huddle with other great players like Puckett, [Dale Murphy](#), Keith Hernandez, Don Mattingly and Jim Rice.

But the point is that he was so much better than the measly 2.9 percent of the vote he received. I mean, whether or not you buy into WAR, there is a *reason* he has 75.1 career bWAR and 351 Win Shares, both clear-cut Hall of Fame levels. He did everything. He only hit .276, but he walked so much that his .363 on-base percentage was way above average. He hit with power for his time — 420 doubles and 244 homers — he was a solid base runner, scored a lot of runs, and won three Gold Gloves even though he played in the time of defensive genius Frank White. And he was good every year — from 1978 to 1993, he only had one season with less than 3.5 WAR. The guy was a metronome out there.

There are, of course, reasons that he was underappreciated — the big one being that he probably only had one easily recognizable great season. That was 1983 when he hit .320 with 40 doubles, 17 stolen bases, he scored 93 runs, drove in 72 and won the Gold Glove. He finished eighth in the MVP balloting that year — the only time he ever got a single MVP vote.

All of his other seasons were quieter. He was very good in 1989 when he hit 28 homers and played superb defense, but he hit just .251 that year so few noticed. He was terrific in 1991 when he hit .279/.391/.489 with 23 homers, 94 runs scored and, again, played superior defense. But he didn't even make the All-Star team. He was basically just as good in 1992, but nobody noticed because the Tigers had begun their shocking decline by then.

And he was solidly excellent in 1984 and 1987 and played a big role in the Tigers winning American League East championships in both seasons — but his double-play partner Trammell was better in those seasons and drew most of the attention. When you hear people say, "I never thought of Lou Whitaker as a Hall of Famer," this is at the heart of what they're saying. Whitaker was never the best player in the American League and he was only on occasion among the Top 10.

But he was *always* really good, always played at an All-Star level, and when you play 15 years at an All-Star level you are a Hall of Famer in my view. Again using Baseball-Reference WAR because it's the easiest tool to filter, here are the players with 15 or more seasons with 3.5 WAR.

20 seasons: Barry Bonds

19 seasons: Henry Aaron, Tris Speaker, Ty Cobb

18 seasons: Willie Mays

17 seasons: Stan Musial, Mel Ott, Eddie Collins

16 seasons: Alex Rodriguez, Frank Robinson, Babe Ruth, Honus Wagner

15 seasons: Rickey Henderson, Ted Williams, Rogers Hornsby, Nap Lajoie, Lou Whitaker.

Whitaker was not as good as any of the other players on this list. But he was damn good.

There's something else about Whitaker's Hall of Fame snub in 2001 that I only just noticed: He came on the ballot with two of his most famous Tigers teammates, Lance Parrish and Kirk Gibson. Those Tigers teams in the 1980s were really good. They won 90 or more games in 1983,

'84 and '87. The '84 team was all-time great — they went wire to wire and obliterated the Royals and Padres in the playoffs and World Series — and they were always in contention.

But there was always this sense that the sum was greater than its parts. They had so many good players of roughly equal value — Jack Morris, Trammell, Whitaker, Gibson, Parrish, Chet Lemon, Darrell Evans, Dan Petry, etc. — that it was hard for a player to separate. The most decorated Tigers player of the time was actually a relief pitcher, Willie Hernandez: He was the only Tigers player to win a Cy Young Award or an MVP.

And I suspect that has something to do with Whitaker's Hall of Fame difficulties, too. It took forever for Morris and Trammell to get into the Hall of Fame, and they both had a bigger reputation than Whitaker (even if Whitaker was every bit as good, if not better). I imagine people looked at the 2001 ballot, saw Whitaker, Gibson and Parrish, and thought all of them to be about the same. That's certainly what the vote total suggests:

Whitaker: 15 votes

Gibson: 13 votes

Parrish: 9 votes

They were not the same. Gibson was a wonderful outfielder who won an MVP and had several nice seasons. Parrish was a wonderful catcher who won three Gold Gloves and hit with power. You could make Hall of Fame arguments for them, sure.

But Whitaker was an all-time player who did everything well over a long and remarkable career. It does seem that people have figured this out — last year, Whitaker finally made it on the Veterans' ballot and though he fell well short of election, he did get six votes. I have to believe that, in time, he will get in and join Trammell in Cooperstown. The Hall of Fame should put their plaques next to each other.

William Roger Clemens

Boston—Toronto—New York Yankees—Houston, 1984-2007

A seven-time Cy Young Award winner, the Rocket dominated baseball for more than two decades with his overpowering fastball, death-defying splitter and raw intensity. Hall of Fame election was delayed because of his much-disputed connection to performance-enhancing drugs.

Let's get down to a question: Why, if we believe that a substantial number of players were using PEDs, do we choose to focus all of our energy and all of our rage on [Roger Clemens](#), [Barry Bonds](#), Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa and a few others?

Well, first: Do we believe that a substantial number of players were using PEDs during that era before testing, before oversight, back when there really wasn't an obvious public price to pay for taking steroids and all that comes with it?

That's a trickier question than might first appear because: What constitutes a performance-enhancing drug? I imagine if you are specifically talking about illegal steroids, that's one question. If you include amphetamines and stimulants, it's another. If you include, as Bill James suggests, legal over-the-counter substances that were not banned at the time but are banned now like Andro, it's yet another.*

I suspect if you include *everything* the answer is probably close to 100 percent of players.

**It is fascinating to watch as people try to simplify what happened in the 1990s. Take Andro. That was an over-the-counter "supplement" you could find at any GNC and was absolutely permitted for use by MLB (even as it was banned by the International Olympic Committee and other ruling bodies). There are numerous arguments about the benefits and risks of Andro, but essentially they mirror those of steroids. And yet, how are we supposed to react to players who used Andro at a time when it was not banned?*

The point is that the whole thing is more complicated and messy than we like to think in retrospect.

But even if we are only talking about illegal drugs — particularly steroids — the consensus seems to be that at least a sizable minority of players were using, and perhaps more. Obviously, we don't know, we'll never know, but I have seen numerous polls that suggest this is what people believe. I even did my own little Twitter poll to see what you think:

So almost everybody guesses it was more than 10 percent, more than three-quarters of people believe it was more than 25 percent, and a substantial number of people believe it was more than half. This is just one snapshot — and not a scientific one — but it seems to match up with other snapshots that show most believe steroid use was rampant and widespread in the game.

And yet, the focus of the anger and disgust has been on Clemens and Bonds along with a few others. Why? Well, I can think of a lot of reasons, but three specifically come to mind.

First, of course, they were the most prominent players of the era. In the record books, there has never been a pitcher quite like Roger Clemens. The man led the league in FIP nine times. That's crazy. FIP — Fielding Independent Pitching — is a stat based entirely on three things:

1. How many batters a pitcher strikes out
2. How many batters a pitcher walks
3. How many home runs a pitcher allows

Now, as you know, there is a school of thought that these are the only three things a starting pitcher has any real control over. That means Clemens, year after year after year after year, controlled games better than anybody else. From 1986 to 2005 — 20 seasons — Clemens was top-10 in FIP 17 times. That's absurd.

With Clemens and Bonds and McGwire and Sosa and Alex Rodriguez in the headlines every single day, yes, certainly, people are going to direct attention on them.

Second, all those players have tangible connections to steroids and other PEDs. One of the most frustrating parts of the PED era is how little we truly know. We can and do guess at how many players were using, but we don't know because the players for the most part observed the oath of omerta. They denied using except when caught red-handed, they refused to turn in teammates, they stayed silent and still do. There were no test results.

So, we are left to rely on the inconsistent memories of José Canseco, the investigation into BALCO, the flawed and incomplete Mitchell Report, a few halfhearted and incomplete admissions. That could be why the anger might be disproportionate toward the few open and shut cases there are, like with McGwire, who admitted using, or with Bonds, who has a mountain of evidence pointed against him.

To this day, as far as I know, Roger Clemens denies ever using PEDs. He has sworn under oath before Congress that he never used. And though he was charged with perjury, making false statements and obstruction of Congress, he was found not guilty on all six counts brought against him.

Still, there are enough credible accusations that there's a nearly unanimous consensus that Clemens did use steroids. And there are unanswered questions [about his relationship](#) with the late Mindy McCready. And that's why he has not been elected to the Hall of Fame, and will not be elected for the foreseeable future.

But it's the third reason that interests me most. Let's say you have two people who cheat on a chemistry exam. They have access to the same cheat sheet. One cheats their way to an 81 and passes the class. The other cheats their way to a 100 and gets a scholarship to Harvard. Now let's say neither one gets caught. Which one makes you angrier?

Yes, most people would tell you there are multiple players in the Hall of Fame who used steroids. Everybody knows there are managers and executives in the Hall of Fame who profited off players who used steroids.

But maybe we continue to draw the line in front of Clemens and Bonds and a handful of others because they were too obvious about it, they flaunted their synthetic strength, they unapologetically broke cherished records, they mocked the game by playing it unnaturally well. Were they cheating *more* than others? I guess you could argue that part. But, they seemed greedier about it.

There is, I would add, a fundamental difference between the aging Clemens and the aging Bonds, one that is easy to miss as we so often put them together. On the surface, you can see the comparisons:

Bonds from age 36-42: Set the home run record, won four MVP awards, won two batting titles, led the league OPS four times, hit 45 or more homers five times.

Clemens from age 36-42: Went 108-48, won two Cy Young Awards, led the league in ERA and FIP, made four All-Star games.

But here's the thing: Bonds reached heights he had never reached before as a player. The younger Bonds might have been about as good a player because of what he could do as a fielder and on the bases. But the younger Bonds didn't hit anything like the older Bonds. He never approached 73 home runs or a .370 batting average or 120 intentional walks.

Clemens is different. As good as he was as an older pitcher — a point probably overblown by him winning two Cy Youngs he really didn't deserve — he was still not as good as he had been as a younger pitcher. Let's use Bill James' Win Shares to punctuate the point:

Clemens from age 23-27: 125 Win Shares

Clemens from age 28-32: 89

Clemens from age 33-37: 103

Clemens from age 38-43: 99

So, yes, Clemens managed to maintain his excellence for much longer than we would expect but unlike Bonds, he did not become this unrecognizable force of nature.

Not to give anything away, as we'll probably revisit all of this in the next few days ... but I think it's probably pointless to argue whether or not Clemens should be in the Hall of Fame because we're not really arguing about Clemens. We're arguing about the Hall of Fame. Just about everybody I know thinks Clemens was a Hall of Fame baseball player. Just about everybody I know thinks Clemens disgraced himself and baseball by surely using PEDs and then dragging the game through the mud in his appearance before Congress.

So the question is: Do you think he should be in the Hall of Fame because he was an all-time great player or do you think he should not be in the Hall of Fame because he did more harm than good? That isn't about Clemens, really. It's about what we want the Hall of Fame to be.

Scott Bruce Rolen

Philadelphia—St. Louis—Toronto—Cincinnati, 1996-2012

Brilliant defensive third baseman who excelled in all facets of the game over a 17-year career. The 1997 Rookie of the Year and eight-time Gold Glove winner drove in 100 RBIs four times and cracked more than 500 doubles and 300 home runs. Mr. Baseball in Indiana as a high-schooler and runner up for the state's legendary Mr. Basketball. "He just plays the game exactly how it should be played," his teammate Jonny Gomes said.

OK, we're going to talk about WAR again ... so you can tune out if you like. We all know that there are problems with WAR or, more to the point, problems with the ways that many people try to use WAR. I fall into these traps all the time.

But let me say this: There are 51 position players in modern baseball history who have 70 Wins Above Replacement both the way that Baseball-Reference figures it and the way FanGraphs figures it. Of those 51, every single eligible player is in the Hall of Fame except:

- Barry Bonds. For obvious reasons.
- Pete Rose. For obvious reasons.
- Rafael Palmeiro. For obvious reasons.
- Scott Rolen.

I am not using WAR here as an argument ender but, instead, as an argument starter. Does WAR overrate Rolen? It's certainly possible. Let's look and see how he got to 70 Baseball-Reference WAR — for his career, Rolen was worth 456 runs above the average player (which translates to 725 runs above a replacement player or 70 WAR).

Baseball-Reference figures that Rolen was worth 234 runs above average for his hitting. That seems about right. For his career, Rolen hit .281/.364/.490 with 517 doubles and 316 home runs. He hit for pretty good averages, walked more than his share, and crushed a lot of line drives off or over the wall.

He was worth about eight runs above average for his baserunning and ability to avoid hitting into double plays.

Give him 39 runs for playing third base exclusively. Third base is a difficult and important defensive position — not quite as difficult and important as shortstop, but still extremely valuable.

And then Baseball-Reference gives him another 175 runs for being an extraordinary defensive third baseman. You can quibble with this, I suppose. Everyone knows that Rolen was a great defender, but you might feel like 175 runs is too much. But with simple math and using Rolen's range, we can calculate that he made 369 more plays than the average third baseman did over his career. That's a lot of outs.

In any case, add it all up this way and you see a clear-cut Hall of Fame career.

But do we want to determine the Hall of Fame based solely on WAR or a similar metric? No, we don't. The Hall of Fame, you would hope, is about more than the mere collection of baseball value. It is also about memories inspired, barriers broken, seasons impacted, stories told. Scott Rolen's career wasn't a simple tale. He was a great high school basketball player, runner up for the Mr. Indiana award, and he was offered a scholarship to play for Hugh Durham at Georgia.

Instead, he signed with Philadelphia and he came up to the Phillies as a 21-year-old with the unspoken promise of filling the third-base void left behind when Mike Schmidt retired a few years earlier. Rolen delivered that: He put up a Schmidt-like MVP type season in just his second full year, 1998, when he hit .290/.391/.532 with 45 doubles, 31 homers, 110 RBIs and had jaw-dropping defense at third base. Ted Williams, among many others, considered him to be the game's next big star.

But then Rolen started having back problems. He put up very good seasons in 1999 and 2000 but they didn't look nearly as good because he missed a bunch of games. It's amazing how nagging injuries that take you out of 30 or 40 games can make a season look so much worse. For instance, in 2000, Rolen hit .298/.370/.551, which is essentially the same OPS as he had in his great 1998 season. But because he only played in 128 games, he had 26 doubles instead of 31, 89 RBIs instead of 110, 88 runs scored instead of 120.

Then fiery Philly legend Larry Bowa took over for the 2001 season and those two clashed like crazy, with Bowa once saying after a disappointing series, "He's killing us." Another fiery Philly legend, Dallas Green, basically said on the radio that Rolen was too soft to be a great player. Rolen felt entirely ambushed. He put up another terrific season — 39 doubles, 25 homers, 107 RBIs, 96 runs, his third Gold Glove — but the Phillies fell short of Atlanta in the division and Rolen knew that he was done in Philadelphia.

This led to all sorts of ugliness — and Rolen being labeled by some as a malcontent. It seemed to me at the time a thoroughly unfair charge and, in retrospect, seems even more unfair. Rolen was, by every account I've come across, the consummate professional. In the Hall of Fame plaque, I use part of a Jonny Gomes quote — it's worth seeing the quote in full.

"He doesn't argue with the umpires, he runs every single ball out, he makes great plays, he makes routine plays, he gets the runner in when he needs to get him in, he gets the runner over when he needs to get him over. He just plays the game exactly how it should be played."

I've heard that repeated over and over by players and executives alike; Rolen should always have been viewed as a credit to the game. But that rough 2001 season in Philadelphia definitely led some to question him ... and I can't help but wonder if that, in some small way, has affected the way Hall of Fame voters look at him, too.

After Rolen was traded to the Cardinals in 2002, he helped make St. Louis a dominant team. From 2003-2006, the Cardinals made the playoffs three times, won two pennants and took the 2006 World Series. Rolen made the All-Star team all four of those years, won the Gold Glove the three years he was healthy, and he put up an MVP type season 2004 season — .314/.409/.598, 109 runs, 124 RBIs plus he was probably the best defender at any position in baseball.

At that point, he was 32 and his body was worn down, but he still put up some good years for the Cardinals and Blue Jays and Reds. He retired at 37, and his Hall of Fame case seems to be building momentum. For some reason, he finds himself behind Omar Vizquel in the minds of many Hall of Fame voters, which doesn't make a lot of sense since he was three or four times the hitter Vizquel was while being his equal as a defensive player.

But sometimes it takes time for the fog to clear and for people to see what should have been obvious all along: Scott Rolen was a Hall of Fame baseball player.

Barry Lamar Bonds

Pittsburgh—San Francisco, 1986-2007

Retired as the all-time leader in home runs (762) and walks (2,558) in addition to holding the single-season record for most home runs (73). Won seven MVP awards, eight Gold Gloves and is the only player in baseball history with more than 500 home runs and 500 stolen bases. All his extraordinary accomplishments are tainted by his use of performance-enhancing drugs.

In 2001, [Barry Bonds](#) hit .328/.515/.863 with 73 home runs. There had never, in the history of baseball, been a season like that. It isn't even the 73 home runs that impress most, it's that slugging percentage, which is the all-time record by more than 15 points. [Babe Ruth](#) in 1920, when he outthomered every other *team* in the American League, had what seemed the unbreakable record with a .847 slugging percentage. Bonds in 2001 shattered it.

In 2002, Barry Bonds hit .370/.582/.799. There has never, in the history of baseball, been a season like that. Bonds' OPS+ that year was 268, even higher than it had been in 2001 and, yes, it remains the highest in baseball history. Managers had started to give up on even trying to get Bonds out; he set the major-league record with 68 intentional walks. He broke [Ted Williams'](#) record for highest on-base percentage.

In 2004, Barry Bonds hit .362/.609/.812. There has never, in the history of baseball, been a season like that. At this point, managers had *completely* given up on trying to get Bonds out. They intentionally walked him an insane 120 times — there are scores of Hall of Fame batters who never *unintentionally* walked 120 times in a season. He became the first player in baseball

history to get on base more than 60 percent of the time and I can't imagine there will be a player in the foreseeable future who will do it again. When pitchers actually pitched to him, he cracked an extra-base hit once every 4.7 at-bats.

The question here is when you see these seasons, these utterly mind-twisting seasons, what do you see? Do you see steroids? Do you see an image of Bonds locked in like no other player has ever been locked in? Do you see a combination of both?

Or do you see nothing at all?

It is the last of these options — seeing nothing at all — that fascinates me. I believe that many baseball fans simply look at those seasons the way people in the desert look at a mirage. Yes, you see it, but look closer: Those seasons do not exist. The records he broke are not broken. The home runs are phantoms.

