

SUNDAY BASEBALL TIDBITS

MARCH 2020

As we all suffer from baseball's hiatus, a few entertaining tidbits.

Check out these throws:

https://www.mlb.com/news/best-outfield-throws-in-baseball-history-c289968680?partnerId=zh-20200315-156906-47943&query_id=1026&bt_ee=nY8pFmf%2F4M6FmbZPWjWR%2BSt0mxyAlZgEmI5cCNcKUNeMuZbq1O8Smqw2lV7KhNCm&bt_ts=1584272022886

Rickey Henderson

Stole 500 more bases than anyone else in history

First ballot HOF with 3,055 hits, 2,295 runs scored (all time leader) and 1,406 stolen bases (all time leader).

Stole 3B 322 times (no one else has over 200)

Led off an inning with a walk 796 times

Reasons to sign him to an extension:

Gleyber Torres, SS, Yankees, age 23

Eligible for free agency after the 2024 season

New York has changed its stance on extensions in recent years, handing out multiyear pacts to Aaron Hicks and Luis Severino last year. Aaron Judge and Gary Sanchez each have two years of arbitration-eligibility remaining, but Judge's injury issues and Sanchez's defensive questions make it unlikely that either will be extended. [Gleyber Torres](#) is four years younger than Sanchez and five years younger than Judge, and with two All-Star appearances in his first two seasons, he has emerged as a bona fide star. Torres will enter his first year of arbitration after the

upcoming season, so the idea of buying out his arbitration years along with multiple free-agent years could be appealing to the Yankees.

Three Mets pitchers to strike out 250 or more batters in a season: Jacob deGrom (2018, '19), Dwight Gooden (1984, '85) and Tom Seaver (1970, '71, '73)

OUT OF MINOR LEAGUE OPTIONS

Yankees

- [Mike Tauchman](#), CF
- [Tommy Kahnle](#), P
- [Gio Urshela](#), 3B
- [Luis Cessa](#), P
- [Kyle Higashioka](#), C
- [Gary Sanchez](#), C

Looking way back to early 1900s. Centerfielder HOF Tris Speaker: .345 career average with 3,514 hits, all time record 792 doubles. One of two players all time to have 50 doubles and 50 stolen bases in same season (Craig Biggio).

Hall of Fame baseball player also drafted by the NHL's Los Angeles Kings--Tom Glavine (1984 NHL Entry Draft, 4th round).

Yankees career batting leaders

Games played	Jeter	2747
Hits	Jeter	3465
Batting Average	Ruth	.349
Doubles	Jeter	544
Triples	Gehrig	165
HRs	Ruth	659
RBI	Gehrig	1995
Stolen bases	Jeter	358
On base %	Ruth	.484
Slugging %	Ruth	.711
Extra base hits	Gehrig	1190
Sac flies	Mattingly	96

something to hopefully keep you from climbing the walls

Managers who managed in the 1970s, 80s, 90s, 2000s, 2010s:

Bobby Cox, Tony LaRussa, Joe Torre, Jack McKeon

Most saves from age 40: Hoyt Wilhelm, 130

Eddie Murray—one of six players with 3,000 hits, 500 HRs and 500 doubles...only switch hitter to do it. Aaron, A-Rod, Mays, Palmeiro, Pujols.

Don't think Mike Trout is the best player in MLB and best of his generation?

2012: Led league in runs, stolen bases, OPS+ and both versions of WAR

2013: Led league in runs, walks and both versions of WAR

2014: Led league in runs, RBIs, total bases and FanGraphs WAR

2015: Led league in slugging, OPS, OPS+ and both versions of WAR

2016: Led league in runs, walks, on-base percentage, OPS+ and both versions of WAR

2017: Led league in on-base percentage, slugging, OPS and OPS+

2018: Led league in walks, on-base percentage, OPS and OPS+

2019: Led league in on-base percentage, slugging, OPS and OPS+

Plus most intentional walks (led three times), runs created (led four times), times on base (led four times), fielding percentage for center fielders (led in 2015 and 2018 when he made zero errors).

Randy Johnson: from 1999 to 2002, four seasons, he left the known universe. He went 81-27 with a 2.48 ERA and he averaged — *averaged* — 354 strikeouts per season. He won all four Cy Youngs, carried the Arizona Diamondbacks to a World Series title.

He did all this from ages 35-38. It's the greatest four-year run for any late-30s pitcher ever. He wound up second all-time with 4,875 strikeouts (Nolan Ryan), had 303 wins, 37 shutouts, 100 complete games and 190 HBP.

Mickey Mantle 153 stolen bases, 80% success, 6th best of all HOF with 100+ SBs.

Last week I listed the lineups from the MLB.com columnists for active players—who you would pick if you needed to win one game.

So here is your challenge--Must win one game, players you have seen. My picks below (with players who were hardest to exclude). Reply with yours and I will send a compilation of answers in a future email.

1b	Cabrera
2b	Pedroia (Randolph, Joe Morgan)
Ss	Jeter (Ozzie Smith)
3b	Brett (Schmidt, Brooks Robinson)
Lf	Henderson
Cf	Trout
Rf	Clemente (Paul O'Neil, Frank Robinson)
C	Bench (Munson)
Dh	Carew (Rose, Frank Thomas)
Sp	Pedro Martinez (Gibson, Guidry)
Rp	Mariano

trying to help pass the time

Can you name the seven ways to reach base? Answer at bottom of this email.

Stan the Man

Stan Musial was second all-time in combined doubles and triples 725 + 177 for 902 total (behind only Tris Speaker). Musial had exactly the same number of hits at home as he did on the road (1,815). Musial won three MVP awards and finished second four other times. He won

seven batting titles and led the league in runs (five times), hits (six times), doubles (eight times), triples (five times), RBIs (twice), total bases (six times) and OPS (seven times).

Catchers

Yogi Berra, 1946-63

1,430 RBIs, most among Major League catchers.

Joe Mauer, 2004-18

Only American League catcher ever to win the batting title (did so three times).

Ivan Rodriguez, 1991-2002, 2009

11 full seasons with the Rangers, 10 All-Star Games, 10 Gold Gloves, 1999 American League Most Valuable Player Award winner.

Mike Piazza is the only Hall of Fame position player with a Mets cap on his plaque.

Yadier Molina, 2004-present

Two-time World Series champion, nine-time All-Star, nine-time Gold Glove winner and four-time Platinum Glove winner.

Buster Posey, 2009-present

One of three players to catch three no-hitters and win three World Series titles, joining Bill Carrigan and Yogi Berra.

TY COBB

Before babe Ruth and HRs came to dominate baseball, Ty Cobb was amazing.

He stole home 54 times in his career. Fifty-four! He retired with a .367 batting average. For 19 seasons, from 1909 to 1927, Cobb never hit as low as .329. From 1909 to 1919, Cobb never hit as low as .367 in a season.

As of 1955, the year I was born and 27 years after he retired, Cobb still held a huge number of records: the highest average in one American League season (.419 in 1911); most bases stolen in one season (96 in 1915); most total stolen bases (897); most seasons played in majors (24); most games played (3,034); most times at bat (11,440); most hits (4,191 — with two hits later taken away); scored most runs (2,245); most years batting champion; most years hit over .300 (23, though that includes some partial seasons); most years hit over .400 (3).

