

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

SEPTEMBER 26, 2021

Good morning baseball fans from Bandon, Oregon. It may be the middle of nowhere (5 hour drive south from Portland) but it will be a fun week of golf.

Thank you for the excellent baseball book suggestions. Keep them coming and I will include the list in next week's newsletter. Some fun stuff this week as we the race to the finish of the regular season.

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

Phillies rallied to beat the Pirates 12-6 this week with 12 unanswered runs. The Phillies became the first team in the modern era to win by six or more runs after trailing by six or more runs twice in the same season.

Since his debut in 2001, Albert Pujols leads MLB with 39 go-ahead RBIs in the ninth inning or later. Second is that David Ortiz (35 RBIs).

As Milwaukee celebrates 50 years of Bob Uecker in the radion booth--three Hall of Fame pitchers allowed home runs to Uecker---Gaylord Perry, Sandy Koufax and Ferguson Jenkins.

The only two Canadian-born players to hit 40 or more home runs in a season--Larry Walker (49 in 1997) and Vladimir Guerrero Jr. (46 and counting in 2021).

Here's a bet to be won:

Instead of asking ‘who are the top two with the most HRs in Dodgers history?’ (Duke Snider 389 and Gil Hodges 361) ask “who are the top two with the most HRs in LA Dodger history?” (Erik Karros 270 and Ron Cey 228).

Eddie Rosario of the Braves hit for the cycle Sunday against the Giants. Rosario's afternoon was unique, given that he saw only five pitches over his four plate appearances, which is the fewest number of pitches seen by a player who hit for the cycle since at least 1990, per the Baseball-Reference database.

Patrick Wisdom crushes a three-run home run to center field, his 27th longball of the season to surpass Kris Bryant's Cubs rookie record. Wisdom spent 9 years in the minors

With nothing left in the 2021 season, [Noah Campbell](#) decided to do everything.

Campbell, a Milwaukee prospect and second baseman by trade, played all nine positions on his team's last day of the 2021 campaign and earned the save on the mound as Low-A Carolina wrapped up its season with [a 5-2 win](#) at Fayetteville.

With his 43rd home run in Saturday's [6-1 win](#) over the Twins, Marcus Semien tied [Davey Johnson](#) (1973, Braves) for the most homers by a second baseman in a single season in AL/NL history.

HOW ABOUT THOSE CARDINALS

These 2021 Cardinals, with a come-from-behind 8-5 victory over the Cubs at Wrigley Field on Saturday afternoon, own the longest win streak in the storied franchise's history. They passed the legendary Gashouse Gang's mark of 14 consecutive wins set 86 years ago in 1935. And in doing so, they have catapulted from fringe postseason contenders to a team firmly entrenched in the second [National League Wild Card spot](#), their magic number trimmed to three with seven games remaining.

seven facts and stats about the Cardinals' 15-game winning streak:

1. This win streak has, of course, changed the Cards' [postseason picture](#) dramatically. They had just a 2.8% chance to make the playoffs on Sept. 7, according to FanGraphs' playoff odds. Now, they're on the verge of clinching. Those playoff odds go back historically to the 2014 season. In that span, only one team has made the playoffs after having single-digit odds to do so at any point in September: the 2019 Brewers. They were at 5.6% on Sept. 5, and ended up being the second Wild Card.

2. Where does the Cardinals' streak rank in late-season lore? Glad you asked. Their 15-game win streak is tied with the 2017 Indians, 1977 Royals and 1960 Yankees for the fourth-longest streak in the months of September and October since 1900, according to the Elias Sports Bureau. Of course, despite including October, that encapsulates only regular-season games. And it's worth noting that the Indians' 15 games in September were the ninth-month portion of a larger 22-game win streak that began in August.

The September win streaks the Cardinals are chasing on that list? 26 by the 1916 Giants, the longest overall win streak in MLB history -- all of which occurred in September. There's also a 21-game streak from the 1935 Cubs and a 16-game streak from the 1909 Pirates, which the Cards can tie on Sunday.