And, in this way, Bonds' punishment for cheating the game is not a tangible sentence — a suspension, a fine, community service of some kind — but instead to pretend that his legendary seasons never happened, that he simply ceased to exist. This is how we often handle such things: We pretend. We pretend that Lance Armstrong didn't win those Tours de France, that Marion Jones never ran at the Olympics, that Reggie Bush never made a tackler miss while playing football at USC. In this way, we can pretend that [Henry Aaron](#) still holds the all-time home run record and Barry Bonds was not, in actuality, one of the greatest players in baseball history.

I get all of this. The trouble I have is that I don't think avoiding reality is much of an answer.

My best guess is that Bonds is not going to the Hall of Fame anytime soon. I don't believe the Baseball Writers' Association of America will vote him in, and I certainly don't believe the Hall of Fame veterans committees will be eager to honor him. I used to wonder how long the Hall of Fame could maintain its place in baseball royalty without the all-time hit leader ([Pete Rose](#)), the all-time home run leader (Bonds), perhaps the greatest pitcher who ever lived ([Roger Clemens](#)), the most perfect home run machine of them all (Mark McGwire) and one of the most beloved baseball folk heroes in the game's history ([Shoeless Joe Jackson](#)) along with, in the famed words of John Updike, gems of slightly lesser water, such as [Sammy Sosa](#), [Manny Ramírez](#), [Rafael Palmeiro](#), [Kevin Brown](#), [Gary Sheffield](#) and, perhaps soon, [Alex Rodríguez](#).

I don't wonder about this anymore. The Hall of Fame — and baseball fans generally — seem perfectly comfortable enough with the dissonance. Thirty years ago, the only truly great player missing from the Hall of Fame because of his "character" was Shoeless Joe, who took money from gamblers to throw the 1919 World Series. Now, as you can see, the list of such players is vast and rapidly growing and the Hall of Fame means something different from what it used to mean.

Many people (most people?) seem comfortable with that shift.

Here's something I wonder about Bonds: If we had appreciated him more as a younger player, would he have gone all comic supervillain in 1998 and decided to show everyone what a *real* player using PEDs could do? I mean, no, it isn't like Bonds was overlooked as a young player. He won three MVP awards and was voted by the fans to seven consecutive All-Star teams.

But ... think of it this way: Think of how [Mike Trout](#) has been treated. He too has won three MVP awards (while finishing second four other times) but the thing with Trout is that people are constantly calling him one of the greatest — maybe even *the* greatest — players in the history of baseball. He is constantly being compared with [Mays](#) and [Mantle](#). We remind ourselves, perhaps even on a daily basis, to be sure and appreciate just what we are seeing when we see Trout. He is history in motion.

It wasn't quite like that with Bonds.

And yet, the young Bonds was as good as the young Trout.

I'm not saying that cavalierly. From 2012-20 — we'll include the 2020 season even though it was so short — Trout has hit .306/.422/.587 with a 178 OPS+. He has smacked 297 home runs, stolen 197 bases and played good defense in center field. This is all-time stuff, and the fact that he's still only 29 years old makes us dream of what he yet might become.

From 1990-97, while playing in about 50 fewer games, the younger Bonds hit .305/.438/.599 with a 181 OPS+. He smacked 290 home runs, stole 300 bases and won seven Gold Gloves as a left fielder. I'm telling you: The young Bonds was Mike Trout. When people say that we haven't seen a player as good in so many ways as Trout since the heyday of Mantle and Mays and Aaron, we're simply skipping over Bonds.

And, in some ways, it felt like we were skipping over Bonds even in the time. Some of this had to do with Bonds' personality: Trout is so welcoming while Bonds was, you know, the opposite of that. Some of this has to do with Bonds being overshadowed by the electrifying [Ken Griffey Jr.](#), who lit up ballparks with his irrepressible joy.

Some of it, I believe, has to do with Bonds being a left fielder instead of a center fielder. I know this is just a surface thing, but the image is pretty unshakeable: Center field is the spotlight, the main attraction, the show. And left field is where you hide your best hitter. Center field is for all-around greatness; left field is for a brilliant player with some immutable flaw — weak arm, awkward movement, defensive indifference and so on.

Bonds did not have any of these flaws. He began his career as an immensely promising center fielder, but then the Pittsburgh Pirates got Andy Van Slyke and decided to move Bonds to left, where he was not just *good* but one of the best to ever play the position. From that point on, it never made much sense to move Bonds back to center, but there is no doubt in my mind that because he played left field, it was too easy to miss his surpassing greatness.

And most agree that it was people missing his surpassing greatness — his widely reported jealousy of McGwire and Sosa and others getting so much attention during that 1998 season — that led to him bulking up and becoming the greatest hitter who ever lived. None of this changes any of the facts. But I do find it fascinating.

1. SHORTSTOPS

Stark: The greatest era of shortstops ever? We did the math — it's true

I'm not sure exactly when the lightning bolt beamed out of the sky and it finally hit me what we've been watching. But now that I know what I know, I'm not sure how we ever missed it.

That's because we are witnessing something unique, historic and spectacular. When the likes of Francisco Lindor, Fernando Tatis Jr. and their remarkable friends appear before our wondrous eyes, we are witnessing the greatest era of shortstops in the history of baseball. And before Derek Jeter, Ozzie Smith or any heirs of Honus Wagner start contacting their lawyers, here's what they need to know:

I can prove every word of that phrase: *The greatest in the history of baseball.*

But before I present that proof, they should also know I have co-conspirators in this argument.

"Hey, I'm part of the fraternity," Hall of Fame shortstop Alan Trammell said. "So I have experience talking about the position. But I also look at it as a fan of the game, which I still am. And what you just mentioned — the best group in history? I totally concur.

"No doubt," Trammell said. "Absolutely."

No doubt. Absolutely. We could easily rest our case right there, since it's always helpful to roll out compelling testimony from a man who spent two decades and nearly 2,300 big-league games as a shortstop. Ah, but why stop now? You don't even have to take his word or mine, because we have another witness.

"We are absolutely watching a golden era," said Michael Young, a five-time All-Star shortstop in Texas not so long ago. "There's not even any doubt about that.

“The greatest generation of shortstops ever? I don’t even think it’s close,” Young went on.
“Honestly. It’s not even close.”

Not. Even. Close. So ... convinced yet? If not, well, I knew this would be a hard sell. So it’s time to roll out our first piece of evidence — A) because it’s a stunner and B) because it took me 45 minutes of going over 121 seasons, year by year, just to look this up. Here goes:

Exhibit A — the value meter

Thanks to one of the coolest hidden gems on Baseball Reference, the [position comparison tool](#), we can report that in 2020, the position on the field that produced more value than any other — i.e., the most Wins Above Replacement per team — was ...

You guessed it. Shortstop.

HIGHEST AVG. WAR BY POSITION, 2020

Shortstop, 1.3
Third base, 1.0
Center field, 0.9

OK, maybe you’re thinking that was only in a 60-game season, so it’s potentially misleading. Fine. Excellent point. Then what about 2019, the last full season? Take a look.

HIGHEST AVG. WAR BY POSITION, 2019

Shortstop, 3.2
Third base, 3.1
Right field, 2.4

Hmmm, starting to see where this is leading? Let’s hope so. But one more time. What, you wonder, about the season before that? Thanks for asking.

HIGHEST AVG. WAR BY POSITION, 2018

Shortstop, 3.0
Third base, 2.7
Second base, 2.4

So that’s three consecutive seasons in which shortstop has been the most valuable position on the diamond (the pitcher’s mound not included). And that, frankly, is amazing.

It’s amazing for many reasons, but here’s the most brain-cell blowing: Want to guess the last season before 2018 that shortstop was the outright most valuable position in baseball? It might be tough to recall off the top of your head, since ...

It was in 1909!

I bet Honus Wagner and Joe Tinker could tell you all about it — if you just had a time machine that could take you back to when they were both alive, which was 73 years ago. But since I'm guessing your time machine is in the shop this week, just trust us: 1909.

"I don't think too many people would have gotten that," Trammell said, with a laugh, after I'd tried out this question on him. "I was going to say 1987. So I was a little off."

Oh, there were two seasons along the way — 1952 (hello, Phil Rizzuto) and 2007 (remember Jimmy Rollins, MVP?) — when shortstop tied for the most valuable position. But that's it — in more than a century. So there you go.

"It's the most dynamic position in the big leagues right now," Young said. "And I don't know that there's ever been a time when that was the case."

So *has* it ever been the case? Let's examine that question, too.

To try to rank the greatest shortstop generations ever is close to impossible. But let's give it a shot. Why the heck not? To pull that off, we enlisted the help of our friends from STATS Perform, where research genius Jacob Jaffe devoted pretty much an entire day of his life to assisting with this fun project. For which I can only say: Sorry! And also: Thanks!

There's no perfect way to do this. But let's start with ...

Value times three

Since we originally defined this era as 2018-20, we homed in on three-year chunks of time. STATS then began by counting how many different shortstops had at least one season with 5.0-plus Wins Above Replacement over any three-year period.

As we present those results, we acknowledge there are some obvious apple/orange comparison issues here. And there are two more things you should know: 1) STATS computes Wins Above Replacement with a slightly different formula from either Baseball Reference or FanGraphs and 2) all seasons were "normalized" to 162 games. On that note ...

MOST SHORTSTOPS WITH 'ELITE' SEASONS, SINCE 1900

2018-20	15	Trevor Story, Francisco Lindor
1906-08	10	Honus Wagner, Joe Tinker
1909-11	9	Honus Wagner, Joe Tinker
2000-02	9	Alex Rodriguez, Nomar Garciaparra
2007-09	8	Troy Tulowitzki, Hanley Ramirez

STATS then looked at this another way. Here are the most *total* 5.0-plus WAR seasons by shortstops over any three-year period, just as a cross-check to point out that many of those elite seasons weren't merely one-hit wonders:

2018-20	20 Trevor Story, Francisco Lindor, Marcus Semien
1908-10	16 Honus Wagner, Joe Tinker, Bill Dahlen
1903-05	12 Honus Wagner, Bill Dahlen, George Davis
1917-19	12 Rogers Hornsby, Rabbit Maranville, Roger Peckinpaugh
1998-2000	12 Alex Rodriguez, Derek Jeter, Nomar Garciaparra

Important apples/oranges addendum: If you want to argue that those groups between 1903 and 1920 should rank ahead of this one, based on the fact there were only 16 teams back then, you have a valid case. But we should also note the defensive portions of the WAR computations from those days are basically just informed guesses, since the Statcast website apparently was down back then — for a whole century. So as with all this stuff, we're doing the best we can, OK?

But there are other ways to compare these generations, too. So we also looked at ...

The shortstop MVP glory meter

We'll willingly concede that award voting has never been an ideal barometer for gauging greatness through the years. But it certainly tells us *something* about greatness — and especially over these last three seasons.

Did you know that eight different shortstops have finished in their league's top 10 in MVP voting just in the last three seasons? Right, *eight*: Tatis, Lindor, Story, Semien, Tim Anderson, Trea Turner, Corey Seager and Xander Bogaerts. And that doesn't even include Javy Báez, who played more second base than short in 2018, when he was the NL MVP runner-up to Christian Yelich.

Seager and Lindor actually have multiple top-10 finishes in their careers. And over the last five seasons, 18 different shortstops have gotten MVP votes. Which tells us all we need to know about the absurd depth at this position these days. But let's focus on all those recent top-10 finishes, because once again, we've almost never seen anything like this:

- How long has it been since eight different shortstops landed in the top 10 of MVP elections over any three-year period? Oh, only *seven decades*. Last time that happened, according to STATS, was 1948-50. The eight back then: Rizzuto (1950 winner), Lou Boudreau (1948 winner), plus Pee Wee Reese, Granny Hamner, Alvin Dark, Vern Stephens, Eddie Joost and Stan "Happy Rabbit" Rojek.

- And you wouldn't have seen this coming, either. Before those eight shortstops went top 10 on us in just three years, the previous generation only had three top 10s from this position in the *eight seasons* from 2008-15 (Jeter, Hanley Ramírez, Troy Tulowitzki).
- Finally, we shouldn't overlook the enormous impact shortstops made in 2020 alone, when *four* of these guys were top-10 MVP finishers: Tatis (fourth, NL), Turner (seventh, NL), Anderson (seventh, AL) and Seager (ninth, NL). You might have a tough time recalling the last time that happened, too — since it was 65 years ago, when Harvey Kuenn (fourth, AL), Roy McMillan (sixth, NL), Gil McDougald (seventh, AL) and Reese (eighth, NL) all did it in 1956.

So what do those MVP votes tell us? I think it's obvious. Maybe there were years back in the earlier part of the 21st century, when there was enough star power here that you'd find a Jeter/Tulowitzki/Ramírez trifecta in an MVP top 10 in 2009, or an all-shortstop top two (Miguel Tejada/Alex Rodríguez) in 2002. But what makes this generation special is the luster at this position extends way beyond a handful of stars — to the point that it's not crazy to go this far:

Shortstop isn't merely the best position on the field these days. It's also the coolest.

For more than half a century — let's say from Joe DiMaggio to Ken Griffey Jr. — center field was baseball's ultimate glamor position. But in *this* century, I think shortstop has now ascended to that throne. It's shortstop where you find the most magnetic players in this sport, and more of them than anywhere else.

"You look at these shortstops now," said Young, now a special assistant for the Rangers, "and the separator is the depth of these incredible two-way players. And here's the other thing. You look at those great center fielders, and Griffey eventually moved off center field. Almost all those center fielders, for the most part, were asked to move off center field when they got older. ... But none of these shortstops are ticking time bombs to go to third base. None of them.

"And that, to me, is the most impressive part. We all know they can hit. You see that in highlights all the time. But none of these guys are going to move off short."

But wait. We shouldn't just zip past that *they can hit* part, because this is important ...

They can *really* hit

Did you know there was a time, as recently as 1984, when the average team got *five* home runs a year — and a .631 OPS — from its shortstop? So imagine a whole sport full of Yunesky Betancourts and you get the picture. Think it's safe to say times have changed?

"When I was (first) playing," Trammell said, "it was Mark Belanger and Eddie Brinkman and Dal Maxvill and guys like that. They were defensive players. Knew how to play the game. ... But hitting was secondary. (Laughs.) It's not secondary anymore."

True! But luckily for humankind, STATS dug in to let us know how true it really is. Shortstops now account for a greater share of their team's offense than at any time in the live-ball era, which began in 1920. And once again, we're about to prove that, by computing what percentage of the offense in the entire sport came just from shortstops. FYI, all of these figures are based on each player's primary position in that season.

HIGHEST PERCENTAGE OF HOME RUNS FROM SHORTSTOPS*

2020: 10.3%
2018: 10.0%
2019: 9.7%
2017: 8.8%
2007: 8.8%

HIGHEST PERCENTAGE OF RBIS FROM SHORTSTOPS*

1927: 11.3%
2020: 11.3%
2018: 11.0%
1934: 10.8%
2019: 10.6%

(* — Since 1920)

HIGHEST PERCENTAGE OF EXTRA-BASE HITS FROM SHORTSTOPS**

1904: 12.2%
2020: 11.8%
1917: 11.7%
1932: 11.4%
2018: 11.4%

HIGHEST PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL BASES FROM SHORTSTOPS**

2020: 12.3%
1917: 11.6%
1904: 11.6%
1918: 11.5%
2018: 11.5%

HIGHEST PERCENTAGE OF HITS FROM SHORTSTOPS**

2020: 13.0%
2007: 12.3%
1946: 12.2%
2008: 12.1%
1999: 12.0%

(** — Since 1900)

But just to widen the lens on this study, STATS also studied these same categories over three-year periods instead of just one year. And guess what? That span from 2018-20 ranked No. 1 in the live-ball era *in every department*. So no matter where we look, we keep proving the same point. The depth of across-the-board impact players at this position has no parallel.

“I think probably the first golden age of shortstop, even back when I played, was probably the Alex/Nomar/Jeter era,” Young said. “It was like, wow, these guys are big, they’re strong, they’re physical, they can hit, they can play defense, this is amazing. But I also think those three were looked at as anomalies at the time.

“Well, nowadays, these guys are no longer anomalies.”

Nope.

You know what they are instead? They’re also ...

History majors

Here’s one final way to measure how special any given group of players is: How much history do they make? We knew that question was coming. We have some answers.

FERNANDO TATIS JR.: The Padres’ human Play of the Day video just turned 22 a couple of weeks ago. His OPS+ through his age 21 season? Would you believe 154?

That translates to 54 percent above league average — and here are the only other players since 1900 with an OPS+ that altitudinous through their age 21 season:

Mike Trout (166) ... Ted Williams (161) ... Albert Pujols (157) ... Jimmie Foxx (157) ... and Rogers Hornsby (155) — whoever they are. Then comes Tatis ... *and Ty Cobb* (153)!

So that’s the historic company Tatis is already keeping. It doesn’t even account for this: He also leads the league in one of my favorite categories — Wow Factor.

“I still remember [that play at Pittsburgh](#) two seasons ago,” Young said, “when he tagged up on a freaking pop fly to the second baseman. Dude, I rewound that three different times. The second baseman for the Pirates had one foot on the infield dirt and one foot on the outfield grass. Tatis tagged up from third and scored. And I mean, what the hell? I know part of it was that the second baseman was shocked he went in the first place. But that’s the thing. *He went in the first place*. So when I think of Tatis, that’s the first play that I think of. But then all I can think is, *this is a power-hitting shortstop* who just pulled that off. That’s insane.”

FRANCISCO LINDOR: Lindor takes his show to the Mets in 2021. And has New York even gotten the memo yet that there has never been a show quite like it?

From 2017-19, Lindor spun off three straight seasons with at least 30 home runs and 40 doubles. Did you know that all other shortstops who ever lived have combined for *seven* seasons like that? No one else in history has more than one. And even those numbers don't totally convey Lindor's rarified charisma on both sides of the ball.

"Not only is he a good defensive player, but he can do it all," said Trammell, who has seen the Lindor show a million times in his role as special assistant for the Tigers. "He can run. He can hit for power. And he obviously has the game awareness. So for me, he's at the top of the list of the premier shortstops in baseball."

TREVOR STORY: If I had to pick one player in the sport that we don't talk nearly enough about, Story is that player. And don't "*but Coors*" me, either.

Story is one of just seven shortstops in history who have ever had a season of 85+ extra-base hits. ... He's one of only two who have ever done that and also had a season in which he led his league in stolen bases. (The other: Jimmy Rollins.) ... And Story is one of just two shortstops who have ever had a season with 35-plus homers *and* 20-plus stolen bases. (The other? A-Rod.) ... Oh, and one more thing. When he's just working with leather, he's also coming off a top-three finish in The Fielding Bible voting.

"When I think of Story, I just think turbo-athlete," Young said. "He's kind of like a strong safety playing shortstop. Strong. Fast. Really strong legs. Strong dude, but he flies around the bases. He has great agility, great balance. If you were going to draw up a shortstop and how you'd want him to play, you'd want power, speed, agility, balance, defense, arm strength, durability. ... And Story fits the bill on all those things."