The question to my smart friends and baseball fans—as GM/Manager you must win one game. what lineup of players you have seen would you select? 13 of you offered lineups, some with detailed reasoning and many comments on who was hard to leave off. Thanks for all your responses. Results:

1B The field was spread across: Cabrera, Tino Martinez, Mattingly, McCovey, Puljos, Rose

2B A virtual three-way tie: Alomar, Morgan, Pedroia

SS All Jeter with 1 A-Rod and 1 Ozzie Smith

3B Brett, Brooks Robinson and Schmidt bunched with 1 vote for Chipper Jones

LF Barry Bonds and Rickey Henderson the only multiple vote getters, Ken Griffey Jr., Frank Robinson, Ted Williams and Yaz each score 1 vote.

CF Willie Mays dominated with a couple of Mantle and Trout votes. (which says alot about the age group that receives this newsletter)

RF Clemente and Reggie Jackson bunched at the top, Aaron, Ichiro and Paul O'Neil with 1 vote each.

C All Johnny Bench with Berra, Munson and Pudge Rodriguez getting 1 vote each.

DH All Big Papi with Carew and Edgar Martinez getting 1 each.

SP Gibson, Koufax and Pedro Martinez all tied, 1 vote for Randy Johnson

RP Clean sweep for Mariano

Comments about 19 tough players to leave off: Aparicio, Bagwell, Beltre, Boggs, Cano, Canseco, Eckersley (only reliever mentioned besides Mariano), Fisk, Garciaparra, Guidry, Jeff Kent, Posey, Manny Ramirez, JD Realmuto, Cal Ripken Jr., Schilling, Seaver, Frank Thomas (multiple comments), Winfield.

SEVEN WAYS TO REACH BASE

Hit

Walk

Hit by pitch

Dropped third strike

Fielder's choice

Catcher's interference

Error

regular readers of my baseball tidbits updates know they are mostly short, hopefully surprising or thought provoking items.

today, if you have the time, two interesting in-depth reads

one on command versus stuff for pitchers

another on the impact of the new rule around three batter minimum for pitchers

two good reasons to subscribe to The Athletic.

Managers plan for the new three-batter rule — 'I'm having a hard time'

He is still a week away from dealing with a rule that is guaranteed to have him reaching for his Advil stash. But Terry Francona is already losing sleep over an imaginary game he has managed only in his mind.

In the dream, it is June in San Diego. Francona's Indians are playing the Padres. And the new three-batter rule is hanging over the manager's head as he frets about how he would handle a pitcher who doesn't even pitch for him anymore.

"What if (Corey) Kluber goes 7 1/3?" Terry Francona muses. "And we're playing San Diego, and they've got (Eric) Hosmer and (Manny) Machado (coming up)?"

In another year, in a previous life, not a problem. His team employs a lethal situational left-hander (Oliver Pérez) and a sidewheeling situational right-hander (Adam Cimber). So....

"So we've got an answer," Francona is saying, the managerial wheels churning over this still-fictional dilemma. "But right now we don't."

Right. Here in the year 2020? Here in baseball's first season of requiring all pitchers to face at least three hitters, unless an inning ends first? Here in this strange new orbit all managers are about to enter? He would be correct. Now, they don't.

"We've got half an answer," Francona goes on. "Pick your poison. Who do you want to face? And that's not fair."

For the last couple of weeks, we've been surveying managers who are still trying to reprogram their managerial brains now that the rules, and their world, have changed. Frankly, they're struggling. They're processing. They're venting.

Joe Maddon (Angels): "You're going to be put into situations that you never, ever wanted to be in — and you worked hard not to be in."

Bud Black (Rockies): "A team should be able to do what they want to do with their players."

Torey Lovullo (Diamondbacks): "It's not going to be as simple as people think."

There is no more challenging aspect to the day-to-day life of a modern manager than maneuvering through the daily bullpen chess match. But now imagine Magnus Carlsen, your reigning world chess champ, showing up at the chessboard next week and being told, *"Sorry, Magnus. Your king has to move three squares now instead of one. Good luck to you."*

Well, that's how baseball's newest rule change feels to the men who have spent a lifetime managing their bullpen chess pieces one way and now are being told that way will no longer be permissible, beginning in spring-training games on March 12 and then carrying right through the season, the postseason and, presumably, the rest of time.

Oh, they'll deal with whatever they're told to deal with. But they don't have to celebrate it.

"Look, I think MLB has done an unbelievable job," Francona says. "Every time they put rules in, they explain things to us. But this is the one time I cannot get it through my head. They're telling you how to compete. On our team, we show up early and we stay late. One of the things we try to do is run our bullpen better than the other team. Sometimes we're more successful than others. We're not infallible. But I think the unintended consequences of this — I just don't think they've thought them through."

What Rob Manfred and the folks who devised this rule have told them is that that's not true. The architects believe they've thought through every pro and every con. They see this rule impacting so few real-life situations that they think the actual impact will be minimal. So in the view of the people in charge, this is *not* designed to be a rule that eliminates strategy. It's just designed to be a rule that changes strategy.

But how will that strategy be morphing? We've asked the managers. Here is just some of what they see coming.

The intentional walk is a thing again

It was just a decade and a half ago, in 2004, that Barry Bonds piled up 120 intentional walks in one season all by himself. Boy, those were the days. But by last year, as intentional walks dropped to an all-time low, the entire AL West didn't pile up 120 intentional walks by all five teams combined. The Astros, as you might recall, issued zero intentional walks in the entire regular season.

So a mere five months ago, the intentional walk was clearly dying. But that was then. This is now, in the new three-batter-rule universe.

"I know the intentional walk has kind of gone away," says Cubs manager David Ross. "This might bring it back in."

We had managers tell us this spring that intentional walks could double this season — which means, by the way, that we could see a swing from the fewest intentional walks per game in history one year to the most the next year. That's a crazy thought, but it's easy to see why. Think about it.

Say you're Torey Lovullo, managing the Diamondbacks, facing the Dodgers. You bring in your best left-hander, Andrew Chafin, to face Max Muncy — who then doubles. Up next, it's Justin Turner, who hits right-handed. On deck is Cody Bellinger, who bats left-handed. Wouldn't it suddenly become almost automatic for Chafin to intentionally walk Turner to get to Bellinger? Seems like it.

"If there's a bad matchup, and then a good matchup behind him, maybe you put a guy on base," Ross says, "because that counts as a batter faced."

NEW STRATEGY ALERT NO. 1! In this scenario, Chafin gets credit for three batters faced, but only actually pitches to two. Can't beat that for modern innovation. But wait. Let's keep those strategic wheels spinning.

"Say you bring in a lefty to face a lefty," says Maddon. "And say there's a runner on first base. Now he walks him, and it's first and second, two outs, and it's a horrible matchup with this lefty versus a righty. Do you intentionally walk that dude if there's a lefty on deck to load the bases? You might."

NEW STRATEGY ALERT NO. 2! There were only 29 intentional walks issued all last season with a runner on first base. There were only nine issued by all 15 American League teams put together. But here's a bet you should make: This year, that number should explode — almost solely because that left-handed pitcher on the mound *has* to face at least three hitters.

But hang on. There's an even more fascinating plot twist that could come into play because of this rule. This could even bring back...

"The old Barry Bonds"

A manager who asks not to be named is thinking through the kinds of situations we've been kicking around above. He is talking about facing one of baseball's scariest lineups. We won't name that one, either. But here's his thought:

Two outs. Two on. He rolls the dice and brings in a left-handed reliever to face a dangerous left-handed-hitting all-star. Let's call him "David Ortíz." But there's a terrifying right-handed hitter on deck. Let's call him "Manny Ramírez."

As the manager tumbles those dice to escape this inning, "I'm trying *not* to get to (Manny Ramírez)," he says. "I'm making sure we get (David Ortíz). But I'm going to walk into that matchup with (Manny) if that out isn't made. So we're trying to amplify that matchup (with Ortíz) and say, 'Hey look, we've really got to lock down on this situation, make sure we find the target, make sure we find the right matchup, make sure we get the out.'"