3. Of course, if the Cardinals were to extend this streak into that territory, we'd be talking about the overall win streaks record list, not just September/October-only. Another thing we might be talking about? The longest season-ending winning streaks. The Cardinals are at 15 straight right now. It's still a while away, but if they won out, that would be 22 straight games. That would shatter the record for the longest season-ending win streak by a team that made the postseason, which is currently 15 by the 1960 Yankees, in case you were curious, according to Elias. Only one other team has won 15 or more to end a season, postseason-bound or not: the 1887 Phillies, who won 16 straight to end the year, long before the first World Series in 1903. The team actually went by the Quakers at the time.

4. Another remarkable part of this streak is that the Cardinals have won 10 straight road games within it. And not any 10 road games, but 10 of their final 11 -- with the last one coming Sunday at Wrigley Field. Only one team in MLB history has won its final 11 or more road games, according to Elias: that 1887 Philadelphia squad. Those final 11 road games came against the Indianapolis Hoosiers, Detroit Wolverines, Pittsburgh Alleghenys (now the Pirates) and New York Giants.

5. How difficult had it been for the Cardinals to win 15 games earlier this year? At one point this season, from May 30-July 17, it took St. Louis 40 games to win 15. Now, they've taken ... 15 games to win 15. Wild.

6. [Tyler O'Neill](#) was among the contributors in Saturday's [8-5 win](#), crushing his 11th home run so far this month. That's the fourth-most homers in the calendar month of September in franchise history, behind only three consecutive years from Mark McGwire: 1997 (15), 1998 (15) and 1999 (12).

7. O'Neill hasn't been the only Cardinals player going yard. In fact, they've hit 29 homers over the course of the win streak. That's the most home runs by the Cardinals in any 15-game span since 2017. The only other team with at least that many home runs over a 15-game span with all of those games being wins is the 2017 Indians, during their historic streak.

There was this: From the big home runs and strikeouts to all the little plays in between, the Cardinals are doing everything right during their Modern Era franchise record [15-game win streak](#). And it was one of those little plays that came up huge during St. Louis' [8-5 triumph](#) over the Cubs for win No. 15 on Saturday.

The Cardinals led, 5-4, but the Cubs had runners on the corners with one out in the bottom of the eighth when Rafael Ortega bounced a grounder to first baseman Paul Goldschmidt. St. Louis' Gold Glove Award winner fired home to catcher Yadier Molina to force David Bote, the potential game-tying run, into a rundown. Molina relayed to third baseman Nolan Arenado, who tagged Bote for the second out of the inning. Arenado then spun and fired to second baseman Tommy Edman, who threw back to Molina before the backstop found center fielder Harrison Bader charging into second base.

Bader joined the rundown and relayed the ball to shortstop Paul DeJong, who tagged Trayce Thompson to complete a bonkers inning-ending double play. Just your not-so-routine 3-2-5-4-2-8-6 double play.

POST SEASON EXCELLENCE

As post season approaches, a reminder of greatness—Mariano Rivera had 42 post season saves in 47 opportunities. Kenley Jansen of the Dodgers is tied for second all-time with 18 post season saves. He has the best batting average against .152, of any pitcher with 40 or more postseason innings in history.

Clayton Kershaw He has 13 wins (fifth all time, one behind Tom Glavine and Justin Verlander, and two behind John Smoltz), and batters have hit just .221 against him. More to the point: He's the all-time leader in postseason strikeouts, with 207.

Albert Pujols has post-season slugging pct. 599, higher than anyone else in the top 25 in games played.

Cardinals Jon Lester He's 14th all time in wins with nine, and he'd enter the top 10 if he can get one more in October. (Tying Dave Stewart, Chris Carpenter, CC Sabathia, David Wells and Whitey Ford. Though he's only one ahead of Gerrit Cole.) He's also eighth all time in innings

pitched, and his ERA, 2.51, is better than every single pitcher above him on that list. He's ninth in strikeouts too, but he's not likely to catch the guy just above him: That's Max Scherzer, who is known for striking a few guys out himself.