CARLOS CORREA: Is it all right if we ignore the Houston trash-can-lid soundtrack and just look at the player he's been when healthy? Let's do that, all right? — because this is one multitalented human.

Correa has already had three seasons with an OPS+ of at least 135 (and 300-plus plate appearances). The only shortstops in history who had more through age 25: A-Rod and Arky Vaughan (four). The only others with three: Ernie Banks and the young, mesmerizing version of Hanley Ramírez. But Correa, too, is an above-average defender who finished fourth in 2020 The Fielding Bible voting.

"He's one of those guys who 15 years ago, the question would have been, 'When is this guy going to go to third?'" Young said. "He's 6-foot-4, and just a big strong dude. Big shoulders. Huge power. But again, there's no reason to do that. ... Obviously, he's a great defensive player. But I think the sky is the limit for what he can do where power potential is concerned."

COREY SEAGER: Seems like a good time to extoll the brilliance of Seager, since he's coming off a great season and an epic October. So here goes:

His .863 career OPS is almost 100 points higher than anyone who has ever played shortstop for the Dodgers for as long as he has. ... And about that October he just had? Seager was the LCS *and* World Series MVP — which gives him one more postseason MVP trophy in one month than Derek Jeter won in 11 Octobers with the Yankees.

“I want to give Seager his due,” Trammell said, “because he is as quiet at the dish as anyone in the game who takes an aggressive swing. He chokes up, but he takes not just an aggressive swing but a controlled, aggressive swing. ... I love his swing. I think it’s a classic.”

In the course of working on this piece, I surveyed a bunch of front-office minds from all across baseball on how they would rank the various tiers at this position. The five guys above wound up in Tier 1. But what stood out, once the votes were in, was the slew of talented studs who *didn’t* quite sneak into that tier.

There was Javy Báez, a dazzling defender who once had a 40-double, 30-homer, 20-steal season. ... And Trea Turner, who has already had two seasons with more than 40 steals and two others with an OPS+ over 140. ... And Tim Anderson, whose late-season slump kept him from becoming the fourth right-handed hitter in history to lead the major leagues in batting average in back-to-back seasons. ... And Andrelton Simmons, a guy Trammell called baseball’s best defensive shortstop since Ozzie Smith ...

And we haven’t even mentioned Xander Bogaerts, Marcus Semien, Didi Gregorius, Bo Bichette, Gleyber Torres, Dansby Swanson, Nick Ahmed, Brandon Crawford, David Fletcher, Paul DeJong and, well, you get the idea. By the way, should we also note that the near-unanimous Best Prospect in Baseball is — yessir — a shortstop (the Rays’ Wander Franco)? Then again, of course he is!

“You know, for the longest time,” Young said, “you and I could sit here and say, ‘Let’s name the greatest shortstops in the game,’ and you’d probably get like five. Or two. Then you’d say, ‘All right, let’s go to the next tier.’ But now it’s like, ‘Let’s name 15 — and *then* we’ll go to the next tier.’ I mean, it’s just crazy how much depth there is. It’s just nonstop, one name after another. Just look at the teams that have been in the World Series over the last five years. They’ve all had incredible shortstops.”

Tremendous point. Here’s a sampling of the names on that list: Lindor, Seager, Correa, Bogaerts and Turner. Plus Báez, who bounced all over the field for the 2016 Cubs. And let’s not forget Rays dynamo Willy Adames.

“Now you *have* to have one of these guys,” Young said, “or you won’t win.”

So there you go. Maybe back at the beginning of this opus, you were one of those skeptics screaming, “*Noooo. Shortstops were way better back in ... (pick one: 2002 ... 2009 ... 1909 ... whenever).*” Whatever year you pick, though, I hate to break it to you — but you don’t have a case.

The most magical age of shortstops? It's happening right now. And if there's an argument for any other era that could be more magical, um, what if it's actually the next one?

"It's just a really special time to watch these guys play shortstop," Young said. "And here's the thing: I think it's an indicator of what's going to happen in the future, too. This is just the beginning."

2. TALKING COLLECTIVE BARGAINING WITH LABOR LAWYER EUGENE FREEDMAN.

Eugene Freedman serves as counsel to the president of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, and also writes about baseball labor relations in his spare time. On January 19th, Eugene was kind enough to chat via phone with me and answer my collective bargaining questions. If you're interested in baseball's labor talks, I recommend [following Eugene on Twitter](#).

Tim Dierkes: Can you explain your background a little bit?

Eugene Freedman: Sure. So I work for a national labor union, the National Air Traffic Controllers Association. I work in the office of the president and handle a lot of different things, including collective bargaining for the union. I've been involved over the course of my career in approximately nine term contract negotiations and not all of them with the air traffic controllers. When I was in law school, back in, I guess it was the fall of 98, I clerked at the National Labor Relations Board full-time. So I have some experience being on the side of the labor-neutral but the rest of my career has been on the union side.

Dierkes: Do you think it would be beneficial for the players to attempt to extend the current CBA by a year to allow teams to recover economically before hammering out a new CBA?

Freedman: I think it's hard for me outside to say exactly whether they should extend it. I know that that's something that has been put out there publicly. I don't remember where I saw it originally. My guess is that it came from one of the sources that frequently puts things out there on behalf of management, and so I'd be wary just from the source of that original suggestion that it really came from Major League Baseball, not someone independently viewing the situation.

I do know that the Players Association has a lot of things that it wants to address in the next negotiations, some of them are very public, like service time manipulation. Some of them are probably less obvious, in terms of what the priorities are. I guess there's a couple different ways to view the financial aspects of pay and there's an idea that you can either spread the peanut butter thin or you can allow it to clump in certain areas. Right now, it's very clumped

and there is some thought to raising the league minimums, things like that, that would spread the peanut butter a little more thinly but allow for more players to see the benefits. And I think that that's something in the next CBA negotiations that's going to be a big deal in terms of how they share revenue not just among players and the league but also players among themselves.

There's a big concern about loss of free agency benefits for players over the age of 30. I think the compensation system is something they want to get at quickly in terms of team-to-team free agent compensation, the draft pick compensation aspect of it. Delaying negotiations means one more year that players who are at the league minimum, players who are not premier free agents, may not see benefits and I don't know that it's in their interest for the Players Association to extend the current deal.

Dierkes: If we reach December 1 without a new CBA, what would you expect to happen then?

Freedman: So it's kind of difficult to predict at this point because we don't really have a lot of reports about whether they are at the table negotiating right now. I suspect that they're doing some of the lower-hanging fruit. Some of the articles in the CBA won't be renegotiated, they'll just be "rolled over," is the term that we use in labor negotiations. Where the parties basically say, "We'll tentatively agree that this article won't be changed in the CBA." But of course that's subject to negotiation of the entire package. So I think that a lot of those things are going to be resolved relatively quickly and easily and then you'll get down to the more complicated issues.

I think that one of the big things that was kind of obscured throughout the restart of the 2020 season was the fact that part of the big issues that were being negotiated were the revenue split for the playoffs. There obviously was going to be no gate or very limited gate. The CBA talks about the players' share being based on gate receipts. And then you had reports of Major League Baseball signing a bigger package with I believe it was the TBS-Turner deal for the playoffs and that wasn't going to go into effect right away, but it was something that was on the horizon as a big issue for how that money was going to be split. And so they didn't resolve it for 2021 as part of those negotiations, and I saw that as pivotal.

What happened, if you recall, was that the players were asking for a 50/50 split on the increase in television revenue – not the base package that they had in place but whatever the increase was going to be. At the same time Major League Baseball was offering a flat amount because they recognized that there weren't going to be gate receipts and they proposed \$25 million. At the last minute as they were they were coming to a deal Major League Baseball and the Players Association [agreed to a \\$50 million flat amount](#) that was going to be the players' share of playoff revenue split among the players.

I saw that small negotiation as really what the big negotiation was going to be about for 2021. When the parties go into that negotiation, they're going to have to resolve those issues of revenue splits of new revenue. A lot of these things were not contemplated – streaming revenue, things like that, in prior CBAs, and because of that Major League Baseball received either the lion's share or basically all of those new revenue streams for the ownership groups.

And so the players, to the extent that those owners have not passed that along through free agent contracts, that seems to be an imbalance and perhaps one of the imbalances that the media has picked up on. I see that as something for this year. Recently the articles have been talking about whether they'll reach an agreement to expand the playoffs for 2021. I think that however they decide to split the revenue this year – if the playoffs are expanded – that will serve as a template for the next CBA. And so, if they are able to reach an agreement on basically splitting the revenue and sharing it between players and management on increased television contracts and/or additional streams of revenue, particularly streaming, that will be a template and it will make the 2021 offseason negotiations that much easier.

But if they're unable to reach an agreement now on expanding the playoffs, that would basically tell us that the parties are going to have long protracted negotiations and it's likely that we will see a work stoppage, whether that's management-initiated through a lockout and spring training, or player-initiated through a strike.

Dierkes: If the owners are content with the status quo, at least to a degree, why would they initiate a lockout?

Freedman: Well, I think the question about who's going to initiate any kind of work stoppage is kind of one of those questions that will depend on the circumstances at the time. The parties will be trying to negotiate, and more management than the union will be trying to negotiate in public. Getting the PR side and their kind of proxies in the media to put out their messages. If you start seeing messages about greedy players, if you start seeing messages about the unreasonable offers coming from the Players Association, but you don't see similar things saying how the current system is broken and needs to be fixed, and you don't see parallel things saying how there are things that need to be resolved mutually and jointly, which normally would be the message that everybody puts out.

But baseball seems to always take the more aggressive tack in their negotiations and their PR campaign. I think if they start putting out a lot of anti-player press it's possible that they will engage in a lockout. And the reason for management to do it is not because they want to disrupt the apple cart in terms of the status quo, but it's to place additional pressure on the players.

I don't think we're going to see a situation where there would be imposed work rules and replacement players like we had in 1995 spring training, but I think what you see is the players at the lower end of the pay spectrum, who probably live more like everyday people, would feel the burden of not being paid. They travel from their homes to spring training every year. They don't get paid in spring training, they get paid from opening day to the end of the season, but knowing that they're not going to get that first paycheck when they're on perhaps a split contract or even just a league minimum contract. They're going to feel the crunch, whereas a player at the higher end of the spectrum likely has sufficient savings to make it through. And that kind of attempt to fracture the solidarity of the players is a tactic that management not just in baseball, but elsewhere, uses, to pit the more junior employees against the more senior

employees. They have the same long-term interest and they have the same interest in benefiting the bargaining unit as a whole but they do have different individual financial interests as the negotiations are ongoing.

Dierkes: I wanted to get at that topic of public opinion a little bit that you touched on. From what I can sense, I feel that the players will struggle there just based on some [polls we've run with our readers](#). I do think that the majority of baseball fans feel that they're overpaid or greedy. Plus you kind of have a different dynamic here in my opinion where the players are seeking a radical change from the status quo, as opposed to '94 when the the owners were attempting to impose it. I've seen some of the things that Marvin Miller expressed where it seems like he really didn't care what the public thought because he knew they were wrong. Do you think it matters what the public thinks and do you think the players union takes that as a major concern and should they try to shape it or should they try to ignore it?

Freedman: So I would say there are a couple aspects of that. First, in terms of changing the structure or seeking some kind of radical change, I think all collective bargaining is making changes around the fringes. It's very rarely making a major change all at once and I think the idea of getting younger players paid earlier in terms of whether it's raising the minimum or making arbitration eligibility earlier, I don't see those as radical. I see them as things that are smaller. Changing it from Super Two to perhaps after Year 2 for all players, or removing the disincentives for teams signing free agents. Those things are within the current system. They're not big radical changes.

Number two, in terms of the media presence. Major League Baseball has a significant number of writers on their own payroll, not directly through Major League Baseball, but some of them do work for MLB.com, many of them work for the TV arm of Major League Baseball, and then others work for the individual teams. And so they do a lot in shaping public opinion just through spreading around their own money and the Major League Baseball Players Association can't counter that. They have to look to, I guess I don't know how to describe them other than independent journalists, who are stating facts rather than stating positions and sometimes it's very hard for the average fan to parse that difference because they see certain people on TV and they recognize them and they accept them as experts, even though they may be publishing a company line.

That said, I don't think that public opinion is a huge factor in shaping the negotiations. I think that Major League Baseball, going all the way back to the teens and perhaps a hundred years ago or perhaps even before then, owners were calling players greedy. Just look at the Black Sox Scandal and the conflict between Charles Comiskey and his players. I think that there's always been that conflict. I don't know that it's going to go away and there's always been a disagreement about who he is greedy and who is just seeking fair compensation.

It's interesting. My ten-year-old daughter said to me the other day, "What does that mean, 'owner?'" And I said, "Well, they own the team." Then she says, "Do they manage the team? Do they coach the team?" And I said, "No, they don't. They just collect the profits off of the other

people's work." And she said, "I don't know why we need them." It was kind of an interesting viewpoint because she sees teams she's played on and there are coaches and there are players, but there's not someone collecting money for everybody else's work. So perhaps we missed the boat on it, and I don't know too much about their structure, but the Green Bay Packers ownership structure may be the fairest where it's municipally owned by shareholders who live in the city as opposed to an individual or group of individuals collecting revenue off of other people's work.

But that's more of an economic philosophy argument. With regard to the PR side of it, I think, one thing that the Players Association has to do is maintain the confidentiality of negotiations as best they can. I know that MLB frequently leaks things. I think that it would benefit both parties for the negotiations to go on quietly and privately to the greatest extent they can. I think that the negotiations that went on during Michael Weiner's tenure as executive director [of the MLBPA] were the quietest we've probably ever seen. I think they announced that there was a new CBA before anyone even knew that they were in negotiations. That's really how it should happen.

Most industries though aren't followed by dozens of media people in each city. So it's a little bit different than UPS negotiating with the Teamsters. But that said, it can be done quietly and it can be done confidentially. It really takes both parties to achieve that though and when one party is constantly bashing the other publicly, it does lead to friction at the bargaining table. I've been there. I've been at the table in contentious negotiations when there were dueling press releases or public statements all the time. It meant that every single day the first 20 or 30 minutes of our bargaining was actually discussing what was out there in the press and not the actual issues that we were negotiating and it really distracted from the negotiations themselves. So I would hope that this negotiation happens more quietly and it happens behind the scenes at the table and not publicly in the press.

Dierkes: What do you think about the possibility of an offseason lockout by ownership perhaps as a way of freezing free agency? Do you think that that's a plausible scenario?

Freedman: It is possible. As I mentioned, creating that tension between the lower-paid players and the players who have more tenure and have received their first big contract who might not be economically affected by the loss of income for a few months, that would create a tension also with another group, which is the group of players who do not have a contract. They're not going to be signing. They're not going to know what team they're playing for. Obviously their whole family living situation will be in flux for an extended period of time. It is a pressure point. It is a way to try to separate some players from the solidarity of the larger group.

Dierkes: How likely do you think a scenario would be where the owners are willing to start the 2022 season without a new contract, putting the onus on to the players to strike?

Freedman: That's a good question, because the the threat of strike is almost as powerful as the strike itself. Because if they're operating without a contract the players could go on strike

basically at any point and that could create chaos for management. It would create a situation where they would potentially lose television revenue, lose gate, if fans could actually go to the games by 2022. There are a lot of risks to management of the threat of strike and it's very possible that they would use a lockout as a tactic to avoid giving the players control over the situation.

I think that the players, though, are less likely to strike than they were back in the 80s, particularly. It's not something that has happened in many of their lifetimes. You're talking about the last strike in 1995. So you're talking about 25 years. It's not something that is every three or four years the parties are looking at at a strike or a lockout as they were in that period of the 80s through 1995. And when it happens that frequently you've got players who were in leadership roles in the union like Paul Molitor and Tom Glavine, who had lived through other negotiations, had lived through other strikes or lockouts.

Now, you've got an entire generation of players who never even lived during the time of a strike or lockout. And so the mentality is different. The mentality is more, "Hey, we've got a good system here, we can change it and we change it through bargaining, not through economic pressure." Then again, we don't know how the internal leadership of the union is. There were a number of players who were very vocal during the restart negotiations. They spoke very strongly of solidarity. They came out of the negotiations very unified. And so I think the fact that this happened only 18 months before they were going back to the table for term negotiations probably helped the union in terms of developing and building that solidarity that they'll need going into these negotiations that otherwise they might not have had.

Dierkes: I would assume that now even with the salaries stagnating a bit, even adjusted for inflation, that the salaries now for players are probably a lot higher than they were in the 90s. Do you think that as salary has gone up does that that make solidarity more difficult?

Freedman: I think it may be more difficult in terms of basically that gap. So you've got players who are making approximately \$30 million a year and you've got players making the minimum which is a little bit more than \$500,000 so that's a 60 times differential. I don't know and I haven't looked at it but I would suspect that that differential is one of the largest it's ever been, at least in the collective bargaining era. I imagine when Babe Ruth was making \$100,000 a year, he was probably making more than 60 times the lowest-paid players in the league, but in the collective bargaining era the salaries have been more compressed in terms of their ratios. And I think that that's something that could affect player solidarity.

Then again, if you have players who are at the top end of that salary scale like Mookie Betts and Mike Trout and others who are supporting the union's efforts and saying that they're going to do the right thing for the 25th or 26th man on the roster, that would go a long way towards building solidarity and ensuring that there aren't fractures in the membership.

Dierkes: Do you feel that the players have sufficient chips to bargain with, or does that matter, having chips?

Freedman: Well, yeah, every negotiation is about power to some extent. There are obviously other factors that play into it and the players do have the ultimate issue which is, they are the product. Without them, there is no baseball. We talked about negotiating around the fringes. There are things that management wants that aren't necessarily related directly to player compensation. We saw a lot of changes in the area of the Joint Drug Agreement over the last decade. We've seen other changes in play on the field.

The expanded playoffs is a big deal to management. Expanded playoffs for 2021 can't happen unless the parties agree to it and they're not going to agree to it unless they agree to some kind of financial arrangement around the split of revenue. And that's why I think that issue for the 2021 season will really lay out the idea of whether or not it's going to be an easier collective bargaining agreement or a more difficult one. Because that's probably the number one issue on management's mind, is expanded playoffs, and they can't get there now without the players union.

You talked about the possibility of going into the 2022 season without a CBA in place and just carrying forward the existing CBA as they negotiate. They won't have extended playoffs in 2022 under that scenario either. And so I think that that being a big driver for all of management's interests is something that the players have significant leverage over and it's something that I think they need to focus on in terms of this upcoming negotiation. I'm not saying they're not focused on it, but I think that it is the primary area that will give us an indication about the next term CBA.