Ah, but this is baseball. And baseball isn't real reliable at following those scripts. So what happens if they *don't* get that out? What happens if "Manny Ramírez" is now heading for the plate with the bases loaded?

"We're going as far as to ask ourselves, 'What happens when somebody does the old Barry Bonds — walks (Manny) with the bases loaded and forces in one run?'" this manager says. "Those are internal conversations we've had as a group."

For the record, the intentional walk has been an official stat for 65 years now, since 1955. Exactly once, in all those years, has a hitter other than Bonds been handed “the old Barry Bonds” — and been intentionally walked with the bases loaded. That was Josh Hamilton, on Aug. 17, 2008. The manager who issued that walk? A fellow named Joe Maddon.

NEW STRATEGY ALERT NO. 3! So here we have a thing that has almost never happened, since the invention of the intentional walk. Yet we have an active manager, telling us right out loud, that his team has talked about this in its three-batter-rule deliberations and thinks we could possibly see the bases-loaded intentional walk become *a thing that won't shock us anymore*. We're not sure if this qualifies as “forward-thinking genius” or “another unintended consequence.” But it's one more sign that this rule is guaranteed to alter what used to pass for traditional baseball thinking.

Beware the left-right-left-right lineup logic

When we've asked about how this new rule could alter lineup construction, the first inclination of most managers is to suggest that the way to neutralize the other team's best left-handed reliever is to do what seems most logical.

“If you do (your lineup) righty-lefty-righty-lefty,” says Toronto's Charlie Montoyo, “that's going to be tough to match up against.”

There are times — possibly most times — that's obviously going to be true, and the way to go. Just review the ground we've covered so far, and you'll see why that makes sense. But are we sure it makes sense in every situation, with every lineup?

NEW STRATEGY ALERT NO. 4! “Normally, I've always gone left-right, left-right, left-right,” Maddon says. ‘I've always tried to do that with my lineups. But ... now you might see stacks.’”

So what's a stack? It has nothing to do with pancakes. It's a lineup stack that could be triggered if a team has one of those impact left-handed bats in the middle of its lineup, the kind of guy most likely to force an opposing manager to go to a left-handed reliever with a game on the line. In that case, maybe left-right-left *isn't* the way to structure the ideal lineup.

Maybe it makes sense to “stack” your best right-handed bats behind that left-handed hitter, so that a left-handed reliever can't bypass the next hitter with a simple intentional walk. That's especially true of the Angels lineup, which otherwise might go:

Mike Trout (RH)
Shohei Ohtani (LH)
Anthony Rendon (RH)

“Just say Ohtani's hitting,” Maddon says. “Would you not then put two righties behind Ohtani? ... So that's what I'm saying. You might see stacks. With a prodigious left-handed hitter, it might

be wise to stack behind him, on the opposite side — right-right-right — so if they brought in this fellow to face Ohtani ... now they've got to go through Trout-Rendon."

Essentially, by setting his lineup like that, Maddon would seem to be setting a trap, trying to lure that opposing manager into a matchup he'd love to avoid — with a left-hander against two of the best right-handed hitters alive. Or it could work another way, by getting Ohtani a late-inning matchup against a right-hander. What we don't know yet is how the opposing manager would counter that trap. But this is just one more way in which the 2020 chess match is about to evolve.

A big year to shop at Target

Here's how managers used to game-plan in the olden days — by which we mean, oh, last year: Go through the opposing lineup. Pick out the hitter that each reliever in their bullpen matched up best against. Then look for situations that allowed them to force that matchup.

OK, now back to the future. Here's how managers are going to have to game-plan now, when matching up one pitcher against one hitter is no longer a feasible strategy: Pick out pockets of the lineup where different relievers could match up — or, as Torey Lovullo calls them, "targets."

NEW STRATEGY ALERT NO. 5! "Targets," in my vocabulary, is a huge word," Lovullo says, "when I'm designing strategy through the course of a game — targeting matchups that I want to try to make sure play out. I go through about six or seven targets per game."

Lovullo's biggest challenge this year might be finding new ways to use one of his most valuable relievers, Chafin — whose 25 one-batter appearances were the most of any left-hander in the National League. Now that the one- or two-batter appearance is off his drawing board, Lovullo has to recalibrate how he'll employ Chafin, who faced the second-most left-handed hitters (135) of any left-handed reliever in baseball last season — by design.

"What I do in Andrew Chafin's case — it's not a secret, I think the rest of the league knows it — is I target the candidates that I think I want to have him face," Lovullo says. "And I save him for the highest leverage situation I can get him in there. It's not going to be a closer situation. It could be the seventh. It could be the eighth. It might even be the sixth inning. So I find my targets."

When Lovullo hears people say this rule is going to eliminate strategy, he laughs. What he sees, when he thinks about how much more complicated it is for him just to plot out how to use his best situational left-hander, is actually the opposite.

"I think it's going to *enhance* strategy," he says. "It's not going to simplify things, where you've just got to throw him out there for three batters and see what happens ... It's how you can get

out of that and maximize that situation, when you have your back against the wall. To me, there's a strategy to that. So it's not just 'throw him out there and watch the game for three batters.'"

Warning! Mid-at-bat pitching change ahead

Picture this scene — because it's coming to a ballpark near you:

Jon Lester rolls into the seventh inning, and up steps Christian Yelich. The count goes to 3-and-0. And then ...

Out pops David Ross, to wave for a right-handed reliever ... as two right-handed hitters loom in the next two spots. So in trots Tyler Chatwood and throws ... ball four. On semi-purpose, of course.

NEW STRATEGY ALERT NO. 6! So what's up with that? Here's what, in the coy words of Ross, even as he's trying to reveal as little as possible.

"I don't know that I really want to share my secrets yet," he says, with a knowing chuckle. "But there are some areas that will come into play where you might be able to give a guy a batter faced without him actually facing the batter."

What's up, in other words, is one of the oddest wrinkles in this new rule: In that scenario above, it's Lester who would get official credit for that walk of Yelich. But it's Chatwood who would get credit for that batter faced — because MLB has informed teams that the pitcher who is on the mound when a plate appearance ends will be considered to have "faced" that batter. And that would be true even if the new pitcher comes in and throws *no* actual pitches, because his manager signals for an intentional walk.

Got that? Even managers who have contemplated this stuff are having trouble deciding if it makes any sense.

"OK, let me think of a scenario," says Rays manager Kevin Cash. "Say we have (left-handed setup man Colin) Poche pitching to a lefty. He goes 3-0 on him ... So we're just going to give up on that guy, bring in (right-hander Diego Castillo) and say, 'It's a bad matchup for you, Diego, so we're just going to walk him now and let him go?'"

Cash shakes his head. You can see his wheels spinning as he imagines trying to explain this to everyone involved — Poche, Castillo, his front office, even Rob Manfred himself.

"They'll change that," Cash says, finally. "If that starts happening, I bet that will be something they'll discuss, that you're not allowed to do that. Because that defeats the purpose of what they're trying to accomplish."

He raises an excellent point. *Is any of this open for review, if it “defeats the purpose of what they’re trying to accomplish?”* Managers say they’ve been told none of this etched in stone.

“I don’t think it’s like the Ten Commandments,” Maddon pronounces. “I don’t think that any of these things are going to be in place for the next couple of millennia.”