[Yadier Molina](#), C, Cardinals

Derek Jeter is the only player to have played essentially a full season of postseason games: He ended up with 158. But Molina is close to a full-season-for-a-catcher number. He's at 101 all time, good for sixth overall and easily first among active players. If he gets into 10 games, he'll tie Manny Ramirez for fifth, and he needs 11 to tie David Justice for fourth. He's fifth in hits and will pass Jorge Posada for fourth with three hits this October.

[Buster Posey](#), C, Giants

We'll save what might be the most notable achievement for last. Posey's historical postseason feats come entirely from his three years winning the World Series with the Giants in 2010, '12 and '14: He's the only active Giant who was on all three teams. (Brandons Belt and Crawford weren't there until 2011.) He does have an opportunity to become the first National League player (and the first non-Yankee) to win four World Series with the same team in the divisional era, which began in 1969. The last NL players to win four for their team? Sandy Koufax and Johnny Podres with the Dodgers.

Think the Dodgers starters will be tough in the post-season? Clayton Kershaw and Max Scherzer share six Cy Young awards between them and might add a seventh this year, while Walker Buehler and Julio Urías have sub-3.00 ERAs and have combined for 32 wins.

Best record of defending WS champ since 1969

Dodgers	2021	.640	(so far)
Orioles	1971	.639	(101-57)
A's	1990	.636	(103-59)
Astros	2018	.636	(103-59)
Reds	1976	.630	(102-60)

ALBIES

Ozzie Albies created a lasting memory with the home run he hit in the fifth inning of a [9-2 win](#) over the D-backs on Wednesday night at Chase Field. The two-run shot secured both the first 30-homer and 100-RBI season of his still young career. He's the first second baseman in Braves franchise history to have a 30-homer, 100-RBI season.

Here are a few facts created by Albies' 30th home run:

- Albies, Austin Riley (31) and Freddie Freeman (31) have each reached the 30-homer mark, leaving Dansby Swanson (26) as the only Braves infielder who hasn't. The 2008 Marlins are the only other team to ever have four infielders hit at least 25 homers.
- Albies became MLB's first second baseman to have a 30-homer, 100-RBI season since fellow Curaçao native Jonathan Schoop did so in 2017. The only other second basemen to reach the mark going back to '10 are Robinson Canó ('16) and Dan Uggla ('10).
- Albies is the first Braves second baseman to record a 30-homer, 100-RBI season. Davey Johnson finished a RBI shy of the century mark when he hit 43 homers for Atlanta in 1973.
- Albies and Riley have homered in the same game 12 times since the start of the 2020 season. According to the Elias Sports Bureau, the only other teammates to also reach that mark 12 times over the past two seasons are Toronto's Vladimir Guerrero Jr. and Lourdes Gurriel Jr.

Just twice in club history have the Braves had three different players tally 30 homers and 100 RBIs in a season. That occurred in 2003 (Gary Sheffield, Andruw Jones and Javy Lopez) and 1998 (Andres Galarraga, Chipper Jones and Lopez). That won't be matched this year, but Duvall, who was acquired from the Marlins on July 30, already has 37 homers and an NL-best 109 RBIs.

If Riley reaches the 100-RBI mark, he and Albies would become just the fifth set of teammates 24 years or younger to tally 30 homers and 100 RBIs in a season. The only others to do so were Ryan Braun/Prince Fielder of the 2008 Brewers, Mark Teixeira/Hank Blalock of the 2004 Rangers, Mark McGwire/Jose Canseco of the 1987 A's and Don Hurst/Chuck Klein of the 1929 Phillies.

SALVATOR

Salvator Perez hit his 46th home run of the season in the Royals' [7-2 victory over the Indians](#) in Game 1 of a straight doubleheader on Monday, passing Johnny Bench for the most home runs in a season by a [primary catcher](#) (at least 75 percent of games).