Dierkes: So if we saw an agreement for this year for expanded playoffs and the accompanying agreed-upon split, that would increase your optimism for avoiding a work stoppage, would you say?

Freedman: Yeah, I would say and and partially depends on the structure. If it winds up being a fixed pool again, I'm going to consider it a one-off, but if it involves some kind of revenue sharing arrangement, no matter what that arrangement is, I'll see that as a very positive thing that the parties are working collaboratively to reach a mutually beneficial agreements.

Dierkes: How do you think having Democratic control of the government might come into play with these CBA negotiations?

Freedman: I think there are a couple aspects to that. One is the National Labor Relations Board. The National Labor Relations Board General Counsel position I think will be vacant in June *[editor's note: [On January 20th](#), the Biden administration asked NLRB general counsel Peter Robb to resign, and subsequently fired him]*. That will be filled by someone who will be more union-friendly and because of that it means that if management were to engage in an unfair labor practice or something that is unique that hasn't been heard before by the Board, it's more likely to result in a complaint being issued. And if a complaint is issued, then it goes through the quasi-judicial process and ultimately judicial appeals process.

Also the Board itself, the makeup of the board will switch from three Republican members and one Democratic number right now by, I think it's the fall, to three Democratic members and two Republican members. And in that scenario, it means that cases that were more on the borderline are more likely to be resolved in favor of the unions. It doesn't mean all cases will result in in in the union winning versus now all cases management winning. It's more of those close cases wind up more likely to be in favor of one party or another and so you've got that that aspect of it which is the kind of regulatory and legal aspect of it.

But then you also have the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service should the parties need a mediator to participate in negotiations. That's something that the president's appointment to the FMCS director is important. In the Obama Administration, George Cohen was the director of the FMCS and George mediated the NFL situation, their negotiations. I'm not familiar at all with the NFL, I don't follow it. So I don't want to misspeak on any of the details there but George had been engaged in collective bargaining for 50 years. He knows how agreements are reached. He actually was the counsel who argued the case of the '94-95 baseball strike in front of now Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. He had represented the NBA players back in the 70s. He's retired now, but he was one of the greatest labor lawyers in US history. And so he was a great person to lead that body, the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, and he could basically, any two parties who could not reach agreement, he could help them reach agreement. Because he could see things differently than they could.

President-elect Biden hasn't yet named a director of FMCS. That's usually a later person in the process. They're probably vetting people now, but they haven't announced publicly whom that person might be. That director could play a key role. Also, I just think that the tone of the President plays a big role in it as well because President Biden has said publicly that he's going to be the most labor-friendly president in the in the nation's history. If there are these close calls, I think he will use the bully pulpit of the White House to weigh in on issues. And if you're talking about that PR campaign aspect of it, if you have the president of the United States saying, "The players are right. You should reach a deal. I don't think management should lock the players out," those are things that are kind of incalculable in their value in the PR campaign, and the public support or opposition to one of the party's positions.

Dierkes: Can you explain the concept of an impasse as it relates to collective bargaining?

Freedman: Impasse is frequently misunderstood or misused as a term in the media, unfortunately. Impasse is basically a temporary state of affairs. It's not a permanent fix situation. So normally, throughout the course of negotiations the parties negotiate over different things at different times and they may set certain things aside to deal with later, especially if they're thornier issues. Compensation frequently comes last in negotiations. So the National Labor Relations Board basically defines impasse through its case law and it's a combination of things. It basically uses a totality of the circumstances test and factors in things like how long have negotiations gone on, whether the positions of the parties have become fixed or whether they're still making progress on certain issues. It can only occur over mandatory subject of bargaining. Those are the things that the parties have a duty to bargain

over – their wages, hours, and other terms and conditions of employment. They can't reach the impasse technically over permissive subjects, which are the subjects that there's no duty to bargain over.

So in terms of negotiations, obviously it has to be good faith negotiations. I mentioned the length of the negotiations. The importance of the issues on which there is a disagreement plays into it. Whether both parties agree that they're not making progress plays into it. I mentioned that it is a kind of a moment in time. Any changed condition can terminate an impasse. If the players were to go on strike after management says there's an impasse, that strike could break a pre-existing impasse.

There are other things to kind of play in sometimes behind the scenes like unfair labor practices. If one of the parties is violating the National Labor Relations Act and engaging in bad faith bargaining the Board frequently will say that an impasse cannot exist because the one party was not bargaining in good faith. Good faith and bad faith are kind of things that have been thrown around primarily by management last time but I think Tony Clark said it at one point as well in a press release or on a press call. So take those for the grain of salt as well because the National Labor Relations Board has tests for bad faith bargaining as well. And a lot of the time the parties will kind of throw the term around when it doesn't become legal standard.

Some of the issues are like if there's a break in bargaining and the parties are no longer meeting, that could create an impasse, or it could be seen as no impasse because the parties haven't met and shown that their positions are fixed. I mentioned that the parties sometimes set aside certain topics to be dealt with later. If they're at an impasse on one of those issues, that doesn't suspend your bargaining obligation of all the other unsettled issues. So they still have to negotiate everything else to conclusion and withdraw any permissive proposals to actually declare an impasse in bargaining. The other important thing about an impasse is it doesn't remove the duty to bargain. So if the parties mutually believe they're at impasse that doesn't mean that management can do whatever it wants. It can unilaterally implement its last best offer, but that doesn't eliminate its duty to bargain. If it were to try to change anything else, it still has the duty to bargain.

It's based on the totality of the circumstances. Disagreement doesn't mean impasse, a stalemate on one issue doesn't mean impasse over the full collective bargaining agreement. It just means that the parties are not working on that one thing right now and they still have a duty to get back to it. There are going to be stops and stalls throughout the process. The more complicated issues are going to be the ones that they leave for last. It's just always how it's done.

3. Rosenthal: An open letter to Theo Epstein on how to fix the game

Dear Theo,

And you thought it was difficult building the Red Sox's first World Series champion in 86 years and the Cubs' first in 108.

Ending those alleged curses was practically child's play compared to the challenge you inherited on Jan. 14, when Major League Baseball hired you as a consultant regarding on-field matters.

Asked you, in short, to help fix its increasingly unwatchable product.

I love baseball, you love baseball, millions of people around the world love baseball. But the major-league version, the highest level of the sport, needs to find ways to inject more action, unless your idea of fun is having enough time to listen to entire symphonies in between balls in play. And I know it isn't.

It isn't commissioner Rob Manfred's idea of fun, either, and that's why he hired you. We talk plenty about the financial issues in this sport. We need to talk more about the game's diminishing entertainment value, because if that aspect is not fixed, the financial issues only will get worse.

You said it yourself at the news conference announcing your departure from the Cubs: "We need to find a way to get more action in the game, get the ball in play more often, allow players to show their athleticism some more, and give the fans more of what they want."

Royals second baseman Whit Merrifield, responding to a tweet of that quote by @MLBonFox, got right to the point: "It's a simple fix then. Pay players who put the ball in play and pitchers who throw strikes more. Players who hit homers are paid more. So players strive to only hit homers. Same with pitchers. Strikeouts get guys paid... getting weak contact pays less."

Both you and Merrifield identified the problem — the need to incentivize more contact. The question is how to make that happen, and that's where things get complicated. Rather than propose individual solutions in a vacuum, the league needs to consider a combination of solutions, and try to anticipate their unintended consequences. The idea should not be to create more runs, but more action. Make the game about the players again.

You *know* I have some thoughts: I've been advising you for years on how to run the Red Sox and Cubs! I'll start with a prerequisite, the one thing you must accomplish if you are to succeed at making baseball compelling.

- **Getting buy-in from players**

Theo, you'll obviously need it — the collective-bargaining agreement mandates the league must negotiate any rule changes with the Players Association. But as we both know, the relationship between players and owners is as bad as it has been since the strike of 1994-95. And while players, too, are eager to fix the game, they are not exactly a homogenous group, ready to rally under one flag.

I don't need to tell you: The union is comprised of pitchers and hitters, older and younger players, domestic and international. And the interests of those varied groups do not always align.

Changes that benefit hitters might hurt pitchers. Older and younger players are at different ends of the financial spectrum, and even within those categories opinions might be divided. Some veterans with higher salaries might be more inclined to preserve the status quo. Others with long-term, guaranteed contracts might be more open to adjustments to the game.

Only one thing seems to unite players: Contempt for the owners and MLB. Not only are you one of *them* now, Theo, but you're also the guy who manipulated Kris Bryant's service time, prompting the union to file a grievance. The Cubs won the grievance, and I don't need to remind you that the extra year of club control backfired; the team in 2021 will pay Bryant \$18.6 million as a potential free agent coming off a poor season, making it difficult to trade him). But let's just say some on the players' side haven't forgotten the episode, OK?

The players, though, will welcome new ideas, and surely have a few of their own. You mostly treated them with respect while running the Red Sox and Cubs, and your relationships with them almost always were good. So, you're perfectly capable of serving as a facilitator, creating a level of trust and helping diffuse the tension between the league and union.

In spring training, then, you will need to meet with every club. If you're smart, you'll invite union officials to be present. And, uh, you might want to record the meetings, to make sure nothing that is said is later disputed (see [Manfred and Tony Clark, June 17, 2020.](#))

You need to give the players a voice, foster an air of collaboration. If you succeed, I will nominate you for the Nobel Peace Prize. If you fail, everything else you attempt will go to waste.

All right, now for the juicy stuff:

- **Move back the mound**

Theo, you and your GM buddies talk all the time about how players are bigger, stronger and faster than ever. Their performances are enhanced by advancements in technology and training. It is possible — no, I would say probable — they have outgrown the dimensions of the playing field.

You can move the fences back, alter the distance between bases, increase or reduce foul territory. None of those adjustments, however, would address the essence of the problem — the reduced contact rate, which is the product, at least in part, of pitchers' increased velocities outpacing hitters' reaction times.

Chris Young, the former pitcher who worked in the commissioner's office before becoming general manager of the Texas Rangers, advocated [moving the mound back](#) from 60 feet, 6 inches — the distance from home plate since, ahem, 1893. The Atlantic League experimented with the idea, but it did not seem to gain much traction — in part, because the experiment involved a difference of two feet!

That's too extreme.

Start by moving back the mound six inches, leaving open the possibility to extend the distance further using a calculated formula to counter additional increases in velocity. Few pitchers would notice the difference. The league did a study that showed catchers vary by more than two feet in their setups, so the impact on pitcher injuries, at least in theory, should be minimal.

Additional studies on potential unintended consequences would be necessary. Lowering the height of the mound would make no difference in hitters' reaction times, and is therefore not a solution. In fact, to keep breaking pitches on the same trajectories, the league might need to raise the mound as it increases the distance between the pitching rubber and home plate. Those breaking pitches might become even more difficult to hit — or not. And then there is this:

Since 2015, in seeming response to the game's latest home-run surge, the percentage of [fastballs has been creeping downward](#). Pitchers try to avoid contact rather than induce weak contact, but it's not like you can legislate pitch selection. Which leads to my next thought...

- **Talk to players about the strike zone**

Ah, let's turn to everyone's favorite topic, not that you, Theo Epstein, ever sat in your private box at Wrigley Field and grumbled about the zone or anything.

The players probably are as divided on the zone as the game's decision-makers, but they're the ones who must live with it. The least you can do, then, is empower them to think it through.

A bigger zone likely would lead to more pitchers' counts and more strikeouts, probably making it a non-starter. A smaller one, if it produced more walks, also might not be the answer. But shrinking the zone, top to bottom, could offer certain merits, too.

If pitchers needed to come into the zone more, they might start throwing more fastballs, which are easier to command than breaking pitches. More fastballs might lead to more contact. Ditto for a renewed emphasis on command rather than velocity.

Lowering the zone is another concept worth exploring: If the top is at a height at which high fastballs are less effective, hitters will stand a better chance of putting the ball in play. Reducing the width of the rubber also might create more contact, forcing pitchers to work with less angle and enabling hitters to see more pitches out of the pitcher's hand starting on home plate.

The pitcher-batter matchup, though, is not the only possible area of adjustment...

- **Incentivize throwing more strikes**

Most people seem to like the extra-inning rule the league introduced in 2020, in which a runner is placed on second base with no outs at the start of every half-inning after the ninth. But allow me to suggest a twist to the twist: If the game is still tied after the 10th inning, the team with the most base-runners wins.

You might think, "Wait, that would just mean teams will try to compile more walks." True enough, but their opponents would focus more on *avoiding* walks, which again translates to — you guessed it — throwing more strikes. Defense would take on greater importance. Contact hitters might become even more valuable. And if you want to take this a step further, you could introduce rules to make walks and strikeouts even more punitive on a per inning basis. Second walk in an inning, two bases; third walk, three, etc. Fifteen or more balls in an inning, each ball thrown counts twice; 10 or more swings and misses, each swing counts for two strikes.

All that might be a little too much, but what about reducing the number of pitchers on the roster to closer to 10? Such an adjustment only would be possible after the COVID-19 pandemic subsided and expanded rosters no longer were necessary. But the union should be on board with any proposal that forces teams to draw longer outings out of their starting pitchers; provided those pitchers stayed healthy, their value would be even higher. And if both starters and relievers were forced to work more regularly, they would need to back off on velocity, giving hitters a better chance to make contact.

Everything comes back to contact, which is why one of the most oft-discussed methods to boost offense might not provide much of a boost at all. Which is why I would say . . .

- **Keep the shift**

I'll admit, I don't love how the shift wrecks certain left-handed batters, denying them hits up the middle even when they employ the proper swing path. I also don't love how it puts defenders out of position, or how some on the analytics side seem to celebrate it as the ultimate manifestation of computer-generated efficiency.

But you know what, Theo? As much as your new bosses at MLB seem inclined to propose limits on the shift in upcoming collective-bargaining negotiations, I'm not sure the shift is the problem.

Eliminating it would not necessarily help the contact rate, and might even reduce the rate further if hitters became more pull-happy. The only positive offensive outcome would be more singles, and the benefit of more singles is diminished when hardly anyone steals bases anymore.

Now, if you devise ways to stimulate stolen bases — limiting throw-overs, limiting the time a pitcher can hold the ball once he comes set, eliminating the pitchout and making the bases bigger all would be possibilities — banning the shift might carry greater appeal. But even then, how far would you go?

Requiring two infielders to be positioned on each side of second base might be acceptable, but requiring them to keep both feet on the infield dirt would be difficult to enforce and contrary to what the game is trying to accomplish. You should not want even more replay to determine whether a player's spike is on the outfield grass. And you should not restrict the athleticism of infielders, taking away their naturalness and aggressiveness. The ones with strong arms, you want them to play deep. Let them range for balls, roam fearlessly, make plays.

The shift stays. But I've got a few more suggestions:

- Deaden the baseball. You want more balls in play, then counter the launch-angle revolution and the obsession with hitting home runs. If it's more difficult to go deep, players will adjust by cutting down their swings, promoting more contact and enabling starting pitchers to work deeper into games.
- Institute a pitch clock. The union doesn't like the idea, but the majority of players are accustomed to it, having come through the minors in the pitch-clock era, which began in 2015. The clock helped increase the pace of action and reduce times of games, so make it [part of the solution](#).
- Slope the first and third base lines toward fair territory to help keep bunts and ground balls fair. It's exciting to watch a player bunt for a base hit, but when was the last time teams employed the practice regularly? Franklin Delano Roosevelt's first term?

I know I've thrown a lot at you, Theo. All of these ideas need to be dissected. Some are better than others. And I'm guessing if I asked my readers, they would come up with dozens more.

But if there is one thing I know about you, you're not the type to sit back and philosophize. You're a doer, a risk-taker, a man of action. So, for heaven's sake, let's go.

Devise a plan. Get the union on board. And I'll see you in Oslo for the Nobel ceremony.

Regards, Ken

JANUARY 31, 2021

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

Some miscellaneous tidbits, discussion of the best hitter of all time, Joe Posnanski wraps his arguments for players who should be considered for the HOF, and some think pieces. Stay safe out there.

The Baseball Hall of Fame opened on June 12, 1939. That summer, the first telecast of an MLB game aired. Cincinnati Reds and Brooklyn Dodgers, on Aug. 26, 1939.

Played from 1945 on, only third basemen elected to HOF (I didn't include Paul Molitor who I don't consider primarily a 3B)

Wade Boggs

George Brett

Chipper Jones

George Kell

Eddie Matthews

Brooks Robinson

Ron Santo

Mike Schmidt

DJ LeMahieu--Over last two seasons he has hit 11 leadoff home runs, including six in 2019 and a Major League-leading five in 2020. He is the fourth Yankee in franchise history to have at least five leadoff home runs in back-to-back seasons, along with Rickey Henderson (three straight from 1985-87), Chuck Knoblauch (1998-99) and Alfonso Soriano (2002-03).

Jacob deGrom posted a 2.38 ERA and struck out a whopping 39% of batters faced, holding on to the top spot. Gerrit Cole is ranked second after turning in a 2.84 ERA and 33% strikeout rate for the Yankees.

Before Yankee fans get too excited: - Kluber, Taillon, German, Severino in 2020-one inning pitched combined.

How quickly we forget--Daniel Murphy of the Mets' homered in six straight games in their run to the World Series in 2015.

Shortstops—seasons of 140+ games with 5 errors or fewer:

Omar Vizquel-- 3

All other shortstops since 1900 combined-- 3

Only two other players in history with as many hits (2,877) and Gold Gloves (11) as Vizquel: Willie Mays and Roberto Clemente.

Billy Wagner is the only pitcher since 1900 (with 900 innings or more) to hold MLB hitters *to a batting average below the Mendoza Line (.187)*! Yep, Billy Wagner. Next up on that Lowest Opponent Average leader board, if you're curious, are two nobodies name Nolan Ryan (.204) and Sandy Koufax (.205). Yeah, yeah, those two did it as starters. But just so you know, Mariano and Trevor Hoffman are 24 points back (both at .211). No other pitcher in the last 100 years (with 900+ IP) has finished his career with fewer baserunners than he pitched innings (WHIP under 1.00)

Sammy Sosa (not Ruth or Bonds or Mark McGwire) is the only man in history with *three* seasons of 60-plus home runs.

(from baseballegg.com)

Only nine players in baseball history have reached the 2,500 hit mark and also had a .300 career average, but failed to win at least one batting title.

PLAYER	HITS	BATTING AVERAGE
Derek Jeter	3465	.310
Paul Molitor	3319	.306
Eddie Collins	3314	.333
Sam Rice	2987	.322
Sam Crawford	2925	.309
Frankie Frisch	2880	.316
Mel Ott	2876	.304
Roberto Alomar	2724	.300
Vladimir Guerrero	2590	.318

Derek Jeter finished second in the batting race twice, once to Nomar Garciaparra, the other time to Joe Mauer.