The return of the pinch-hitter

No AL team ran more pinch-hitters up there last season than those ever-fluid Tampa Bay Rays. They used 130 of them — including, at one point, five in one nine-inning game. So when Cash starts mulling what lies ahead this year, in a world in which he now has an extra bench player and a rule that requires pitchers to stay in the game for three hitters, it’s no surprise to hear these words coming out of his mouth:

“We’re gonna pinch-hit,” he says. “A lot.”

NEW STRATEGY ALERT NO. 7! What happens when you combine a team that almost never plays the same lineup two days in a row with a rule change that locks the opposing manager out of the ability to match up a fresh reliever with all its bench options? Guess what? Let the pinch-hitter parade begin, especially in a place like Tampa Bay.

“When you pinch-hit (in the past), there was always a risk of ‘what is the opposition going to do?’” Cash says. “Are they going to bring a pitcher in? ... But when you pinch-hit now, the leverage is with the offense. You’ve got the guy penned in. You will be able to just pick your matchup without any concern — within that three batters.”

Again, it’s not too hard to envision how this would work. It’s the seventh inning in New York. The Yankees call on the left-handed Zack Britton to face the top of the Rays’ order, with two left-handed hitters (Austin Meadows and Yoshi Tsutsugo) looming. But Cash has a bench packed with multi-position players. So here comes José Martínez to hit for Meadows and Austin Meadows to hit for Tsutsugo — and Aaron Boone has no ability to bring in a right-hander until Britton has navigated through three right-handed bats.

You don’t have to be the mix-and-match kings of baseball to take advantage of this. But it helps.

“As I said,” Cash says, “we’re gonna pinch-hit. A lot.”

What you won’t see

But for every new strategic wrinkle this rule will bring us, there’s another that will disappear. Here’s a sampling of what figures to vanish:

I CAN GIVE YOU ONE HITTER — “Here’s the thing,” says Bud Black. “Let’s say we have a pitcher who throws 28 pitches on a Tuesday night, and he also got a couple of outs for you on Sunday

afternoon ... And now you get to Wednesday. So you go up to that pitcher and say, 'How ya feeling?' And he says, 'I can get you one hitter.' Well, those days are gone — because there's no such thing now as one hitter."

MOVE THE LEFT-HANDER TO THE OUTFIELD — This used to be kind of fun. Remember the 2017 Cubs-Reds game when, with a right-left-right-left procession of Reds hitters hovering, Maddon flip-flopped two different relievers — Travis Wood and Spencer Patton — between left field and the mound, depending on who was hitting? Good times! And just last year, Cash had two different games in which he moved his best situational left-hander, Adam Kolarek, to first base to help him dodge a right-handed hitter, then shifted him back to the mound when the next left-handed bat came around. That used to serve as the veritable pinnacle of managerial creativity. But now?

"That's done," Cash says. "Done. What's the benefit of doing that, unless I want Kolarek to play for three batters at first base?"

His interpretation of that is correct, by the way (even though we should mention Kolarek is a Dodger now). MLB has informed teams that all relievers have to face three hitters *consecutively*. So if Kolarek (or any other reliever) enters a game, pitches to three hitters and then moves to another position, he can't return and just face one more left-handed hitter. He has to stick around for three *more* hitters in a row.

THE QUICK HOOK — "Here's the one thing with managers," says Toronto's Charlie Montoyo. "They can tell whether this guy has it or doesn't have it by the first batter. And what happens when you know already he doesn't have it and now he's got to face two more batters? That's gonna be tough to just sit there and take it."

Well, there *is* one option: Head for the mound with the trainer — because managers are still permitted to remove a pitcher who is injured or sick. But that's a card they can only play so much. MLB has told them it has compiled historical data on how rare it has been through the years for any pitcher to leave a game for those reasons, and it will be watching closely. If it feels that exception is being abused, it has threatened to impose rules saying that any pitcher who exits with an injury won't be permitted to pitch again for a week — or even could be required to go on the Injured List.

Let the trial and error begin

They're all a week away from seeing this rule begin to wreak havoc in actual exhibition games. They've been contemplating what it means for weeks. Many have even walked through simulations with their research-and-development people or brainstormed with their front offices, just to be ready. But are they? They don't sound ready.

Cash: "I think we're going to learn a lot in the first month."

Black: “This is a strategy, or a change in strategy, that we’re going to have to really wrap our heads around here moving forward, because it really changes how use your bullpen — not only on a given night for sure, but even in usage on previous nights, and how you’re going to use your bullpen tomorrow and the next day.”

Francona: “I’m just having a hard time — and I know when the season starts, nobody is gonna give a shit that I’m having a hard time. But I’m going to have to figure out what we’re going to do. And it bothers me.”

They’ve already begun playing with different ideas — like Cash picturing a left-handed masher like Ohtani lurking as the third hitter of the inning and getting the left-hander in the game to face the *first* batter of the inning instead of waiting for Ohtani’s turn.

“There are going to be a lot of bad decisions made,” Cash says. “And we’ll do it. I’ll do it. I’m sure I’ll screw it up — overvaluing the guy that’s three batters away, undervaluing the two in front of him, and all of a sudden, Ohtani comes up and there are guys on second and third. Or you’re down two runs because you walked a guy and the next guy hit a home run. But hey, now at least you’ve got the lefty on Ohtani.”

They already had a million decisions to make. Now these men have a million more. But the moral of the story is this: Baseball may not look quite the same once this rule drops out of the heavens — but we think we’ve documented what it won’t do. It won’t kill strategy.

“No, it just creates a different one,” says Joe Maddon. “But I can’t tell you that it’s necessarily gonna be better.”

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What’s more important for a pitcher, command or stuff?

It’s a backfield, barstool argument that has gone on for years: What’s more important, *stuff* or *command*? What matter more: sharp, hard pitches with plenty of bend, or the ability to put those pitches in the right places?

Early on, we didn’t quite have the statistics to answer the question. We could look at things like strikeout rate and walk rate, but then we’d find that combining the two provided us with perhaps [the best in-season estimate of a pitcher’s talent](#). And, anyway, neither of those

statistics cleanly captures the skills we're talking about. It takes command to get strikes, and you can have a low walk rate without command, for example.

But statistics have improved, and we've got a couple of new ones that might finally capture command and stuff separately. And if that's true, we might be able to settle this argument.

From STATS Perform, we have [Command+](#). In order to produce a number that hopes to assess a pitcher's ability to do exactly with his pitches as he intends to do, STATS' stringers at baseball games look at the catcher's signs, the catcher's target, the pitcher's heat maps, and the hitter's heat maps. They'll then assign a target for that pitch and consider how far from that target the pitch ended up.

What's nice about this approach versus more zone-based ones is that it's obvious that a pitcher will intend to put a curveball in the dirt sometimes, an act that would be the result of good command, but which would not produce a pitch that landed in the corners of the strike zone. (This also separates command from control, because a well-placed pitch can be in or outside of the strike zone, while control generally refers to the ability to put the ball in the strike zone, anywhere.)

Command+ is calculated per pitch type and then scaled to league average, where 100 is average. STATS also aggregates it so that there's an overall number for the pitcher, and not just one number for every pitcher's separate pitch. Last year's ten best starters by Command+ were Masahiro Tanaka, Tyler Mahle, Kyle Hendricks, Mike Leake, José Berríos, Zach Davies, Zach Eflin, Aaron Nola, Trevor Williams, and Zack Greinke.

From Driveline Baseball, a pitching lab headed by Kyle Boddy, who is now the pitching coordinator for the Cincinnati Reds, we have Stuff. That number hopes to capture only the effect that the velocity and movement of the pitch have on outcomes. It's a number I've been chasing since I started writing about pitching and was convinced that stuff was the most important aspect to a pitcher's success. Driveline sent over this explainer for the stat.