Perez is now two away from tying the Royals' single-season home run record (Jorge Soler's 48 in 2019). And his 198th career home run put Perez in sole possession of second place on the franchise home run leaderboard, passing Mike Sweeney's 197.

Monday's home run was Perez's 31st as a catcher this season (the others coming as the designated hitter), putting him four shy of Iván Rodríguez's American League record of 35 home runs as a catcher, set in 1999, according to the Elias Sports Bureau.

R.I.P. CLOYD BOYER

Cloyd Boyer pitched for the St. Louis Cardinals and the Kansas City Athletics and, in a baseball career of nearly a half century, later worked as a pitching coach for the Yankees and the Atlanta Braves and as a minor league manager, a roving pitching instructor and a scout.

But in none of those roles was he especially well known. What brought him his greatest distinction was something more familial: He joined with the third basemen Ken and Clete Boyer in a three-brother major league rarity.

Having outlived both Ken and Clete, Cloyd Boyer died on Monday at 94 in a nursing home in Carthage, Mo. His death was confirmed by his son Ken.

The Boyers were not the only brotherly trio to play in the major leagues at the same time. Joe, Dom and Vince DiMaggio famously came before them. More recently there were Felipe, Matty and Jesus Alou, and Bengie, José and Yadier Molina. But across baseball history, notable three-brother combos are a small fraternity.

Cloyd's promising pitching career was victimized by injury, but Ken and Clete, the youngest of the three, flourished in the major leagues.

Ken Boyer played for 15 seasons, 11 with the Cardinals, and later managed them. A fixture on All-Star teams, he was the National League's Most Valuable Player in 1964, when the Cards faced brother Clete's Yankees in the World Series. Ken hit two home runs and a double and drove in six runs in the Cardinals' seven-game Series victory. He later played for the Mets, the

Chicago White Sox and the Los Angeles Dodgers. He finished his career with 282 home runs and 2,143 hits.

Clete Boyer, known for his sharp fielding at third base, spent 16 seasons in the majors. After playing for the Athletics, he was a Yankee from 1959 to 1966, appearing with stars like Mickey Mantle and Whitey Ford on five pennant-winning teams, two of them World Series champions. He later spent five seasons with the Braves.

[Ken Boyer died](#) in 1982 at 51, and [Clete Boyer died in 2007](#) at 70. Both had cancer.

Cloyd, a right-hander with an outstanding fastball, pitched for the Cardinals from 1949 to 1952 and was a teammate of the future Hall of Famers [Stan Musial](#), [Red Schoendienst](#) and [Enos Slaughter](#). After being sent to the minors, he pitched for Kansas City in 1955.

A shoulder injury shortened his major league career, leaving him with a 20-23 record. After his one season with Kansas City, Boyer pitched in the minors until 1961. He was a pitching coach for the Yankees in 1975 and 1977 and with the Atlanta Braves later in the 1970s and in the early '80s. He managed in the Yankees' minor league system and worked for them as a roving pitching instructor and a scout.

WANDER BACK AND ROLLING

Two days after the Rays punched their ticket to the postseason, they got rookie phenom [Wander Franco](#) back for the final stretch of the regular season.

Tampa Bay reinstated Franco from the 10-day injured list and optioned infielder Taylor Walls to Triple-A Durham prior to Friday night's [8-0 victory](#) over Miami at Tropicana Field. And Franco, the switch-hitting shortstop, picked up right where he left off two weeks ago. He worked a sixth-inning walk, which extended his historic on-base streak to 40 games, and added an eighth-inning double off catcher Sandy León.

Franco's 40-game streak is the second longest in AL/NL history by a player 20 years old or younger, only three games shy of the all-time record set by Frank Robinson from May 26-July 7, 1956. The 20-year-old also broke a tie with Johnny Damon (2011) for the second-longest overall on-base streak in franchise history.