Paul Molitor seems like a fella who would have won a batting title. But he finished runnerup twice: to Wade Boggs in 1987, and teammate John Olerud in 1993.

Unfortunately for Eddie Collins, he shared the American League with Cobb for almost his entire career. Collins finished second in batting to Cobb three times, and he was in the top five in that category ten times. He was a truly remarkable player, and [one of baseball's best World Series performers](#).

Sam Rice never seriously competed for a batting title, but the quiet right fielder who played most of his career with the Senators, finished in the top ten numerous times. The other Sam, Mr. Crawford, was runnerup in the batting race four times: twice to teammate Cobb and twice before Terrible Ty arrived in the Motor City.

Frankie Frisch was once traded for [Rogers Hornsby](#), who made it a habit to win the NL batting crown for several years. Frisch never finished higher than fifth. Another Giant, Mel Ott, won six home run titles, but never finished higher than seventh in the NL batting race.

Robbie Alomar hit .300 nine times, but finished no higher than third in batting, which he did in 1993 and 2001.

Finally, Vlad Guerrero has a surprisingly low amount of “black ink” on his record. He led the league in hits and runs scored once each, and in total bases twice. But he never led the league in any of the triple crown categories. He was a perennial .300 hitter, topping the mark 13 times. He finished third in the batting race four times.

All nine of the players on this list are members of the [Baseball Hall of Fame](#).

Greatest Hitter Ever

A subscriber emailed this week asking “excluding Babe Ruth, who do you think is the greatest hitter of all time” is? He framed it as a Cobb vs. Williams discussion between his friends but was looking for another voice. I’m interested to hear your thoughts.

A few thoughts for this group to ponder. (and excluding the trove of Negro League stats that will pour into the discussion—I’m just not up on them yet).

If you google “best hitters of all time” 800K hits pop up. I scanned a bunch to see if there was consensus. Bleacher Report’s top 100 from 2012 is worth a look—their top 15 (below) it captured something close to consensus. You know what they say about opinions.

15 Pete Rose 4256 hits

14 Jimmy Foxx hit .325, had 534 home runs, over 2,600 hits,

13 Joe DiMaggio batted .325 and had 2,214 hits and over 1,500 RBIs.

12 Tris Speaker 792 doubles are easily the most all time, and in his career, Speaker had a .345 average, over 3,500 hits, and was a key part of many World Series-winning teams.

11 Stan Musial led the league in batting average and hits six times, as well as triples, doubles, and RBIs frequently.

The three-time MVP winner finished his career with a .331 average, 3,630 hits, and nearly 600 home runs

10 Lou Gehrig finished his career with a .340 average, nearly 500 home runs, 1,995 RBIs, and finished in the running for MVP nearly every year they had it.

9 Mickey Mantle finished his career nearly hitting .300 with 536 home runs, and over 1500 RBIs. He also cemented his status as the greatest switch-hitter of all time, and his three MVP wins could have easily been five had it not been for Roger Maris's short dominant streak. Triple Crown 1956.

8 Honus Wagner led the league in batting average eight times, doubles seven times, and RBIs five times. His consistently great average didn't slip under the .300 mark until he turned 40.

He finished his career with 3,420 hits, a .328 batting average, and naturally was one of the first five inducted into the Hall of Fame.

7 Rogers Hornsby hit .424 in 1924. Hornsby led the league in batting average seven times, and led the league in nearly every other category at least once. He really got going once the dead ball era ended, as 1920 was the first year he really started looking like an elite hitter.

Hornsby finished his career somehow missing out on 3,000 hits, but his .358 batting average is second all-time, and his 1922 and 1924 seasons are considered two of the best in league history.

6 Hank Aaron

5 Barry Bonds

4 Ted Williams

3 Willie Mays

2 Ty Cobb led the league in batting average 11 times, and it would have been 12 had an error not been found decades later for 1910. He regularly led the league in runs, RBIs, hits, you name it. He even led the league in home runs one year.

His 4,189 hits are second all-time,

1 Babe Ruth career .342. 714 HRs. Led the majors in runs scored 7 times. Led the majors in HRs 11 times. If you look at his profile on baseballreference.com the italics (MLB leader) are all over the place from walks to slugging to on base %, year after year. Not only great stats but dominating.

Rod Carew, Tony Gwynn, Roberto Clement and Frank Robinson showed up between 16 and 25 in many lists. Not making bleacher report's top 15 but mentioned in top 15 of other lists:

Eddie Collins

Hank Greenberg

Shoeless joe Jackson

Derek Jeter

Nap Lajoie

Paul Molitor

Mel Ott

Albert Pujols

Many Ramirez

Mike Schmidt

Al Simmons

Ichiro Suzuki

Mike Trout

Society of Baseball Research did a statistical analysis called **Multi-attribute Decision Making** (google it if you want to see the math). That formula ranked them

1. Ruth
2. Aaron
3. Mays
4. Musial
5. Gehrig
6. Williams
7. Foxx

8. Ott
9. Frank Robinson
10. Griffey Jr.
11. Banks
12. Mantle
13. Killebrew
14. Eddie Mathews
15. Frank Thomas

By tweaking the value of different stats you can manipulate the lists quite a bit. I read long arguments for Ted Williams, Tony Gwynn and Honus Wagner.

Tony Gwynn - Tony Gwynn. His career average of .3382 is the 19th-best in MLB history and it's even more impressive when you realize he sustained it for 20 seasons and in an era when pitching was reaching new heights of difficulty. Gwynn's consistency led him to win eight batting titles, which is second most of any player ever.

Honus Wagner - Honus Wagner dominated the league so much in his era that he won eight batting titles, which ties him for the second most in history. He also held down a career average of .328, he ranks 25th all-time in total bases and eighth in total hits.

Ted Williams His numbers are staggering. His career on-base percentage was .483; the great DiMaggio's was .398. He had the highest slugging percentage in the 1940's *and* the 1950's; no player has ever led in that category for consecutive decades.

Slugging and on-base average are the truest markers of offensive excellence; Williams led the American League in slugging and on-base percentage in the same season eight times, including six years in a row. He won six batting titles, four home runs crowns, two MVPs and two Triple Crowns. His 1941, '42 and '46 seasons surely are among the 10 best in history. What would his career have been like if he hadn't missed the '43-45 seasons to help defend America in World

War II? Or the two years he missed fighting in Korea? he was always a dominant hitter (except in 1959 when, at age 41, he hit .254 mainly because of a neck injury. He couldn't retire after a season like that). As a 20-year-old rookie in 1939, Williams batted .327 and drove in a league-leading 145 runs. In 1957, at age 37, he led the AL with a .388 average, and had two, three-homer games. In 1960, his final season, he batted .316 with 29 home runs, including a home run in his final at-bat at Fenway.

So who do you pick?

Joe Posnanski's series on players not in the HOF who should be considered (published in The Athletic) wraps up.

John Jordan (Buck) O'Neil

"The Soul of Baseball"

Miami Giants—New York Tigers—Shreveport Acme Giants—Memphis Red Sox—Zulu Cannibal Giants—Kansas City Monarchs, 1934-1955

Legendary player, manager, scout and spokesman whose contributions to baseball spanned eight decades. Three-time Negro Leagues All-Star who won a batting title and was widely regarded as the smoothest first baseman in the game. Managed the Kansas City Monarchs to three pennants. Became the first African American coach in the major leagues for the Cubs in 1962. A leading voice in keeping alive the memory of the Negro Leagues and co-founder of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum.

Buck O'Neil did not like talking about his one year with the Zulu Cannibal Giants. In his mind, it didn't advance the story he was trying to tell, didn't elevate the point he was trying to make. Buck wanted people to understand the humanity of the Negro Leagues. The way he figured it, everybody already knew — or thought they knew — about the racism behind it all, the indignities that the players suffered, the pain those players felt living in the shadows.

He believed with everything that the way to get people to listen, to truly understand, was to talk about the joy that overflowed in the leagues. "We could play, man!" he used to say, every day, and he could see people's hearts open up when he told the stories of [Satchel Paige](#) and [Oscar Charleston](#), talked about how fast [Cool Papa Bell](#) ran, remembered the three times he [heard a different sound](#) on a baseball diamond — the first when he was young and heard [Babe Ruth](#) hit a ball, the second when he was playing and heard [Josh Gibson](#) hit a ball, and the third, almost 50 years later, when he was older and a scout and he heard Bo Jackson hit a ball.

That, he felt sure, was the way in; the way to open people's eyes, to open people's minds, to get people to ask questions and feel a part of it all. Baseball, he used to say, is the greatest game ever invented — triples and stolen bases and diving catches and curveballs and a first

baseman digging a throw out of the dirt. And the pain? Well, who wanted to hear about the pain? He could see people's expressions change when it came to the pain, he could feel their hearts closing up. He could see them look away.

And he didn't want them to look away.

And so, he almost never talked about that year with the Zulu Giants. Buck was 25 years old and was trying to make a living playing baseball. Jobs were scarce. The Depression had wiped out so many Black teams, and it would be another decade before [Jackie Robinson](#) joined the Brooklyn Dodgers.

The Zulu Cannibal Giants were a team put together in Louisville by a man named Charlie Henry, a dependable Negro Leagues pitcher from the 1920s. Henry had come to believe that baseball was not enough for a Black team to survive. He came up, then, with the idea of an African baseball team — baseball's "Zulu" tribe — playing games while wearing grass skirts, swinging war clubs and doing various dances between pitches. The players took on names such as Wahoo and Limpopo, Kangkol and Moke and Tankafu. They painted skeletons on their bare chests. They wore no shoes.

In 1937, the team was bought by Abe Saperstein, who is more famous as the founder of the Harlem Globetrotters. And if there was one thing that Saperstein could do, it was shamelessly promote. And so the Zulu Cannibal Giants started to really turn up the volume. The ads began promising "the greatest and strangest Negro Baseball Team in America."

"This Tribe of Zulu Warriors who hail from the wildest section of Africa have won 236 of 251 games played in the U.S. and Canada," these ads continued. "These Wild Men from Borneo play in their native dress, Barefooted, grass skirts, long hair, war paint and rings in their ears and nose."

Their pitcher, Bihe, was according to promoters, a "reformed lion hunter" whose "appetite runs to snakes and reptiles."

The players were ordered to not talk during interviews but instead to answer each question by grunting "Ugh," or, for more verbose responses, "Ugh ugh ugh ugh."

The players on the Zulus, Buck remembered, tried to look on the bright side. They were happy to be making money playing baseball and they chose to see it as show business, some combination of baseball and professional wrestling and performance. Yes, they got cut up a bit when sliding in those grass skirts, and they hated playing barefoot, and Buck himself never quite got over the ways fans would look at them with that blend of horror and pity and cruelty.

"We would do anything to play ball," Buck told me as he explained.

But, for me, it was *where* he explained this that sticks with me. Like I said, Buck did not like talking about his one year with the Zulus. In all my time traveling with him for our book, “The Soul of Baseball” and beyond, I never once heard him bring it up in front of a crowd. And I only once heard him bring it up even in private conversation, and it was on this day when we traveled to Washington, D.C. It was a rainy day, and the car picked us up at the airport, and Buck looked out the window like he always did, and through the gray, he glimpsed the top of the Capitol Dome.

And that’s when he started talking about the Zulus. He talked about how demeaning it was ... and how, at the time, he just couldn’t see it.

“We had become conditioned to racism,” he said. “Hatred will steal your heart, man. You don’t have any fight left in you. You accept what’s around you.”

There was something about that Capitol Dome — so much on our minds these days — that brought this out of Buck O’Neil. I don’t think I ever met anyone who more deeply believed in the promise of America. He had reasons, so many reasons, to doubt, to question, to distrust, to disbelieve, but he continued always to see the best in people, the best in America. He answered every setback with a statement: Look how far we’ve come.

And that day in Washington, as he reflected on the humiliation he felt playing for the Zulu Cannibal Giants — or, perhaps more to the point, the humiliation he felt *having* to play for the Zulu Cannibal Giants because there were no other options — he talked about better days ahead. “There are always more good people than bad,” he insisted, as the car pulled up to the Capitol and he got out to walk up the steps in the rain.

Buck probably would disagree with being No. 2 on this list. It isn’t that he doubted his own place in the game — “Hey man,” he used to say sometimes, “I could play a little bit” — but because he’d want this space to be used, instead, to honor other players.

Buck used to carry around a list of Negro Leagues players and executives he felt sure belonged in the Hall of Fame. Some of them have since been elected. Some have not.

I’d like to share his list:

J.L. Wilkinson: White owner of the Kansas City Monarchs. Pioneered night baseball. Signed Jackie Robinson to play for his first professional baseball team. He’s in the Hall now.

Dick Lundy: Great shortstop. [Not in the Hall of Fame yet.](#)

Double Duty Radcliffe: Called “Double Duty” because he would pitch one half of a doubleheader and catch in the other. [Not in the Hall of Fame yet.](#)

Biz Mackey: One of the greatest defensive catchers in baseball history. He’s in the Hall.

Newt Allen: Buck felt like Allen was the most underrated player in the history of the Negro Leagues; he believed Allen — who could hit, run, field and throw — was as good as any second baseman in the leagues' history.

Ted Strong: Has a strong argument to be in the Baseball *and* the Basketball Hall of Fame; Strong was the star of the Harlem Globetrotters in the 1930s and late 1940s. A tall shortstop who Buck liked to compare to [Cal Ripken Jr.](#) Not in the Hall of Fame yet.

Wild Bill Wright: Great hitter — Buck said he got the “Wild Bill” nickname from the way he ran the bases, but he probably got it from his early years as a pitcher who could not throw strikes. He jumped to the Mexican League because he felt like it was only in Mexico that he was treated like a man.

Mule Suttles: Tremendous slugger. He's in the Hall now.

John Beckwith: Problematic personality but what a force at the plate. [Not in the Hall of Fame yet.](#)

Willard Brown: Actually played in the major leagues in '47, the year of Jackie Robinson, he's the first Black man to ever homer in the American League. He's in the Hall.

Andy Cooper: Superb pitcher and also O'Neil's first manager with the Monarchs. He's in the Hall now.

Saturnino Orestes Armas (Minnie) Miñoso Arrieta
New York Cubans—Cleveland—Chicago White Sox—St. Louis—Washington, 1946-1980

One of the great outfielders of the 1950s, the Cuban Comet combined power, speed and great defense. First Black player to play in Chicago. Roberto Clemente's hero. “He was the Jackie Robinson for all Latinos,” Orlando Cepeda said. Played in the Major Leagues in five different decades.

Minnie Miñoso?

Yes, that's right. Minnie Miñoso.

He is, in my mind, the biggest void in the Baseball Hall of Fame. It is, quite frankly, shocking and appalling that he was not elected while he was alive. And while you can make powerful arguments why [Barry Bonds](#) or [Roger Clemens](#) or [Pete Rose](#) or [Shoeless Joe Jackson](#) do not

have a place in the Hall of Fame, no such arguments exist for Miñoso. He was a great player, a pioneer and a powerful force for good within the game.

Every day that he is not in the Hall is a day that the Hall of Fame itself is diminished.

Miñoso did not become a regular in the Major Leagues until he was 25 years old (or 28 — his birth date has been much debated). That was the year he joined the Chicago White Sox and became the first Black player to play in Chicago. At that point, only Cleveland in the American League had integrated. (The St. Louis Browns briefly integrated in '47 but quickly got rid of their two Black players and returned to being all-White.)

The integration of baseball in Chicago is an under-told and enormously important story. Chicago was the second-biggest city in America and one of the centers of African American life. More than a half-million African Americans moved to Chicago during the Great Migration, and Chicago was in many ways the very heart of the Negro Leagues — it was, for example, where the East-West All-Star Game was played every year. Miñoso was the starting third baseman in the East-West game in 1947 and 1948 before he was signed by Cleveland.*

**It was actually Abe Saperstein, founder of the Harlem Globetrotters, who recommended Miñoso to Cleveland. He came to scout a pitcher named José Santiago, who would briefly pitch for Cleveland in the mid-50s. But Santiago, who was from Puerto Rico, kept talking about his Cuban teammate Miñoso. He said that Miñoso had tried out for the Cardinals, but it would be another six years before the team would sign a Black player. Saperstein watched Miñoso play and immediately included him in his report to Cleveland's Bill Veeck, who signed both players.*

Miñoso was almost certainly Major-League ready when Cleveland signed him, but Cleveland had a powerhouse team — they were defending World Series champions in '49 — and there wasn't anywhere to play him. They sent Miñoso to Triple-A San Diego, where he hit .297 with power and speed. Nothing changed by 1950, so they sent Miñoso *back* to San Diego, where this time he hit .339 with more power and more speed.

Then in '51, Cleveland still didn't have anyplace to play Miñoso — but the trade market was, shall we say, limited because no other team in the American League had a Black player. The White Sox were the team closest to integrating — former Negro Leagues stars Bob Boyd and Sam Hairston had impressed the team during spring training and were assumed to be called up at some point — and so Cleveland traded Miñoso to Chicago in a three-way deal that brought them back a left-handed pitcher and war hero, Lou Brissie.

Miñoso, finally freed to play ball every day, celebrated by homering in his first at-bat for the White Sox.

It remains unclear how Miñoso lost the Rookie of the Year award to Gil McDougald in 1951. Miñoso hit .326/.422/.500, all three slash lines significantly better than McDougald. He scored 40 more runs, had more doubles, triples (led the league with 14), drove in more runs, stole 17

more bases (led the league with 31), walked more, struck out less and played five different positions, going wherever the White Sox needed him.

When the award went to McDougald, who had a fine season for the World Series-winning Yankees, White Sox general manager Frank Lane about lost his mind. He thought that Miñoso not only should have won the Rookie of the Year, but should also have beaten out [Yogi Berra](#) for MVP, too.

“Certainly Berra shouldn’t have gotten it,” Lane said. “He had one of his worst years. He didn’t hit, and he got so he couldn’t even throw.”

This was a bit of an exaggeration — Berra hit .294 with 27 homers and led the Yankees in RBIs and runs — but he was not wrong that Miñoso was a more valuable hitter. Lane’s point was that the awards always seemed to go only to players on pennant-winning teams, and he thought that was unfair. As it turns out, that would be a theme in Miñoso’s career. He was never on a pennant-winning team, joining his fellow Chicago pioneer [Ernie Banks](#) as one of the best players to never play in a World Series.

But unlike Banks, Miñoso’s achievements just seemed to get overlooked.

He had a terrific year in ’53, hitting .313, scoring and driving in 100 runs, and leading the league in stolen bases for the third time.

In ’54, he was the best player in the American League — he hit .320/.411/.535 with 119 runs scored, 119 RBIs and he led the league with 19 triples.

He hit .316 in ’56, again led the league in triples, and cracked 21 homers.

He hit .310 and led the league with 36 doubles in ’57 and also won a Gold Glove in the inaugural year of the award.