"Based heavily off of the work of Glenn Healey's [intrinsic run values](#), our Stuff Metric attempts to predict the value of each pitch thrown during the 2019 season given the velocity, movement metrics, and estimated arm slot of the offering. Our model also controls for pitch location, batter talent, the count, and any platoon advantages that might occur, leaving us with a value that quantifies only the physical characteristics of a pitch's profile in units of runs.

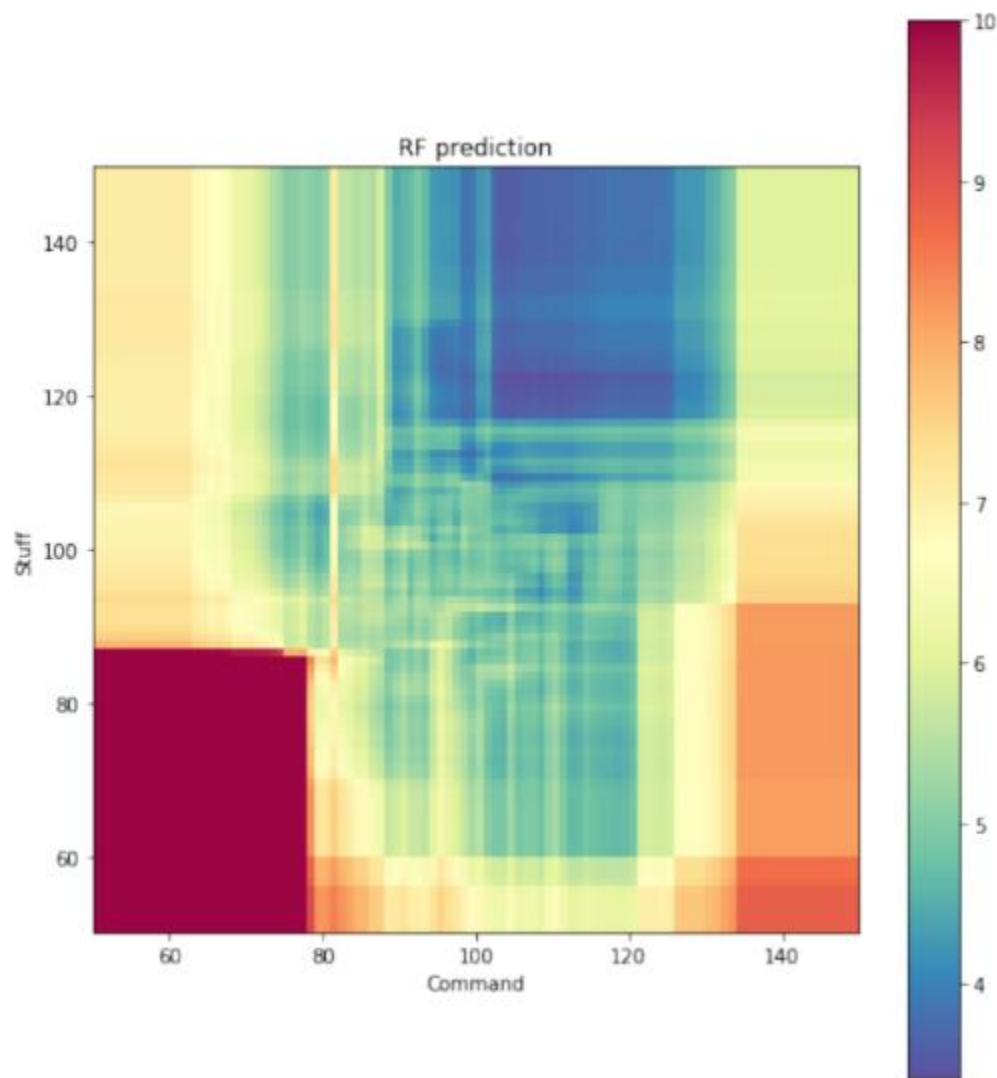
The top ten best starters last year by this Stuff metric were Tyler Glasnow, Gerrit Cole, Garrett Richards, Walker Buehler, Sonny Gray, Frankie Montas, Noah Syndergaard, Luis Castillo, Jacob deGrom and Mike Clevinger.

Command. Stuff. Let's goooooo.

Running the numbers, we have Konstantinos Balafas, a YMCA basketball league-mate of mine and (more importantly) a data scientist. Balafas used a [Random Forest](#) machine learning model with around 7,000 pairs of pitcher Command+ and Stuff as the inputs. The result gave us some “contours” that showed us the predictive quality (read: importance) of each stat in explaining the variance in certain outputs. He then [smoothed out the numbers](#) to make the graphs easier to read and make the trends clearer.

First, we ran the numbers against ERA. Though ERA has flaws, it serves here as a general marker of overall quality.

quality.



You're looking for the blue on this heatmap, and of course the bluest blues reside in the top right corner, where the pitchers have both command and stuff. But in order to look at the relative impact of each, just look at how much bluer it gets in the high stuff areas than in the high command areas.

You can ignore the next paragraph if you aren't interested in the nitty-gritty.

The model wasn't very strong in terms of predictive strength — the r-squared for in-set correlation was merely .094, and for out of set prediction .045, meaning that this combination of Stuff and Command+ explained less than 10 percent of the variance in the set, and predicted less than 5 percent of the variance outside the set. The predictive strength could be better if we smoothed less or took different approaches. One [Neural Network model](#) we tried had a 0.85 in-set r-squared for the same inputs and outputs, but that was probably an overfit model, as the out-of-set r-squared was less than zero.

The less technical takeaway is this: We haven't figured out pitching's secret sauce with these two stats, but we can maybe say that the relative importance of Stuff (which contributed 55 percent to the model) was larger than the relative importance of Command+ (45 percent). And the point here was to check the relative relationship between the two inputs in a visually compelling way.

In other words, stuff is more important than command when it comes to outcomes, and that didn't surprise one MLB pitcher, not one bit.

"That's what all the numbers say," the Reds' Trevor Bauer told *The Athletic's* C. Trent Rosecrans. "If your stuff is elite, it doesn't matter if you hit the center of the plate, it's hard to hit."

The pitcher even came with multiple examples.

"If you take someone with league-average stuff and you improve command, he's going to get better," he said. "If you improve his stuff, he's going to get a lot better. You take someone like Shane Bieber who has really good command and he was good his first year out when he was 91-92 [mph], throwing two-seamers and stuff like that. He started throwing four-seamers and throwing 93-95 and then he was an All-Star."

"I would not consider Gerrit Cole to have great command," Bauer continued — and indeed, Cole has a 102 Command+, making him more above-average than elite in that respect. "He's not a Kyle Hendricks type pitcher who never misses his spot. But his stuff is so elite that he misses a ton of bats. He's a fantastic pitcher."