Franco returned from the IL hitting .314/.376/.508 since the All-Star break. Overall, Tampa Bay is 41-21 when Franco plays. In their first 35 games with Franco and Nelson Cruz in the starting lineup together, the Rays averaged 6.4 runs per game.

30-30 ORIOLE

[Cedric Mullins](#)' surprise, superlative breakout season now also ranks historic. Not until Friday had an Oriole player hit 30 home runs and stolen 30 bases in the same season, throughout 67 years of O's baseball in Baltimore. In that respect, Mullins now stands alone.

He earned the distinction with his three-run home run off Rangers righty Spencer Howard in the second inning of Friday's 8-5 loss, tying something of a bow on a season that's certain to earn the All-Star center fielder some down-ballot MVP love come awards voting. Mullins is the 43rd player in MLB history to record a 30-30 season, and first since Christian Yelich and Ronald Acuña Jr. accomplished the feat in 2019. The last American League players to do so were Mookie Betts and José Ramírez in '18.

Mullins now sports exactly 30 homers and 30 stolen bases with eight games to play, to go along with 173 hits, 36 doubles, five triples, an OPS north of .900 and 10 [Outs Above Average](#). He'd been sitting on 29 homers since Sept. 11, an 11-game span, and entered play Friday ranked fourth among AL players in [fWAR](#), at 5.6.

TATIS KEEPS ROLLING

[Fernando Tatis Jr.](#) went deep in the seventh inning of Wednesday night's [8-6 loss to the Giants](#) at Petco Park, his 40th home run of the season, putting him in exclusive company in franchise history as just the fifth player to reach the 40-homer plateau. He joins Greg Vaughn (50 homers in 1998), Phil Nevin (41 in 2001), Ken Caminiti (40 in 1996) and Adrián González (40 in 2009) as the only Padres to do so.

Tatis became just the 10th player to hit at least 40 home runs at age 22 or younger. Notably, he is the only player on that list to do so having played the majority of his games at shortstop. It's an incredibly select group that includes fellow superstar Vladimir Guerrero Jr., who has 46 this season and is chasing Eddie Mathews' mark of 47 set in 1953.

WE'VE NEVER HAD A HR LEADERBOARD LIKE THIS

(through Thursday)

There have been years in which multiple players reached the 60-homer plateau. There's been plenty of seasons when more players hit 40. But we've never seen a home run leaderboard quite like *this*.

Here's how the top five looked entering Friday's action:

[Vladimir Guerrero Jr. \(TOR\)](#): 46

[Salvador Perez \(KC\)](#): 46

[Shohei Ohtani \(LAA\)](#): 45

[Marcus Semien \(TOR\)](#): 41

[Fernando Tatis Jr. \(SD\)](#): 40

The home run race could go down to the final day of the regular season, but this group has already made history. Here's how:

1) They've never slugged like this before

The three players with 45-plus home runs this year -- Guerrero, Perez and Ohtani -- not only never reached 40 homers in a single season before 2021, they never hit 30, either.

According to Stats Perform, this is the first time that three players who had never previously reached the 30-homer plateau all hit 45 or more in the same year.

It's easy to blame the pandemic-shortened season for limiting their home run opportunities, but there's no guarantee Guerrero, Perez or Ohtani would have hit 30 in a 162-game season last year.

Perez would have had the best chance of getting there, as he blasted 11 dingers in 37 games. However, his career high over his first eight seasons was 27 homers, set in 2017 and '18, and it's fair to wonder if he would have kept up his pace in his first season after missing all of '19 while recovering from Tommy John surgery.

Guerrero finished with nine homers over 60 games last year, bringing his career total to 24 through 183 games. Ohtani, meanwhile, spent most of the year as a DH-only player after a forearm strain ended his pitching season after two starts, but he only managed seven long balls in 44 games while slashing .190/.291/.366.