He went back to Cleveland the next year and hit .302 with 24 homers. Hit .302 the next year with 21 homers and 92 RBIs.

Then he went back to Chicago in 1960 and put up *another* MVP-type season, hitting .311 with a league-leading 184 hits, 20 homers and 105 RBIs.

He never won an MVP award, never really came all that close. The awards almost exclusively went to pennant winners in those days, and pennant winners were almost exclusively Yankees — Berra won it again in ’54, the year that Miñoso absolutely should have been the MVP. Plus, this was the heyday of [Mickey Mantle](#), who overshadowed everybody.

From 1951-60, 10 seasons, Miñoso hit .307 with a .397 on-base percentage. Over that stretch, only Mantle scored more runs, only Mantle and Berra drove in more RBIs, only Luis Aparicio

stole more bases (one more base, actually), only Nellie Foxx cracked more hits. All of them are Hall of Famers. He hit more doubles than any of them.

Also, there's this: A SABR researcher named Scott Simkus [added things up](#), and he found that when you add together Miñoso's Major League hits, minor league hits, Cuban League hits, Mexican League hits and Negro Leagues hits, you come the staggering number of 4,073, seventh all-time. Here's that list of players with more than 4,000 total professional hits:

1. Pete Rose, 4,769
2. [Ty Cobb](#), 4,379
3. [Ichiro Suzuki](#), 4,367
4. [Henry Aaron](#), 4,245
5. Jigger Statz, 4,093
6. Julio Franco, 4,074
7. Minnie Miñoso, 4,073
8. [Derek Jeter](#), 4,059
9. [Stan Musial](#), 4,023

How about that? We'll save our essays on Franco and Statz for another time.

And Miñoso did all this even as he proudly carried the extraordinary burden of being the first Black player in Chicago and the first Black Latino star in the Major Leagues. As David Maraniss points out in his wonderful book, "Clemente," the legendary African American writer Wendell Smith wrote about what Miñoso had to deal with when he went to spring training in Florida:

You cannot live with your teammates.

You cannot eat the type of food that your athletic body requires.

You cannot get a cab in the mornings to take you to the ballpark, unless it happens to be Negro driven.

You cannot enter the hotel in which your manager lives without first receiving special permission.

You cannot go to a movie or nightclub in the heart of town, nor enjoy any of the other normal recreational facilities your white teammates enjoy so matter of factly.

You cannot bring your wife and children to the town where you are training because accommodations are not available where you are imprisoned.

You cannot, even if there are facilities, take them to the town's sprawling beaches or parks, unless, of course, they are designated as "Negro."

You cannot do anything you would normally do in any of the major-league cities where you make your living during the summer.

You are quartered in a neighborhood that ordinarily you would be ashamed to be seen in.

And so on and so on ... Miñoso and other Black players lived in residences without phones, they could not be treated by trainers immediately because they lived in the White hotels, you could not hang out with White teammates because they generally would not come to the part of town where the players were staying.

Miñoso so cheerfully endured. He overcame the indignities of life as Black man in baseball and history has often overlooked just how hard it was.

Speaking of Roberto Clemente, there has been some talk — rightfully so — about retiring his number for every team because of the extraordinary impact he had on the game. Well, Miñoso was Clemente's hero. Miñoso was Hall of Famer Tony Pérez's hero. Hall of Famer Orlando Cepeda called Miñoso the [Jackie Robinson](#) for Latinos.

It is utterly inconceivable that Minnie Miñoso is not in the Hall of Fame.

And yet, he really hasn't ever come close to getting elected. He never received even 25 percent of the BBWAA vote. In trying to put that puzzle together, I've looked closely at his Hall of Fame record — he first came on the ballot in 1969 after he retired the first time.

At that point, the Hall of Fame was utterly myopic about the impact of those pioneers who integrated the sport; heck, they still hadn't elected [Satchel Paige](#) to the Hall. Miñoso, who wasn't given a chance until years after he was ready and faded rapidly after he turned 35, lacked the numbers that Hall of Fame voters cared about then. He didn't have 2,000 hits. He fell short of being a lifetime .300 hitter. He got just six votes and disappeared from consideration.

Then, as you might know, Miñoso had [a strange second life](#) as a ballplayer — Bill Veeck had him return to the White Sox for three games in 1976, when Miñoso was (at least) 50. It was a stunt, the sort of thing Veeck loved. Then in 1980, Miñoso came back again for another Veeck stunt, this time so it could be said he played in five decades.

Then he returned to the Hall of Fame ballot in 1986, but now it had been almost 30 years since he was in his heyday. Miñoso did get some support — receiving as many as 90 votes — but there was no real groundswell for him. Few of the voters had seen him at his best. And even then, there wasn't a full appreciation for what Miñoso had meant. Heck, it wasn't until 1998 that the Hall of Fame Veterans' Committee finally elected Larry Doby, the first African American to play in the American League.

The closest Miñoso came to getting into the Hall of Fame, I think, was in 2006, when a special committee was put together to elect all the remaining Negro Leaguers who were worthy of election. They elected 17 people but Miñoso was not one of them, even though he was on the ballot. It has been reported that the committee did not vote for Miñoso because he only played three years in the Negro Leagues. I wish they could have been more open in their thinking. He played long enough in the Negro Leagues to be on the ballot, and he was a superb Negro Leagues player in his short span. I think they should have looked at his full life and impact.

In 2007, Miñoso was back on the ballot, this time voted for by Hall of Famers. Nobody was elected and Miñoso got just 15 percent of the vote. He should have been on the Historical Era ballot in 2009 but was left off for some reason. He did get on the 2012 Golden Era Committee

ballot, and he received nine of the 16 votes, which was pretty good but not good enough for election.

He was back on the ballot for the 2015 Golden Era ballot, and this time he got eight of 16 votes. Minnie Miñoso died a few months later.

I honestly cannot understand why this has even been a question in anyone's mind. It has been 23 years since everybody finally woke up and elected Larry Doby to the Hall of Fame and it was disgraceful that it took so long.

Well, how much more disgraceful is this? Miñoso was every bit the player Doby was, probably better, and he overcame the same prejudice and had a similarly enormous impact. He made baseball a better game and was beloved like few players in the game's history. We can argue about all those greats like Rose and Bonds and Clemens and the rest, but let's be clear: They all stand in line behind Minnie Miñoso.

And if you have the time and interest, a couple of long thoughtful pieces from The Athletic (and why aren't you a subscriber to The Athletic?).

What next for MLB expansion: Portland, Charlotte, even Vegas? Let's check the data

If you were Major League Baseball, and you had the power to put two major league franchises in cities that currently don't have teams, where would you put them? How would you make the decision?

Back in 2018, commissioner Rob Manfred laid out what you might call finalists for any sort of expansion process.

"Portland, Las Vegas, Charlotte, Nashville in the United States, certainly Montreal, maybe Vancouver, in Canada," the commissioner told hosts on an FS1 show. "We think there's places in Mexico we could go over the long haul."

Of course, since then things have changed. While a loss in revenue preceded past expansions, Manfred recently told reporters that the pandemic has mostly [pushed the timeline further out](#).

"My sense is that the COVID experience has probably slowed the expansion process down," Manfred said in a virtual event conducted in September. "We haven't even formally begun a process. I think it's probably a little further away now as a result of the events of 2020."

Even with a little water on the coals, there is almost a sense of inevitability about the process in the long term, evident even in Manfred's own quotes. It's been almost 30 years since the last time the league expanded, and the American population has grown by about 70 million in that time frame. There must be major-league sized population centers that aren't being served by major league teams right now, right? There also must be data that can help us figure out which cities check the right boxes — we might also figure out along the way which data matter more than others.

The first requirement for a new MLB city might be that it has enough population and wealth to support a team. Thanks to [Andy K.](#), and his hard work on the data and visualizations for this piece, we can see what the relationship between population density and per-capita income looks like on a map.

Per-capita income (color: more yellow means more well-off) vs. population density (height: more height means denser) for American counties in 2020. (Andy K. using census data on [kepler.gl](#))

It's a big map, but if you open in a new tab, you can zoom in on different locales and perhaps you'll notice something: Major population centers show up as yellow (well-off) and rise up off the map (have decent density). So, this method does a good job of showing us where the cities are, and that the cities on the shortlist are there for a reason. But does it help us compare cities? To some extent.

New Orleans vs. Charlotte in terms of per-capita income (color) and population density (height). (Andy K. using census data on [kepler.gl](#))

These two locations don't seem to have the same depth and breadth when it comes to population density and income. But when you try to compare some of the cities on Manfred's list, they start to look more comparable and don't have as much contrast as these two cities. And there's also the fact that this is a static snapshot. Are these cities going in different directions?

"Charlotte is one of the fastest, largest growing cities without Major League Baseball," [says Rick Curti](#), the founder of a grassroots effort called Charlotte Bats working to bring baseball to the city. "They're looking for markets where there is growth, and Charlotte fits that profile to a T."

And he's right, growth matters. All things being equal, baseball would rather set up shop in a city that's trending toward adding more people, and perhaps a young one at that. Among our contenders, Charlotte stands out as a city that ticks the right boxes in this regard.

Possible cities by growth & youth

Monterrey	Mexico		81,000
Orlando	United States	33.3	31,745
Charlotte	United States	33.9	31,503
Portland	United States	36.8	29,709
Vancouver	Canada	39	25,000
Montreal	Canada	40	24,500
Nashville	United States	34.1	22,257
New Orleans	United States	35.9	17,517
Las Vegas	United States	37.4	16,048

Among the cities in the United States, only Orlando matches Charlotte's youth and growth. More on this later, but Orlando is in a tough spot geographically. Manfred himself has pointed to the stadium issues in Oakland and nearby Tampa Bay as priorities over expansion, and Orlando is so close to Tampa (94 miles from where the Magic play to where the Rays play) that it threatens the Rays' "zone of control," [a 75-mile radius around a city](#).

Otherwise, youth and growth are important, but are they equally important?

"You want younger people, but older people have more money. But sometimes people talk about a city dying," said J.C. Bradbury, Kennesaw State University economics professor and author of "The Baseball Economist." "Population growth is fine, because for the potential for that market to grow, you don't want to go to a city that's shrinking."

So Portland's growth is possibly more important than Nashville's youth, but Charlotte and Portland float to the top again. Things aren't looking as great for Las Vegas and New Orleans so far in the numbers, but there's something common to both of those slightly older, slightly less

wealthy, slightly smaller potential fan bases: tourism. Those cities are tremendous draws, and that adds a lot of visiting bodies and money that could help drive enough revenue to support a local team.

Accommodation and food service sales by city. (Andy K. using census data on kepler.gl)

This could have been a table, but the visualization makes it obvious that Las Vegas may have the type of tourism industry to bang with the big teams in America. It was the No. 1 city in the United States by accommodation and food service sales in the last census, and joined only New York and Los Angeles among cities that crossed \$20 billion in such sales. However, it seems that tourism might not move the needle for most candidate cities. Compare Nashville's \$2.2 billion in tourism revenue, based on a fair amount of music-related travel, to Charlotte's \$2.6 billion, or Portland's \$3.6 billion, or even Cleveland's \$2.5 billion, and you'll see that there's just not that much of a spread for most U.S. cities.

Vegas may have a unique advantage over the other cities, but there are other ways local industry can be a benefit to a team's expansion proposal. Retired outfielder Dale Murphy, who has written for *The Athletic*, is associated with the effort to bring baseball to Portland, and he had some thoughts about that city's place in the sports industry as a whole.

"We like to call Portland sportsland because Nike is there, Under Armour is there, Adidas is there, Columbia is there, and I'm just scratching the surface," Murphy said in a recent call. "It's a sports athletic culture."

An executive with experience growing a minor league team confirmed that local industry is important, but perhaps not because of type. More important is that there are large enough companies based in your city to buy sponsorships, and suites, in the stadium you're likely to build. Is there a big difference between these possible cities when it comes to how many large companies call the cities home?

Here's a table that shows how healthy the local industry is in each baseball market, existing or potential. Private and public company size and revenues and locations were provided by Morningstar, and to be considered for this table the company had to have more than \$500 million in revenues last year.

Baseball markets by local industry size

New York City	258	2,105,648,886,531
Arlington	134	1,259,886,113,338
Chicago	157	1,077,306,438,000
Seattle	28	767,798,615,000
Minneapolis	49	754,743,908,000
Houston	134	752,497,385,000
Oakland	91	712,350,413,000
San Francisco	91	712,350,413,000
Philadelphia	63	662,468,551,281
Boston	112	598,416,968,609
Atlanta	75	541,220,767,000
Toronto	74	474,719,538,410
Detroit	47	455,534,626,000
Anaheim	108	450,381,653,414
Los Angeles	108	450,381,653,414
Washington DC	64	425,523,015,000
Saint Louis	39	381,290,138,000
Charlotte	32	355,332,492,000
Miami	49	257,576,747,000
Cincinnati	18	243,339,081,000
Denver	62	225,697,727,000
Pittsburgh	37	174,006,218,000
Montreal	27	172,505,548,545
Phoenix	47	160,337,067,000
Nashville	26	155,119,511,000
Cleveland	31	140,371,585,000
Tampa	17	131,071,994,000
Milwaukee	23	101,184,237,000
Kansas City	26	95,118,401,000
San Diego	22	65,976,011,000
Vancouver	26	61,969,621,391
Portland	17	61,070,269,000
Las Vegas	18	56,351,631,000
Baltimore	12	30,620,923,000
Orlando	6	19,777,730,000
New Orleans	4	15,514,246,000
Monterrey	1	7,964,629,290

Charlotte is once again way out in front of the competition, and it looks as though the spread is rather large. Even though Charlotte has only six more big company headquarters than Nashville, those companies have a collective \$200 billion more in revenues. That seems relevant to the likelihood that the local business community can provide the sponsorship and suite money a newly minted expansion team would be looking for.

Does this take Portland down a peg? Not necessarily. For one thing, there are scheduling reasons to like having another team on the West Coast, and that's not insignificant, since one of the benefits of having 32 teams is realignment. Balancing an East Coast team with a West Coast one would be prudent for the schedule makers trying to keep travel requirements down.

And for another, the other pro sports in Portland seem to be thriving, providing a sort of "proof of concept" for baseball.

"Portland is legendary for the support of their teams," Murphy said. "Look at the Blazers, look at the Timbers, look at the women's soccer league, which was averaging over 12,000 fans a game before COVID. Elite athletes show up here all the time because that's where things are happening."

Candidate cities' non-MLB attendance

Monterrey		
Orlando	18	7
Charlotte	23	8
Portland	7	4
Vancouver	11	9
Montreal	19	2
Nashville	*	21 18
New Orleans	25	7
Las Vegas	*	13

**Started playing during 2020*

It's problematic to look only at 2019 attendance as we have here, because one of the biggest movers on attendance is team strength, and that can ebb and flow. And even though Portland does support their basketball and [both](#) soccer teams well, does that mean they'll support baseball the same way? Couldn't other teams in the market be seen as competition for that sport dollar?

The evidence in public research on the subject is inconclusive, with [one 2005 study](#) finding that the existence of an NFL team was associated with decreased MLS attendance, but the existence of an NBA team was associated with *increased* MLS attendance. Different sports interact with

each other differently, so Portland could end up joining Cincinnati, Seattle and Toronto as cities with top-ten MLS attendance and below-average baseball attendance.

Still, the populace in Portland is willing to support other sports teams, to the point where the soccer team did a recent \$85 million renovation to its stadium. And stadiums seem like a big part of any organized expansion city effort, for good measure since there's a documented ["novelty effect"](#) in which a new stadium leads to more attendance simply by being new. Just look at the beautiful renderings put out by the Portland Diamond Project for their carousel and waterfront development including a modest-sized baseball park.

(Portland Diamond Project)

"You don't want the 50K seat stadiums any more," Murphy said. "The last proposal was for 24K, expandable to 30, with a retractable roof, an intimate experience."

The new stadium has become such a barrier to entry that it's almost irrelevant once the drawings are up and the investors are lined up. It's the draw of a new stadium that matters more than the specifics.

"This is something that baseball has proven they can go and get by going to the community," Bradbury pointed out. "You could see having an existing stadium as being a detriment."

While the new stadium is part of the point — and maybe why this has taken a backseat to those efforts in Tampa and Oakland, just think of how the Rays' talk of playing half their games in Montreal has complicated matters for those expansion efforts — we can't lose sight of why the league would agree to expansion in the first place. Sure, the stadium is nice, but the point is money. And not necessarily present money vs. money down the line, as it has been characterized recently. It's about growing the pie so that a relatively smaller sliver of the pie ends up being more than the current sliver.

"Baseball is not cash constrained — they don't need that cash, they are not credit constrained, they aren't heavily leveraged as a group," Bradbury said. "They're not like Major League Soccer, a league that's selling on speculation. Baseball teams are already generating revenue. An owner is going to know that they are going to be splitting revenues with more teams in the future, but they will want a new owner that will capture back that expected lost future revenue by growing the overall pie. Are these revenues that weren't available to us before because nobody was

watching TV there? What revenue are we missing out from not having a team there? You don't add a team because you need cash now. This may be complicated some by the coronavirus, but that's how I would traditionally think about expansion."

So maybe this table is the one that matters the most, particularly for a league that has, even before COVID, seen more and more of their revenue come from television contracts. Which cities represent the biggest untapped television markets? Here are the numbers from Nielsen, with area viewers in millions, and the designated market area (DMA) rankings in America.

Candidate cities by TV market size

Orlando	1.5M	18
Charlotte	1.1M	21
Portland	1.1M	22
Nashville	1.0M	28
Las Vegas	0.7M	39
New Orleans	0.6M	50

Unfortunately, a good chunk of the data we're looking at here is either unavailable or inconsistently measured in other countries, but in terms of untapped domestic televisions, Orlando, Charlotte and Portland are the candidates that would produce a new top-25 market in baseball. There's still something to figure out about ideal distances from existing markets, though.

Consider Monterrey, Mexico. Even without the data, it's hard to argue that putting a team in Monterrey wouldn't access a new slew of television viewers and benefit from adding more Spanish-speaking fans to boot, especially for a sport so rooted in Latin America. You'd think. Once again, the research that's out there is inconsistent, leading Bradbury to conclude in [a recent paper](#) that "though there are reasons to think larger Hispanic populations may provide more support for MLS clubs, the empirical findings did not strongly support this hypothesis."

And then there's just the distance from the nearest park: Monterrey would immediately become the park that was farthest away from its nearest neighbor in baseball, as it would be nearly 500 miles from the park in Houston. Is that too far?

How far away would the new park be?