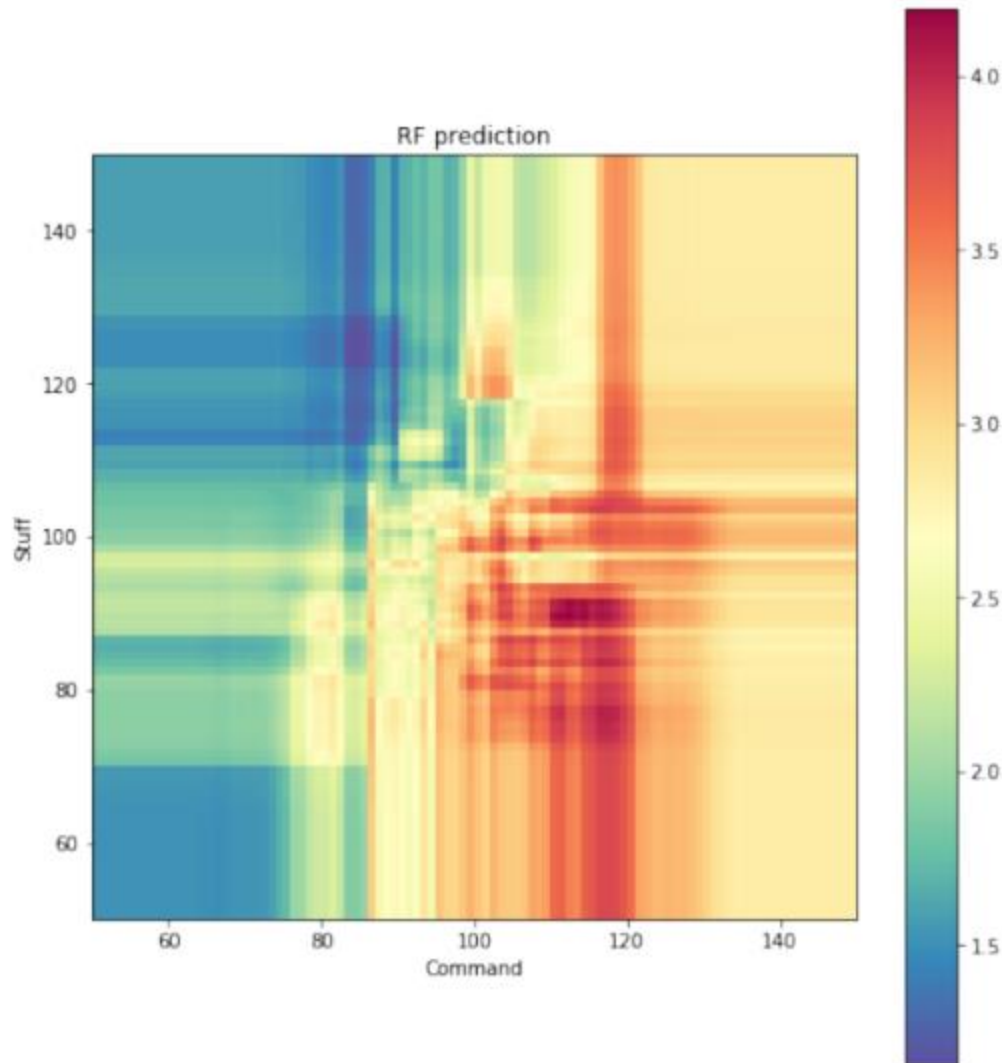
Many fans are probably familiar with some of the analysis that Bauer is talking about, perhaps something as simple as the table below, which shows some of the power that stuff (here represented by simple velocity) can have on outcomes (here represented by swinging strike

rates on four-seam fastballs since 2017). I've referred to myself as a "stuff-ist" because of facts just like this.

Velocity (mph)	Swinging Strike%
90-91	7.4%
91-92	8.1%
92-93	8.8%
93-94	9.5%
94-95	10.5%
95-96	11.7%
96-97	12.7%
97-98	13.5%
98-99	14.4%
99-100	14.9%

But command is worth more than a shrug and some hope — command is important. If you change the thing you're trying to predict, command actually steps forward and becomes more important than stuff.

Check out, for example, what happens when we tried to use Command+ and Stuff to predict innings pitched per appearance using Random Forests — in other words, to predict if a pitcher was a starter or a reliever.



Now you're looking for the red parts of the graph, and once again there's an ideal corner of the graph (the top right red band) where pitchers have both great command and stuff. But the effect is reversed: There are hardly any starters with below-average Command+, and there are many starters with below-average Stuff. The predictive effect was stronger than it was than when we tried to predict ERA (0.084 r-squared), and the importance of Command+ was greater (it contributed 57 percent to the model) than that of Stuff.

Particularly important is the notable lack of starting pitchers with Command+ scores below 90. Granted, it's for fantasy baseball purposes, but in my [top 75 starting pitchers](#) for the coming season, only two established pitchers had a sub-90 Command+: Dinelson Lamet (89.2) and Garret Richards (89.4). At the back end, Dylan Cease (89.8) and Josh James (87.5) threaten to join the group, and at the top end, Tyler Glasnow (90.3 Command+) proves stuff-based hope for the entire group. But that's it. That's the list.

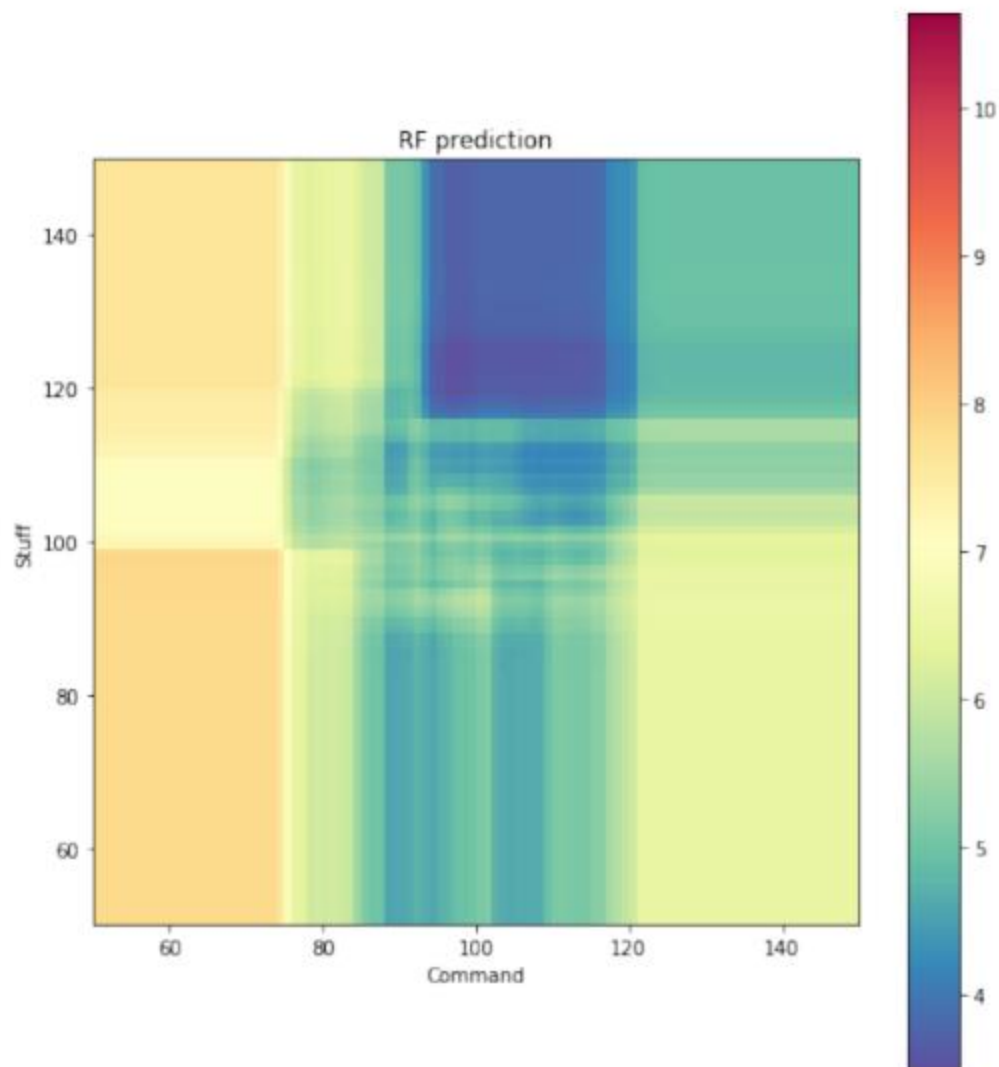
When asked which was more important, Phillies pitcher Zack Wheeler thought it was command because of the quality of the hitters at this level.