2) It's a global group

Baseball is a global game, and MLB's diversity is reflected in the home run leaderboard.

Among the top five home run hitters are two Dominicans (Guerrero and Tatis), a Venezuelan (Perez), a Japanese player (Ohtani) and a Black player born in the United States (Semien).

Guerrero was actually born in Canada during his father's tenure with the Montreal Expos, making this the first time that the first five players to reach 40 home runs in a season were all born in different countries

3) Age-22 phenoms

A wave of exciting young stars has burst onto the scene in recent years, several of whom are already putting their stamp on the history books.

Of the 11 40-homer campaigns in AL/NL history by a player in his age-22 season or younger, three have come in the past three years -- one by [Ronald Acuña Jr.](#) (in 2019), one by Guerrero and one by Tatis. The only other time it happened this century was 2015, when [Bryce Harper](#) smashed 42 big flies and won the NL MVP Award.

This list also includes Hall of Famers [Mel Ott](#), [Joe DiMaggio](#), [Eddie Mathews](#) (twice) and [Johnny Bench](#), two-time MVP [Juan Gonzalez](#) and three-time MVP [Alex Rodriguez](#).

With Guerrero and Tatis both accomplishing the feat in 2021, it marks the first time that multiple age-22 or younger players have done it in the same year.

Guerrero and Tatis could make more history by the end of this season if they lead their respective league in home runs. While [eight players have won a league home run crown before turning 23](#), it's never happened in both leagues during the same year.

4) Positional variety

Another way the 2021 home run leaderboard is unique? Three of this year's 40-homer hitters are at positions that haven't historically been known for power.

Semien is one of five second basemen (min. 50% of games played at the position) to hit 40-plus homers in a single season, along with [Rogers Hornsby](#), [Davey Johnson](#), [Ryne Sandberg](#) and [Brian Dozier](#).

There have been eight 40-homer seasons by catchers, with [Perez's total leading all backstops](#). Bench (twice), [Mike Piazza](#) (twice), [Javy Lopez](#), [Roy Campanella](#) and [Todd Hundley](#) are the other catchers with at least one 40-homer season.

While A-Rod (six times) and [Ernie Banks](#) (five times) padded the number of 40-homer campaigns at the shortstop position (13 overall), Tatis is just the fourth individual shortstop to hit 40 dingers in a season, joining those two and [Rico Petrocelli](#).

Although Semien, Perez and Tatis aren't the first players at their respective positions to hit 40 home runs, this is the first time that a catcher, second baseman and shortstop have all socked 40 long balls in the same year. The 1999 (Rodriguez, Piazza) and 2003 (Rodriguez, Lopez) seasons were the only other years that had two of the three, and there was never a year prior to 2021 in which a catcher and a second baseman or a second baseman and a shortstop both went deep 40-plus times.

Then there's Ohtani, who is the first player to post a 40-homer season while also throwing 100-plus innings on the mound, just one of many unprecedented feats for the two-way superstar.

INTERESTING 2021 STATS

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Only two players have played in every one of their team's games this year

We're obviously a long way from the days of Cal Ripken Jr., but still, even in the age of load management, it's surprising that there are only *two* everyday players. They are: [Whit Merrifield](#) of the Royals and AL MVP candidate [Marcus Semien](#) of the Blue Jays. They both make a habit of this sort of thing: Semien missed seven games last year, but he played 162 in 2019; Merrifield hasn't missed a game since 2018.

Three of the five top-scoring players are Blue Jays

There are two teams, the Astros and the Rays, that have scored more runs than the Blue Jays. But Toronto certainly is top heavy: [Vladimir Guerrero Jr.](#) (first), [Bo Bichette](#) (third) and Semien (fifth) all sit comfortably in the top five. The other two, if you're curious: the Braves' Freddie Freeman and the Astros' Jose Altuve.