Monterrey	1598	490
New Orleans	1236	347
Montreal	1390	309
Las Vegas	1647	273
Charlotte	1141	244

Nashville	1007	238
Portland	2071	173
Vancouver	2254	143
Orlando	1399	106

Five hundred miles is a bit far for your closest neighbor, but in terms of average travel, Monterrey would fit among the West Coast teams. And then there's the other question: What is too close? There's the 75-mile radius rule, but then there's also the fact that baseball is trying to grow the sport. Are these markets full of baseball fans already?

"I grew up in Charlotte, and it's pretty much Braves country," Bradbury said. "Atlanta is the capital of the South; everyone from far away sorta likes Atlanta."

Could we see the influence of existing teams, visually? Andy K. did some great work here in an effort to capture the reach of a team's fan base, by using Google trends data on specific team name searches, anchored to that team's geographic location, with two shades that roughly represent 50 percent and 25 percent online market share. What is pictured is not necessarily "size" because different geographic swathes capture different amounts of people because of population density, but this is an attempt to put the reach of a team on a map.

As far as Monterrey is away, it's still under the influence of the Houston Astros market, as you can see here.

Fan reach by Google trends share (50 percent in black, 25 percent in gray). (Andy K.)

Charlotte, on the other hand, is close to being in that dreaded 50 percent area for the Braves, underlining some risk that this is not a new market.

Fan reach by Google trends share (50 percent in black, 25 percent in gray). (Andy K.)

Orlando is inside that line for Tampa, which seems problematic, but Nashville might actually be an island between the Braves and Cards.

Fan reach by Google trends share (50 percent in black, 25 percent in gray). (Andy K.)

“Nashville is a great city,” [Dave Dombrowski told](#) *The Athletic*’s Chad Jennings before he left the Nashville expansion effort to run the Phillies. “To me, it’s a Major League Baseball city. The people here are quality individuals with whom I’ve worked, and I love their philosophies. People in the community that I’ve met with, you can tell are very excited.”

Montreal, Las Vegas and New Orleans are all fairly safe in this category — and all three have complicating factors. And even this innovative attempt to identify new markets may not tell the whole story. Take a look at Portland, which looks awkwardly close to Seattle’s dark-shaded fan base.

Fan reach by Google trends share (50 percent in black, 25 percent in gray). (Andy K.)

That’s the state of things today. Could things change if [the natural rivalry](#) between Portland and Seattle was stoked by the addition of a new baseball team?

“Can you imagine the geographic rivalries and excitement that could be created with a team in Portland and a team in Seattle?” Murphy asked. “Seattle may feel differently about this, obviously. There’s a natural rivalry there.”

Perhaps these graphs only represent the now, and not the potential. A new team in Charlotte may have to deal with attendance surges when Atlanta comes to town, at first, but the hope would be that a rivalry would develop over time, creating new fans — and a new fandom map.

In any case, it seems like now is the time to consider this. Not only would it be a short-term infusion of cash, but the present may represent a time for us to consider how things are being done, and how baseball can hope to grow and flourish in the future.

“What’s going on here in baseball, 2020 has spurred and motivated change,” Murphy said, “and some excitement under the radar that is evident in things that 2020 forced us to think about — stuff like the universal DH, the expanded playoffs, and the lost revenue that may be accelerating this conversation. This was a year for innovation in baseball. Where do we want to be in two years? You have to innovate and go forward and create revenue and excitement for the game.”

And some of the things baseball is doing right now in the minor leagues might actually incentivize leadership to think about expansion in the short term.

“With MLB shrinking the minor leagues, you have to worry about rival leagues springing up; it might seem silly, but it’s something it could happen,” Bradbury said. “There are more minor league players out there looking to play for cheap — remember that David Ortiz was a castoff — maybe some international players, and you might get a small league that gets a foothold and becomes real competition.”

Despite baseball’s contention that expansion is being back-burnered due to COVID-19, there’s enough going on structurally — in terms of lagging attendance, growing reliance on television money, time since last expansion, and opportunities for sport growth — to think it might happen soon. And when it happens, they’ll have to pore over this same sort of data as they narrow the candidates down to the best two.

“It’s like choosing a fighter in Mortal Kombat,” urban designer Josh Frank, who is located in the Tampa Bay area and consulted with the Rays on a ballpark as part of his college coursework at the University of South Florida, [told R.J. Anderson at CBS Sports](#). “All these metro areas have categories — some of them are higher and some of them are lower — and it’s about trying to choose the right fighter. You try to find one that probably has a little bit of everything and isn’t very heavily weighted in one or two categories.”

Talk to anyone associated with these efforts, though, and there is a palpable energy and passion for this moment in particular.

“I played in front 80k people at Mile High on opening day,” Murphy remembered of his brief time with the expansion Rockies. “It’s remarkable, it’s so energizing for communities and players. It’s time. Now. We’re all feeling that.”

MLB agent survey, part 1: Reps talk labor relations, best players and worst orgs

By Marc Carig, Brittany Ghiroli and Patrick Mooney

Major League Baseball muddled through the 2020 season, navigating the treacherous terrain brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. It was without precedent. The ripple effects will be felt for years. Commissioner Rob Manfred has claimed operating losses of more than \$3 billion, a figure that has loomed over the glacial pace of the offseason. Teams have treated the luxury tax as a salary cap. With less than a month until camps are supposed to open, the sport still faces myriad questions. It is within this context that *The Athletic* reached out to 23 player agents, in hopes that their collective insights might lead to a snapshot of where the game stands.

The agents were granted anonymity so they could speak freely. They represent a cross-section of the industry, from a wide range of backgrounds. Some have represented players for decades, others have only recently joined the agent ranks. All shared a concern for the game in the midst of a tumultuous time.

In interviews conducted over the last three weeks, our panel of agents tackled questions ranging from matters on the field to issues that will play out behind the scenes. Baseball remains in a fight to maintain its place within popular culture and the ecosystem of professional sports. It will be made more complicated by a collective bargaining agreement that will be negotiated [among parties that do not trust one another](#). These topics are among others that will be addressed in the wide-ranging survey. This the first of two parts:

1. How would you grade MLB's handling of the 2020 pandemic season, in terms of health and safety (A-to-F scale)?

Grade: A

Responses: 8

- “Nobody had a complete understanding of what the virus was, how it would impact people, what the short- or long-term effects were. Major League Baseball and the Players Association tried to put their heads together and employ the smartest people out there to put the athletes in the best position to be successful and be safe and salvage whatever sort of season that we could.”

Grade: A-

Responses: 2

- “The beginning was rough, but no one had a clue what was going on or what they were doing.”

Grade: B+
Responses: 1

Grade: B
Responses: 6

- “You can’t forget the absolute clusterfuck that was the first month or so.”

Grade: B-
Responses: 3

- “Especially with what’s going on now in the NBA and other sports, I think all things considered, it wasn’t so bad. They have advantages in terms of the timing of the season and the outdoor nature of the sport. I’m usually hard on MLB about what they do. But it wasn’t that bad. The pivotal thing is that they changed the protocols after the Marlins and Cardinals had their outbreaks.”
- “Dock ‘em for the World Series fiasco.”

Grade: C
Responses: 1

Grade: C-
Responses: 1

Grade: D
Responses: 1

Justin Turner getting pulled from Game 6 of the World Series after testing positive for COVID-19 — and then returning to the field for the celebration with Dodgers teammates, staffers and their families — became an enduring image from the 2020 season.

2. Will there be a labor stoppage after the 2021 season?

Yes: 8

Players and agents remember how teams operated before the pandemic, manipulating service time, squeezing middle-class free agents and waiting until spring training to sign stars like Manny Machado and Bryce Harper. Those tensions existed during a period of runaway growth for a multibillion-dollar industry. Now the current, five-year collective bargaining agreement is set to expire on Dec. 1 at 11:59 p.m. ET.

- “The whole system needs to be blown up and they start from scratch.”
- “This group of owners has a lot of egos and the players’ union finally has a lawyer who knows how to fight.”

The MLBPA hired Bruce Meyer, a longtime labor attorney, to be its chief negotiator in 2018 and surround Tony Clark with more legal firepower. A common refrain is that both sides have too much money to lose to risk shutting down the game again over a labor dispute. One agent deferred, saying that the answer hinges on how the return-to-play plans are executed this year: “We’re at such a crossroads here.”

No: 14

- “There’s such a lack of trust between the players and the owners. When you experience a lack of transparency and you feel wronged, it doesn’t necessarily matter what numbers you can furnish because a good CBA can make anything look good or look bad. How someone feels is how they feel. Right now, the players feel like sophisticated billionaires are showing disingenuous losses.”
- “The confusion is: ‘OK, if I was supposed to make a billion this year, but I only made \$700 million instead, well, you still made \$700 million. So you didn’t lose \$300 million, you just didn’t make as much.’ That’s kind of the way the players are looking at their own salaries: ‘I was supposed to make \$1 million this year. I only made \$370,000. Well, I didn’t lose \$630,000. I just only made 37 percent of what I was supposed to make. You know what, what’s done is done and I’m grateful to have gotten a season in.’”
- “We need to move forward and acknowledge the fact that these TV deals are bringing in a boatload of money. The owners need to acknowledge that a partnership exists and we all need to pull up our bootstraps, be more transparent and put a product back on the field that the fans can appreciate. But I am cautiously optimistic that we are going to avoid a work stoppage because I don’t believe that either side wants to go through with (it) coming off a truncated season where everybody is feeling a financial hit.”

4. Assuming Mike Trout is No. 1, who is the next best player in baseball?

One full point was awarded when a player was named as a sole answer, with half a point going to those who were among multiple answers. Of course, no point system was needed. It was a runaway. Congratulations, Southern California.

Mookie Betts: 17 points

- “Mike Trout’s son. OK, if you want a legit answer it’s Mookie Betts.”
- “Hard to pick a guy who pitches and only plays once a week.”
- “Mookie. That’s clear-cut. The question should be who’s third.”

Ronald Acuña Jr.: 3

Max Scherzer: 1

Fernando Tatis Jr.: 1

Jacob deGrom: 1

Christian Yelich: 1/2

Juan Soto: 1/2

5. Will Tony La Russa be a success or a failure as White Sox manager?

Hiring La Russa was a controversial move — even before the general public learned of his DUI arrest in Arizona last February. The White Sox named La Russa to the position on Oct. 29, the day after he was formally charged by the Maricopa County Attorney's Office. At the time, there were questions about how La Russa would relate to a new generation of players and adapt to a game that he hadn't managed since the 2011 World Series. La Russa reached a guilty plea agreement in December. The White Sox continued adding to a playoff team, trading for starting pitcher Lance Lynn and signing closer Liam Hendriks to a four-year, \$54 million contract.

Success: 11

- “I assume he's going to keep his nose clean. It's a big assumption, really. I think the game has passed him by completely, but he's got a loaded team, so he'll succeed. Maybe the old style might work a little bit. The game is cookie cutter and maybe Tony brings back some of the old stuff and it works. I'm rooting for him.”
- “You could plug in (Rick) Renteria still or Manager X with limited experience and they'll be good because of the current roster. So to answer wins and losses, yes, they will (be a success). But is that all attributed to the skipper? I don't think so. I think Rick Hahn has done a great job building that club.”
- “Knowing Jerry Reinsdorf and how he functions, it's not surprising. A chimpanzee could probably win 90 games with that White Sox roster. But what is success? Three years to win a pennant? I think they'll win a pennant in the next three years.”

Reinsdorf has a strong sense of loyalty, which has been both a positive and a negative during his decades running the White Sox and Chicago Bulls. La Russa remained on good terms with Reinsdorf, even after Ken Harrelson fired him in the middle of the 1986 season. As White Sox chairman, Reinsdorf has made some unconventional hires — Ozzie Guillen led the 2005 team to the franchise's first World Series title in 88 years. Among all 30 MLB clubs, Ken Williams remains the only Black man serving as the No. 1 executive in baseball operations.

Failure: 10

- “There's not just a disconnect with the players, but a disconnect with the philosophy of the front office. The only one he's on the same page with is Jerry.”
- “We are going to see socially aware players like Tim Anderson (and) this incredible, diverse front office and you have the largest display of white privilege in the world (as manager). It's a nightmare waiting to happen.”
- “It's going to be a shitshow.”

Unsure: 2

- “I hope everybody has success. I am a glass-half-full type of guy and I never want to root against somebody. But I just have a hard time seeing him being the best guy available for that position. Candidly, I think the best offseason hire is the Tigers and A.J. Hinch. La Russa is a Hall of Famer for a reason, and the White Sox obviously have tremendous players on the field and smart people in the office. (But) the game is transitioning. The younger players are gravitating more toward managers that they can relate to.”
- “He’s got the team. But a (76)-year-old guy connecting with a team that’s predominantly Latin and young? I don’t think it was a great hire. In this day and age, whether it’s analytics or players trending younger because older players are getting pushed out — fewer veteran players — you need a younger, David Ross kind of guy. A.J. Hinch, Alex Cora, those kinds of guys. If you’re (76), I don’t care who you are, you’re going to be somewhat out of touch.”

6. With Steve Cohen as owner, will the Mets win a World Series in three years?

Cohen has expressed that he might be slightly disappointed if a title isn’t brought back to Flushing within three to five years. He has shown a propensity to spend. But it seems that money isn’t everything — and a slight majority is betting against.

Yes: 11

- “He’s the most inspiring owner I’ve seen in 20 years.”
- “I’m excited to see an owner actually getting out there and trying to compete.”
- “The guy has a lot of money and he wants to win. He’s going to get the best players, and the best players win the games.”
- “He’s going to put together a winning team and do it the right way. He’s going to build the proper infrastructure and build it to last. And I think that he’ll spend the money that you need.”

No: 12

- “I love what they are doing though.”
- “In five years, there’s a good chance.”
- “There’s a lot of randomness with who wins the World Series. You need to have a lot of things go right. I’m not a Sandy Alderson guy. I think his time has passed a little bit. They have a good roster. They still have holes. They don’t have the playoff experience. The Padres and the Dodgers to me have clearly better rosters. Their pitching staff after Jacob deGrom has some major issues. If you look at the teams they’re competing with, I just don’t think they are at that level. They’re probably the third or fourth team in the National League. But that answer could change after a few more months.”

7. Why haven’t the Yankees won a World Series since 2009?

The Yankees, as their fans will tell you, have won 27 World Series championships. But it's been a while, which their fans will also note. We phrased this as an open question, though the answers fit within five buckets:

Bad luck (7)

- “Since they made that transition to a younger group, I think they’ve had a World Series caliber roster. It’s just bad luck and circumstances more than anything. They’ve had a bit of a weak starting staff, but if I had to point out one thing, it’s just luck.”
- “They’re in position to win one every year. They haven’t done anything wrong. It’s just been luck of the draw. They do a great job. They’re very underrated in the way they find their players now. It’s not the old days where every single player is a big free agent signing.”
- “A lot of it has to do with health, losing key contributors down the stretch. ... You look at when they lose a guy like a (Giancarlo) Stanton and (Aaron) Judge coming down the stretch, I think it hurts them.”
- “Injuries. (Brian) Cashman is one of the best GMs in the game.”
- “Honestly? It just seems like bad luck. They’ve had injuries, too, but I’ve always respected the job Cashman does. To stay in New York that long without getting run out of town? Impressive.”

Baseball is hard (5)

- “If you’re a fan and your team has a chance to compete and be a playoff team every year, that’s all you can ask for. Only one team can win it every year.”
- “I don’t think there’s something wrong there. It’s tough to win a World Series.”
- “It just goes to show you how hard baseball is. Regardless of payroll, whether it’s injuries ... sometimes things don’t work out that way. It’s really hard to win.”
- “Because it’s difficult to win a World Series.”

Pitching (4)

- “I would say pitching depth.”
- “They really haven’t had the pitching. They’ve had the bats — and a lot of injuries.”

Payroll (4)

- “They are injured a lot, or seem to be. I can’t pretend to know the inner workings of that team and why they failed previously. I do wonder now why, in a year where many teams aren’t going for it, they wouldn’t try to load up and be that team? Why are they letting a small market like San Diego be the only team that does this?”
- “(The) Stanton trade has hamstrung them. Living by the luxury tax they don’t have the flexibility they need to win a World Series in this day and age.”
- “They stopped spending like they used to before 2009. ... If George were alive, the payroll would be \$350 million. Bauer wouldn’t even be a free agent today. Lindor would be a Yankee. The club would be different.”

Other (3)

- “They’re spending the necessary money. I really don’t know. They’re also making a push at the postseason every year. It’s not like they’re not winning. I do think that for the teams that go deeper into the postseason, they do kind of have that ‘It Factor.’ I look at a Mookie Betts being that ‘It Factor.’ When you have a guy like that who can just put the team on his back and keep everybody (moving) in the right direction, those for me are the teams that go deep and win. That’s kind of what it was when you look at the Cubs (in 2016). They just had a really, really good vibe, and they had a lot of guys that were leaning in as opposed to individual stars. If there was one knock on the Yankees, it’s that their reputation is historically they’ve got no problem accumulating individual stars. But ever since (Derek) Jeter left, there hasn’t been the guy to rally around.”
- One agent noted the 2017 season, when the Yankees lost a seven-game ALCS to the Astros, who were, ahem, getting a little help: “They should have been in that World Series. And then anything goes ... Players gotta play, right? For the Yankees, it’s not the front office, it’s not Cashman, it’s not resources. I just think that the ball hasn’t bounced their way. But I think it’s going to, soon.”

8. Where will Trevor Bauer sign?

Bauer is a polarizing figure and the answers reflected that. While some pondered and made logical guesses, others opted not to answer or professed it mattered little where baseball’s top free agent lands. Agents did not comment on this specifically, but [Bauer’s social media activity](#) has generated controversy and, in multiple instances, provoked harassment by his followers. One agent cautioned that some clubs were leery of Bauer: “Great player, Cy Young, no doubt about it. But there’s a lot of baggage.”

Tie: Blue Jays and Angels, 5 points

The Jays have been in the news recently for adding George Springer, and both they and the Angels are in need of a frontline starter.

Mets: 4 points

Dodgers: 1 1/2 points

While the Mets have made a splash in trading for shortstop Francisco Lindor, several agents still predicted they’d go after Bauer. The Dodgers got one full vote and another mention from an agent who was torn. “He wants \$250 million and they are holding out for the Dodgers.”

Mariners, Yankees, Giants: 1 point

The Korean Baseball Organization also received a vote, which is less about Bauer’s talent and more about it being late January without a deal.

“I’m tired of (his social media behavior),” said one agent, “and I think a lot of players are, too.”

9. Where should MLB put its next expansion team?

OK, so maybe [expansion isn’t coming as quickly](#) as we thought to the sport. (After all, it’s part of the reason Dave Dombrowski agreed to go run the Phillies.) But [at some time it will](#), and this was a pretty obvious two-city race.