“I want to say stuff, but I guess command because you need to throw strikes or that’s it,” he said in camp last week. “Up here, these guys have such good eyes that you have to make it look like a strike no matter what it is. You can have the nastiest curveball but if it doesn’t look like a strike at some point, they’re not going to budge at it.”

His teammate agreed that command was crucial to turning the lineup over.

“But pitching comes down to being efficient and consistent,” Vince Velasquez said. “You know they have [those little nets where they have three or four holes](#)? If you’re a little kid and you can perfect and learn how to go in each corner and every pocket, if you could do that every time, that’s consistency, then you’re in the category with legends with Tom Glavine, and Greg Maddux: spotters.”

So far we’ve looked at overall Command+ and Stuff, but each of those stats is calculated by pitch type — in other words, a pitcher has a particular fastball Command+, and slider Command+, and so on. So there’s more to learn about the interaction between command and stuff and pitcher results. Check out *slider* command and stuff run against overall ERA.

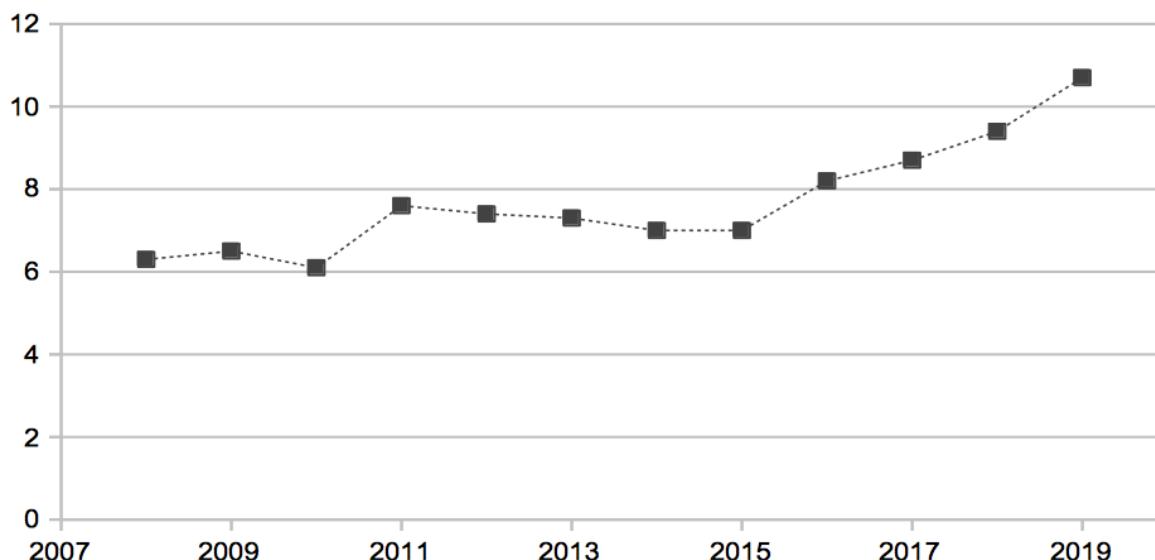


Command is a lot more important for sliders than stuff, it looks like — command contributed 63 percent to the outcome. Just follow the line for 120 slider Stuff on the graph above — you have to have nearly average command for it to start changing your fortune when it comes to overall ERA.

This is may not be all that surprising to some, and it's a thing I've heard from team analysts before. It's become more important as sliders are being used more now than ever — they were thrown more often last year than ever before — but also because the way sliders are being used is changing. Take a look at how often the slider was used in 2-0 counts by year.

The Rise of the Two-Oh Slider

Sliders as a percentage of all pitches thrown in two ball, zero strike counts



The premium is on getting a strike in two-oh counts, but also *not* getting a ball. The solution, increasingly, is throwing a slider in a good part of the strike zone for the pitcher. So it follows that slider command would be so important in today's game.

If you want to see the benefits of extreme slider command, look no further than New York, where it helped an ace declared himself (Jacob deGrom) and a veteran rediscover his value (Masahiro Tanaka). In general, you may see the benefit slider command can have on longevity when you look at last year's slider Command+ leaders (minimum 500 thrown). Teams signing 30-year-old starters to long-term contracts may want to take notice.

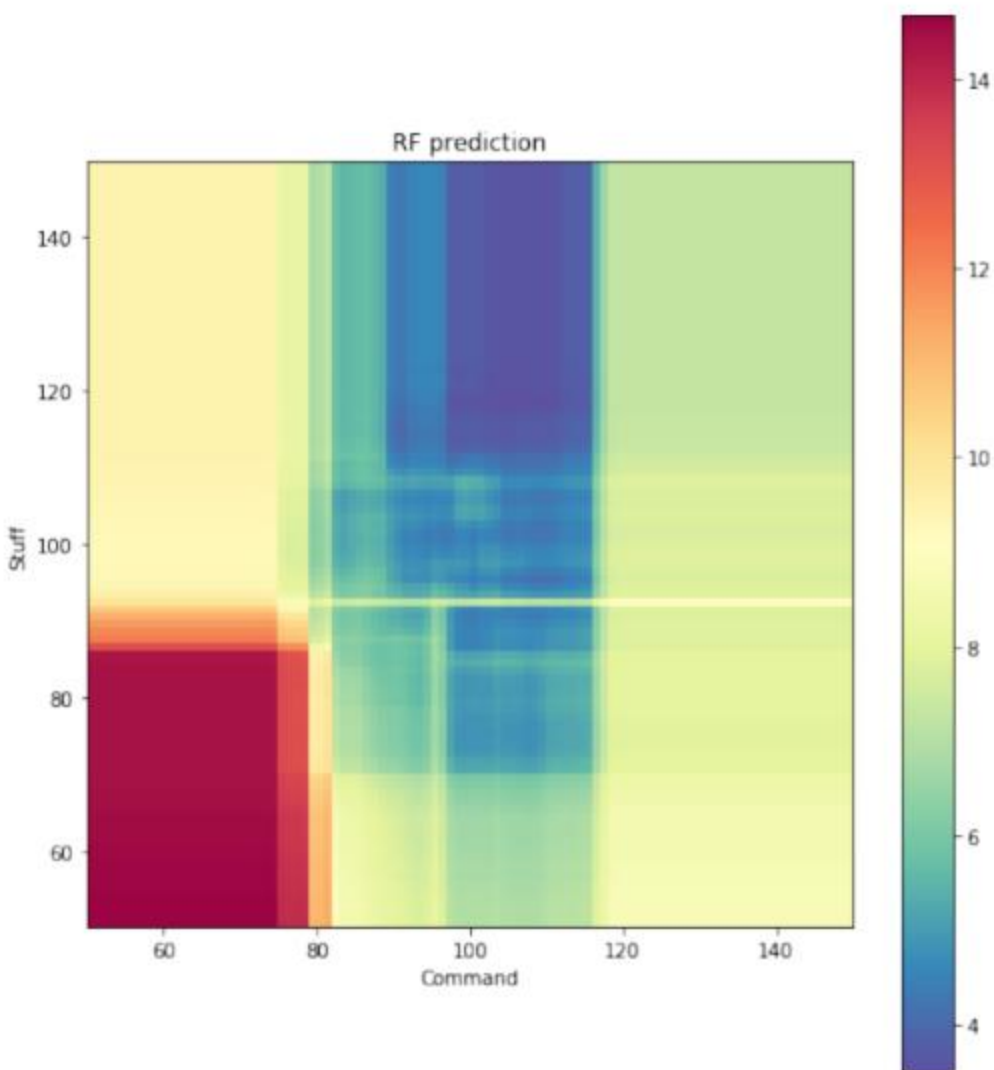
Pitchers	Team	Slider Command+
Masahiro Tanaka	Yankees	139
Jordan Zimmermann	Tigers	131
Zach Eflin	Phillies	126
Jacob deGrom	Mets	121
Miles Mikolas	Cardinals	120
Tanner Roark	Reds	118
Zack Wheeler	Mets	118
Kyle Gibson	Twins	117
Kenta Maeda	Dodgers	116
Justin Verlander	Astros	116
Zack Greinke	Astros	116