You will never guess who is leading each league in doubles

When you think of doubles, you think of guys like George Brett, Carl Yastrzemski and even Albert Pujols (who, after all, is fifth all time). It is fair to say your doubles leaders are not cut from that cloth. In the American League, it's Detroit's [Jeimer Candelario](#) with 41. In the National League? The Cardinals' [Tommy Edman](#) with 41 as well, perhaps the fourth or fifth player in that lineup you'd imagine hitting a lot of doubles. Edman does have one clear advantage: He leads the NL in at-bats.

D'backs outfielder [David Peralta](#) is doing his triples thing again

Peralta is not an unusually fast player -- he has 32 career steals in 865 career games -- and he's hardly ever among the leaderboards in hard-hit balls. But he is unusually good at hitting triples. He led the NL in triples with 10 in 2015, when he was 27 years old. He's now 34 and not exactly burning up the basepaths, but he's still hitting triples, leading the Majors with eight. That's almost as many as the Mariners, who have 10. Peralta will likely be the first person to lead the Majors in triples with fewer than 10 -- not including last year of course -- since Charlie Gould had eight in the National Association in 1872.

[Adam Duvall](#), quiet leaderboard master

The top 10 list of home run hitters in baseball includes many of the usual suspects: Vlad Jr., Shohei Ohtani, Fernando Tatis Jr., Aaron Judge and José Ramírez. But look at Duvall, the oldest player in the top 10 at 33 years old. Duvall has 37 homers this season (second only to Tatis in the NL), and he has upped his pace since coming over to Atlanta at the Trade Deadline, mashing 15 in 46 games after hitting 21 homers in 91 games with Miami. But it's the RBI leaderboard where his name pops out so prominently: His 109 lead the NL, six more than Nolan Arenado of the Cardinals.

The RBI leaderboard has some wild names

In the top 10 of their respective leagues: the aforementioned Duvall, Teoscar Hernández, Austin Meadows, Kyle Seager, Ozzie Albies and Jesús Aguilar. (how many of these would you have guessed?)

Royals DH/1B [Carlos Santana](#) still walkin'

Santana is having a rough year (by his standards) for Kansas City. He has only 34 extra-base hits in 619 plate appearances, and he's hitting .213. But pitchers still aren't making him hit. The famously patient Santana is somehow tied for sixth in the Majors in walks, right there with Bryce Harper, Vlad Jr., Yoán Moncada, Matt Olson and Shohei Ohtani. Special shoutout to the Tigers' Robbie Grossman, who is hitting only slightly better, but he's still third in walks with 90.

[Joey Gallo](#) still has a chance to set the all-time strikeout record

Gallo has been hot lately—a 12 game stretch with 7 HRs and batting .313. But he's leading the Majors with 200 K's, and while he's still behind his personal record (207 in 2018, 10th most in a single season), he has a non-zero chance of breaking Mark Reynolds' record of 223 in 2009. (A record that, in this era, has lasted a lot longer than you might have thought it would.) The Yankees have nine games left. Gallo needs 24 strikeouts to break the record. That's 2.67 strikeouts a game. It's within reach.

There might be three 40-home run hitters in the top 10 in stolen bases

Ohtani (23 SB, in ninth) got there first (45 HRs), and was joined by Tatis (25 SB, seventh) on Wednesday night. If J-Ram (24 SB, eighth) can get five more dingers, it will be the first time this has happened.

[Aaron Nola](#) is still doing plenty right

Nola has been frustrating for the Phillies faithful this year, not quite rising to the level of ace like

they'd been hoping, but he sure can still strike guys out: He's tied for seventh in the Majors in strikeouts with 211 and will likely set a career high, despite that 4.48 ERA. He's one of two pitchers in the top 10 in K's with ERAs over 4.00: White Sox righty Dylan Cease (212 K's) is the other.