Nashville: 13 points

Vegas: 6 points

- “Selfishly? Vegas. Realistically? Nashville,” said one agent.
- “I’d move the Rays to Vegas (now).”

Dombrowski was part of the group pushing for Nashville and many feel the success of the Golden Knights in the NHL means Vegas is a viable city for baseball, too.

“As for betting, it’s everywhere now, so who cares? As long as the players aren’t betting on games.”

Three other cities got one point each, and those who voted that way acknowledged these were more dreams than possibilities for the league: **London**, **Mexico** and **Montreal**.

10. Where’s the worst place to play?

A caveat here became apparent very quick: Are we talking about the worst facilities and city or the worst organization? One is much easier to judge than the other, and we gave our agents plenty of room to answer both, either or take both into account and blend the two into one answer.

The Rays and Athletics got the most votes for terrible facilities, which makes sense as both teams are trying to move out of their stadiums.

- “Oakland. Stadium is gross, nothing around the ballpark. players feel like they have to live far away, San Francisco too far away to commute. It’s just a disaster. You look around and say this is the big leagues, really? Billy Beane is a little overrated. His reputation is built on a good book and a movie. Miguel Tejada was not a product of ‘Moneyball.’ They figured out analytics existed but didn’t know what to do with it. Oakland, that’s an easy one. Tampa’s a close second, but they’re a better-run organization.”
- “Tampa Bay. If I’m a big-leaguer, that’s the worst stadium to go play in, the worst (surrounding) area (around the ballpark). That’s pretty shitty to me. But now as an agent, prospect-wise, I would love for my players to be drafted by Tampa Bay. They’re going to develop them and they’re going to get there quickly.”

Players often enjoy the underdog element in being part of the A's or Rays, assuming you can get past the poor facilities. The Pirates and Orioles were also labeled with reputations for being difficult teams.

- “Pittsburgh does a terrible job, the medical stuff, the training, the communication has been terrible for a decade. Every player I’ve had loved playing in Oakland though, because it’s an ‘us against the world’ mentality.”
- “Baltimore isn’t great. The last six or seven years, guys who I have had in that organization haven’t said anything nice. There’s no communication.”
- “Last resort like, shit, we have nothing else? Let’s go with Baltimore; I think Pittsburgh is at least trying to win.”

“There’s the worst city and there’s the worst organizations. If it’s organization, then it’s the Pirates because of the owner. The city’s great, the ballpark’s beautiful, and it’s a baseball city when they’re winning. If it’s a city, then Detroit.”

Toronto got mentioned enough to warrant a mention here, too.

“The No. 1, most common team put on a no-trade list that I’ve ever been a part of is the Toronto Blue Jays. I don’t know why because I think Toronto is an amazing city. But I think it’s a combination of AL East, Canada taxes and probably travel for their families. If you’re a California kid, you probably don’t want to be playing for the Blue Jays. That’s a pain in the butt for your family to get there.”

“The turf in Toronto is particularly awful. It wears your body down. I love the city, I love the ballpark. But the turf is a killer.”

Of course, as several agents pointed out, this is a pretty privileged problem to have. You’re in the big leagues and every minor league player would gladly trade places.

“We talk about [tanking](#). But for every place that’s tanking, somebody’s getting service time and providing for their families. So I have a hard time saying that. They might get an opportunity to springboard from there and play somewhere else for five, six, seven more years. For every man’s shitty mudhole is somebody’s great swimming pool.”

MLB agent survey, part 2: The toughest negotiators, future leaders and more

By Marc Carig, Brittany Ghiroli and Patrick Mooney

Major League Baseball is still planning to start spring training as scheduled in two of the country’s COVID-19 hotspots. The pandemic has decimated the baseball industry through

sweeping job cuts. The cable TV model that teams rely on is unraveling. It will likely get ugly when the collective bargaining agreement expires after this season.

The game's best player, Mike Trout, hasn't been part of a playoff victory in 10 years. The win-at-all-costs rivalry between the Yankees and Red Sox has softened into maneuvering around the luxury tax. The Cubs are defending their division title with the Yu Darvish salary-dump trade and a pivot toward the future.

Against that uncertain backdrop, *The Athletic* surveyed 23 player agents from across the country to take the pulse of the baseball industry. The agents were given anonymity to candidly share their opinions and discuss their dealings with executives as well as their clients' experiences. This is the second installment of a [two-part series](#).

1. Who should be the next MLB commissioner?

- “Somebody with a better understanding and love for the game.”
- “Anybody but the one we got.”
- “Anyone but Rob.”

The anti-Manfred sentiment among agents was predictable, given the issues that have marked his tenure and his prior role in the commissioner's office overseeing labor relations and negotiating directly with the MLB Players Association. Though not always the right messenger, Manfred, to his credit, has recognized that the game needs more action, more support at the grassroots level and a more diverse set of leaders at the top.

Manfred also apologized last year for calling the World Series trophy a “piece of metal,” a remark that bothered players and invited criticism from fans and the media. The Astros' 2017 sign-stealing scandal had become a symbol of the sport's impersonal outlook and ruthless quest for efficiency. The COVID-19 pandemic further inflamed the tensions between players and owners.

Theo Epstein essentially reached supermajority status with this question (14 of 23 agents) — and those responses were largely tallied before MLB announced his hiring as a consultant for on-field matters. While not universally beloved, Epstein has a deep network of contacts and instant credibility as the architect of three World Series winners, including the 2004 Red Sox and 2016 Cubs.

- “He's got the Superman complex. If there's anyone who can fix the game, it's only Theo Epstein.”

- “We need someone to change the vibe of what’s going on. Baseball is getting lapped by other sports in marketing and promoting the game and keeping up with the times. I think getting someone younger in there who understands this would go a long way.”
- “(Theo’s) not proud of all the decisions that he made and what ultimately transpired in the aftermath. It helped the team win, but it didn’t always help baseball. I get the vibe that he is a really good person — and it doesn’t always come off like that — (but) his heart is in the right place. (We need) somebody that looks at every single decision and says, ‘Is this in the best interest of the owners? Is this in the best interest of the players? And is this in the best interest of the fans?’ You have to look out for all three of those because it really is a tripod. Without the players, you have no games. Without the fans, you have no money. Without the owners, you’ve got no backing. We have to acknowledge that fairness needs to exist for all three parties. The fans — you can’t keep on just spitting in their face. You have to give them a product that they want to go out and see.”
- “A case can be made for literally anyone else, but imagine if baseball got someone smart, young and savvy in that role? I don’t know if he’d like dealing with 30 owners, though.”

Given Epstein’s complicated relationships with the Red Sox ownership group and the Ricketts family that controls the Cubs — and his own desires to someday run a team — two agents suggested new Rangers GM **Chris Young** as a future candidate to return to MLB’s New York headquarters.

- “I don’t think Theo wants the headache. I don’t know if anyone wants that headache. Young has had experience over there and can play nice with ownership.”

Also mentioned: MLB executive **Peter Woodfork**; Red Sox chief baseball officer **Chaim Bloom**; free-agent starting pitcher **Trevor Bauer** (“you need someone willing to be hated”); and former Mets chief operating officer **Jeff Wilpon** (“just kidding”).

2. Did the Astros’ punishment actually deter other teams from cheating?

No: 56.5 percent

Yes: 43.5 percent

- “Absolutely not. A \$5 million fine and a couple draft picks? I’d trade a \$5 million fine and a couple draft picks for a championship any day.”
- “That punishment inspired teams to get more creative with their cheating.”

During the investigation, Manfred granted players immunity in exchange for information and centered the discipline on a few individuals from the management ranks. Jeff Luhnow was fired as Astros GM and remains out of baseball. A.J. Hinch, Houston’s World Series-winning manager, served his one-year suspension and then signed on as Detroit’s new manager. Alex Cora, Hinch’s bench coach in 2017, lost his job as Red Sox manager, sat out the 2020 season while under suspension and then got re-hired in Boston. Carlos Beltrán, a veteran player on Houston’s championship team, was hired and fired as Mets manager without managing a single game.

- “They didn’t really get punished at all. I mean, Cora’s back in the game. Hinch is back in the game. None of the players got punished. So I’m not sure what the punishment was, really. I’m not presuming that any of them shouldn’t be in the game. I’m just saying that the organization got fined but (otherwise) no, not at all.”
- “It’s a funny way the question is worded. The surrounding media and perception and anger with the Astros, that’s what really deterred it because the Astros didn’t get punished. In the court of public opinion, they got labeled bad people and cheaters. That’s what did it.”
- “It’s so hard to judge the punishment because the pandemic kind of got them off the hook in a way. I think the concern is (for) teams (that) are like, ‘Holy shit, if we did it now and got caught, that punishment would be so much worse than whatever happened to the Astros.’ The Astros’ circumstances deterred teams.”

3. Which GM or president of baseball operations is the toughest negotiator?

“Well, that’s a tough one because most of those guys don’t negotiate contracts anymore,” one longtime agent said. “They have their assistant GM or one of their finance guys do the negotiations. Very few (do it themselves). You don’t deal with the GM. Occasionally, some of the ones I’ve had long relationships with, they’ll call me up on their own and talk to me. But, heck, a lot of them will have some other guy call. Dave Dombrowski, for example, good guy, but he’s going to have someone else call you.”

There are, of course, exceptions to that compartmentalized system, based on the caliber of the player, the level of money and whether or not it requires involvement from ownership to close the deal. But another agent explained the groupthink that has overtaken the game: “So many of the front offices just function the same now. Almost every single one is run by a white male in their 40s, and it’s mostly going off what the computer is telling them.”

The phrasing, “toughest negotiator,” also left the question open to interpretation. One agent thought back to how a deal once went down with Tigers GM **Al Avila** while another expressed a distaste for working with Blue Jays president/CEO **Mark Shapiro**. It’s all subjective. One agent mentioned Royals GM **Dayton Moore** — “they’re a frugal organization and he walks the line” — while another said that Moore “doesn’t do contracts” and delegates those responsibilities to his staff.

It could also be taken as a compliment. This was an agent’s scouting report on **David Stearns**, the Brewers president of baseball operations: “Stearns is tough, brilliant, fast. He’s honest. It’s hard to find people who are that smart and honest. If he wanted to use his powers for evil, he could.”

Two agents pointed to Mets president **Sandy Alderson**, a Marine who served in Vietnam before graduating from Harvard Law School and beginning a long career in the baseball industry: “Sandy’s pretty tough. But not in a bad way. He’s just tough.”

Padres GM **A.J. Preller**, who has reinforced his reputation as a frenetic dealmaker this offseason, got four mentions. More than one agent agreed: “He can be a pain in the ass.”

Mike Rizzo also stands out for his old-school scouting background and hands-on approach to the Nationals.

- “Rizzo is one of the most fair people I’ve dealt with. I wouldn’t say he’s easy, though.”
- “Rizzo is tough and the rare GM who is fairly involved (in negotiations).”
- “He’s very hard-headed and stubborn. I love him. He’s a great guy to have a drink with. But in terms of negotiating, he’s very tunnel-vision.”

Also mentioned: Bloom, Yankees GM **Brian Cashman**, Dodgers president of baseball operations **Andrew Friedman**, Cleveland president of baseball operations **Chris Antonetti** and A’s GM **David Forst**.

- “Back in the day, there would be a lot more screaming and yelling and cursing. That’s just the nature of the turnover in the front office and who is now in charge of handling these things.”
- “I don’t think that today’s GMs are unfair, per se. I think that most of them, in large part, because of all the information and analytics and data that’s coming out, they understand how to value the players. They’re willing to pay a certain dollar amount in free agency and it kind of is what it is. We want to sit here and pound the table and call it collusion. But at the end of the day, a fourth outfielder is worth what he’s worth. A backup catcher is worth what he’s worth. A major-league-average shortstop is worth what he’s worth. Gone are the days that you’re going to see a team go out there — like a Jayson Werth for example — where nobody else is offering anything egregious and then all of a sudden the Nationals double the next closest thing. I don’t think that you’re going to see emotional, subjective decisions being made anymore, which makes a lot of these GMs come off as disciplined rather than dicks.”

4. Which GM or president of baseball operations do you trust the most?

- “The short answer would be none of them.”
- “None of them have given me a reason *not* to trust them.”

Again, from an agent’s perspective, it sometimes depends on the type of product you’re trying to sell at that moment. Relationships are complicated and teams go through different cycles. GMs routinely farm out at least some of the negotiations to staffers and have to work within the budgets set by ownership and business operations. But agents still form impressions about how a front office works (or not). **Friedman** led a varied group with four first-place votes.

“He’s a straight shooter,” one agent said of Friedman, who started his career with the Rays and was one of only three executives to garner multiple votes. The others: current Tampa Bay GM **Erik Neander** (2, “if he tells me something, I believe him”); **Stearns** (1.5); Twins GM **Thad Levine**; and Rangers president of baseball operations **Jon Daniels** (1.5).

Also mentioned: Alderson, Bloom, Cashman, Dombrowski, Ross Atkins (Blue Jays), Ben Cherington (Pirates), Jerry Dipoto (Mariners), Nick Krall (Reds), Perry Minasian (Angels) and John Mozeliak (Cardinals).

5. Name someone who hasn't been a GM before but should be within the next two years:

Kim Ng had been the obvious answer, agents said, until the Marlins made a groundbreaking hire in November, recognizing her decades of experience with the White Sox, Yankees, Dodgers and commissioner's office.

- **Amiel Sawdaye**, Diamondbacks assistant GM (3 votes)
- **Scott Sharp**, Royals assistant GM (3 votes)
- **Justin Hollander**, Mariners assistant GM (2 votes)
- **J.J. Picollo**, Royals assistant GM (2 votes)
- **David Chadd**, Tigers assistant GM
- **Michael Fishman**, Yankees assistant GM
- **Chris Getz**, White Sox director of player development
- **Kevan Graves**, Pirates assistant GM
- **Jeff Kingston**, Dodgers assistant GM
- **Ian Levin**, Mets senior director of baseball operations
- **Jason McLeod**, Cubs senior VP of player personnel
- **Steve Sanders**, Pirates assistant GM
- **Josh Stein**, Padres assistant GM
- **Bryan Stroh**, Pirates senior VP of baseball development
- **De Jon Watson**, Nationals special assistant
- **Jon Weil**, Rockies assistant GM
- **Logan White**, Padres senior advisor/director of player personnel

6. Name someone who hasn't been a manager before but should be within the next two years:

- **Hensley Meulens**, former bench coach for Mets and Giants (3 votes)
- **Nick Hundley**, MLB senior director, baseball operations (2 votes)
- **Joe McEwing**, White Sox third base coach (2 votes)
- **Ozzie Timmons**, Rays first base coach (2 votes)
- **Edgardo Alfonzo**, former big-league player and minor-league manager
- **Adrián Beltré**, potential Hall of Fame player
- **Michael Brantley**, Astros outfielder (who recently signed a two-year, \$32 million contract)
- **Carlos González**, three-time All-Star/Gold Glove winner with the Rockies
- **Raul Ibañez**, Dodgers special assistant
- **Don Kelly**, Pirates bench coach
- **Mark Kotsay**, A's third base coach
- **George Lombard**, Tigers bench coach

- **Jeff Mathis**, free-agent catcher
- **Kevin O'Sullivan**, University of Florida head baseball coach
- **Eduardo Pérez**, ESPN analyst
- **Skip Schumaker**, Padres associate manager

7. Are performance-enhancing drugs still a prevalent part of today's game?

Yes: 9

- "This wasn't even a question."
- "We just had Robinson Canó test positive again. That's a black eye for the sport. That's one of the superstars of the past 15-20 years."
- "It's quieter, but I don't know if that means it's better. Guys are no longer shooting up at their lockers, but it's definitely still part of the game. And it might always be, in some facet."

No: 12

- "Guys are generally very careful. I don't think it's anywhere close to where it was 10 years ago. But I think there are high-level players who are doing it."
- "I wouldn't say prevalent, but there's definitely still people trying to beat the system. It used to be 50 or 60 percent and now I would say it's down to like 15 percent now."
- "Sure, they're a part. I don't think they're a problem, but they're a part. I think baseball has done a pretty damned good job of cleaning up the sport."

8. How do you get teams to stop tanking?

Some kind of draft reform, be it a lottery system or the ability for teams to trade picks, became the most common answer. One agent proposed radically restructuring the draft so the team that just missed the playoffs would choose first while the team with the worst record would select 20th. (A full point was recorded if it was an agent's sole response, and a half-point if it was part of a larger answer.)

Alter the draft (5 points)

- "There has to be a way to punish them in the draft. Make a compensation round for teams that finish above 80 wins, 90 wins, 100 wins?"

The owners should act (4 points)

- "Until ownership stops caring about profits vs. winning, nothing will ever change. With respect to rule changes and tweaks, there's nothing that can be done until you get ownership buy-in. Look at the Mets, that's how you fix it."
- "You find owners that want to win. Why wasn't this a problem 30-40 years ago? I also think too many GMs are lying to owners and telling them this (tanking) is the way to go."

Soccer-style relegation (4 points)

- “The last-place or (bottom-five) teams either A) pay a fine or B) they go down to Triple A the next year. Look at these European soccer leagues. If you’re in the Serie A, if you’re in the Premier League and you finish in last place, guess what? You go down to Triple A next year and whoever wins Triple A comes up to the big leagues the next year.”
- “I know there’s so much revenue at stake and you can’t make the Seattle Mariners a Triple-A team. But there has to be some restriction, some relegation, whether it’s financial or profit-sharing. Something has to be changed where there’s incentive to win and not suck. If you’re threatening pocketbooks, or you’re threatening the status of you being in the Premier League, I think that’s a great way to look at things. It promotes winning. It’s important. And I’m not even a soccer fan, but I appreciate that.”
- “Relegate the fuck out of it and watch how quickly those bad teams get off the mat.”

A salary floor (3 points)

- “We know the luxury tax is acting as a salary cap. There’s no salary floor. If we had a salary floor, it would force the teams to spend. As long as there’s no floor, they can do whatever they want. We have clubs right now with a \$40 million payroll. Some NBA players are making more than an entire MLB roster. This sport is a mess. How do you go to the World Series and get rid of your No. 1 and No. 2 starters? Look at the Cubs. They just won the division.”

Go for the money (2.5 points)

- “Stop rewarding teams who lose with millions of dollars in TV money. It’s simple, really.”

Manfred should act (2 points)

- “Manfred could give a rat’s ass about having people in the seats because the digital has gone through the roof. He’s more concerned about putting live gambling on games. It’s all about trying to generate revenue away from what made baseball Baseball.”
- “Stop making losing profitable. That’s the only reason the sport is here. Look, if the people at the top aren’t concerned — and they don’t appear to be — there’s never going to be any reason to fix what’s going on. Why can’t anyone under 35 watch the games (easily)? It’s the same bullshit over and over.”