Sergio Romo	Twins	116
Jack Flaherty	Cardinals	113
Clayton Kershaw	Dodgers	113
Michael Pineda	Twins	113

DeGrom's command actually rubbed off on his teammates last year. One in particular — Wheeler — saw something in his routine that he liked, and copied it.

"Watching Jake deGrom play," Wheeler said as a thing that improved his command. "People ask about my command, and it has gotten better. Watching him, he'll throw twice between starts and he'll just start with ten glove-side fastballs on the first day, nice and easy. You see him pitch, his command is really good, so I thought, I'm going to do that. But I don't throw two pens, that's just how I start off my bullpen now. I did that for a full season and I think that really helped."

That's not necessarily slider command in particular, but it does provide an easy segue into our more surprising finding about command and stuff: For fastballs, command was *also* more important than stuff for predicting overall ERA.



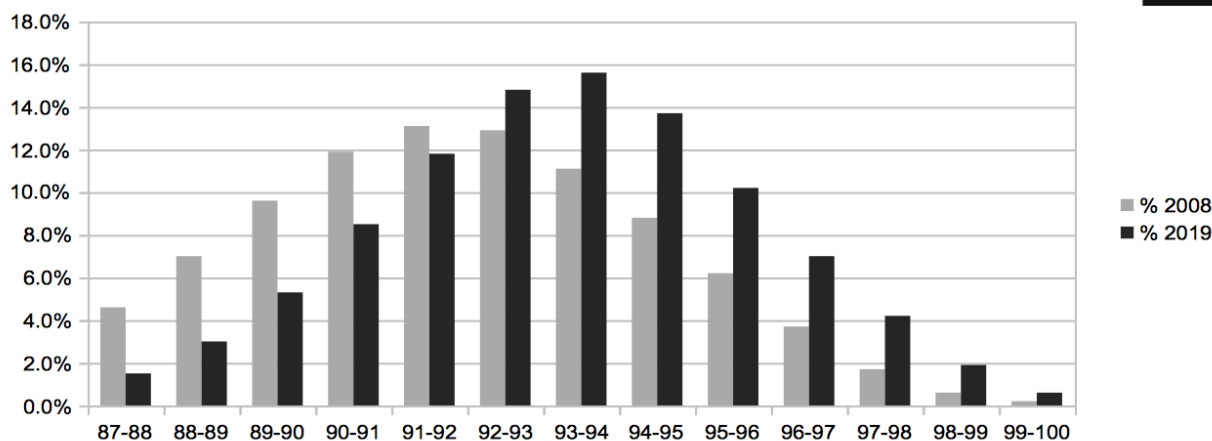
For some, this is perhaps the most unsurprising finding in the article. But the lust after fastball velocity, the radar-gun fetishism, the simple table above and even [trends in the first round of the amateur draft](#) suggest that we're chasing stuff on the fastball level. And yet there's very little blue on the wrong side of 100 Command+, suggesting that fastball command is just as fundamental a skill as our old baseball truisms would have suggested. Command contributed 61 percent to the predictive model, at least.

There might be a link between our chasing after fastball stuff and the relative importance of fastball command, though. What if we've chased fastball velocity so far that we've made fastball velocity less unique? If that's the case, then the way to separate your fastball from the pack is now command instead of more velocity and stuff.

This is more of a theory than fact, but here's a little evidence.

The Shape of Fastball Velocities is Changing

Percentage of fastballs thrown in each velocity bucket, in 2008 and 2019



Look at the shape of the two graphs here, and you'll see how fastball velocity is becoming more homogenized — no bar in 2008 is as high as the three highest bars in 2019. As that shape has a higher peak, and we run up against peak velocities given current bodies and mechanics, the more likely it is that a player can better separate themselves from the average fastball by command than by velocity.

The pitch that was most stuff-dependent in our analysis was the changeup (64 percent of the importance came from the stuff metric). Stuff, for a changeup, is mostly [built on movement and velocity difference off of the fastball](#), so it's all intertwined. And, ironically, a changeup artist who has *both* stuff and command on the changeup can tell us a little something about the pitch — the Blue Jays' Chase Anderson.

"I can throw that changeup behind the in count 1-0, 2-0, drop one in there for a strike," said Anderson, who shares that ability and also elite changeup Command+ (111) with the Reds' Luis Castillo, among others. "You want more weapons. As you get on the mound as a starter, you feel a lot more confident if you get up there with four pitches. Spring training for me this year is all about having all four pitches for strikes, and for chases."

Anderson and his comments bring forth a couple of things: Changeup command is rare, and command and stuff are maybe not as independent from each other as we'd hoped at the beginning. Here's Matt Boyd on slider command, to further the theme.

"I throw working lines," he said of the skill. "My slider may end up middle down, but I want to work that away line. Working a fastball away, I want to throw a slider off of that. If I miss in, then that pitch didn't work off the pitch before. Command is all predicated off that pitch before, as well as working the hitters' weaknesses and strengths."

Listen to slider command leader Tanner Roark on the value of that skill, and maybe the point here becomes clearer.

“If you leave the slider up just a little bit, and you don’t have that same bite you’re used to, they either foul it off or they crush it,” he pointed out. “The worst is when I have a pitch that I know I can strike them out with, and I lack the execution on it and he spoils it. That was your strikeout pitch, and you should have struck him out with it. If you can place it, if they spoil it, you can go a little further out and get the whiff.”

Roark is talking about execution of the slider here. Execution is replicating the intended movement and velocity and location. Replicating good movement and velocity is captured in Stuff, but it’s also captured in Command+.

Are stuff and command impossible to separate? Even if not, there’s a complicated tension between the two, as you can see from these pitchers’ comments. Every pitch plays better as you get ahead in the counts, so — even though we removed count effects from our Stuff metric — there’s still an intertwining that happens with these skills.

Also, although research on stuff metrics is now [more than ten years old](#), slider stuff research has lagged behind, at least in the public sector. And even there my [most recent attempt to understand sliders](#) found that you really define each pitch in relation to a pitcher’s other pitches, and maybe even [the pitch that came just before](#). As much as we try to separate these things to study them better, we find that each pitcher is really a unique combination of attributes, and it’s hard to split them into atoms.

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There’s always more work we can do — we can break these relationships down further to see if command produces weak contact and stuff produces whiffs, for example. We might find that, in order to be a good starter, there’s a minimum number of commandable pitches a pitcher needs to have, and a minimum number of above-average stuff pitches. There’s always more research to be done.

But the fun part is learning, even if you learn you were wrong. Stuff is important! It’s really important. But command also helps explain why your favorite starting pitcher is a starter at all.