The old guys give you innings

Of the top 20 pitchers in innings pitched, close to half (nine) are older than 30. (And a 10th, Robbie Ray, will turn 30 on Oct. 1.) Two of them -- [Charlie Morton](#) (18th with 170) and [Adam Wainwright](#) (second, with 196 1/3) -- are over 37. There is only one pitcher at the age of 25 or younger in the top 20: the Dodgers' Julio Urías with 174 1/3 in 10th place. (Urías also has a chance to be the first 20-game winner in the NL since Max Scherzer in 2016.)

YOUNGSTERS

Here's a look at the eight players to lead their league in home runs before turning 23 years old, from youngest to oldest, according to the Elias Sports Bureau. In parenthesis is the player's age on the last day of that season.

Tony Conigliaro, 1965 Red Sox (20 years, 269 days) *32 HRs (led AL)*

Conigliaro is atop numerous "youngest" lists, including this one. He got off to one of the greatest starts to a career in history, by certain metrics, before an August 1967 hit by pitch in the face changed the course of his career. Only one player in baseball history hit more career homers before turning 22: Mel Ott, with 86. Conigliaro hit 84, including his 32 in '65 as a 20-year-old. Willie Mays led the NL and the Majors that year, with 52 home runs.

Sam Crawford, 1901 Reds (21 years, 171 days) *16 HRs (led MLB)*

Back in 1901, in the first year of the AL, 16 homers were plenty to lead the Majors. Crawford led the NL, and his 16 were two more than AL leader Nap Lajoie, as well as a career high. But he did lead his league one other time -- in 1908 with the Tigers (seven). A [1916 magazine article about Crawford](#) noted that he was considered the ideal slugger in his day: "While we are no sculptor, we believe that if we were and were looking for a model for a statue of a slugger we would choose Sam Crawford for that role."

Eddie Mathews, 1953 Braves (21 years, 349 days)

47 HRs (led MLB)

Mathews finished his career with 512 home runs, tied for 23rd-most all-time. How do you join the 500-homer club? Getting a fast start sure helps. Mathews hit 25 homers as a rookie in 1952, receiving Rookie of the Year votes in the NL, with Joe Black of the Dodgers winning the award. Then as a 21-year-old in '53, Mathews left no doubt, leading the Majors with 47 homers. He finished second in the NL MVP vote to Roy Campanella. Mathews led the Majors in homers again in 1959 when he hit 46.

Ty Cobb, 1909 Tigers (22 years, 293 days)

9 HRs (led MLB)

By the time Cobb turned 26, he had already led his league, if not the Majors, in batting average six times, and had similar accolades to his name in other categories, too. Those include the 1909 season, when a 22-year-old Cobb led everyone in homers with ... nine. It was a different era, but he led the way -- the only time he ever topped his league in home runs.

Johnny Bench, 1970 Reds (22 years, 298 days)

45 HRs (led MLB)

By the start of the 1970 season, Bench had already won a Rookie of the Year Award, received MVP votes in two separate seasons, won two Gold Gloves and was a two-time All-Star. And he was still just 22 years old. He continued the strong start to his Hall of Fame career by crushing 45 homers and driving in 148 runs in '70, leading the league in both categories, before he even turned 23 in December of that year. It was one of two times he'd lead the Majors in homers, also doing so in 1972, when he hit 40.

Joe DiMaggio, 1937 Yankees (22 years, 312 days)

46 HRs (led MLB)

As a 21-year-old rookie in 1936, DiMaggio tied for the Major League lead in triples with 15, along with Earl Averill and Red Rolfe. The following year, he led the Majors in an extra-base hit category again, but this time it was homers. DiMaggio hit .346 and led the Majors in total bases and runs scored in addition to homers, but he finished second in AL MVP voting behind Charlie Gehringer. DiMaggio paced the AL in home runs a second time in 1948, when he hit 39.

Bryce Harper, 2015 Nationals (22 years, 353 days)

42 HRs (tied for NL lead)

Harper's 2015 season was one for the ages, earning him an NL MVP award. He was the youngest player to win one unanimously. He hit .330 with a .460 on-base percentage and a .649 slugging percentage, with the latter two leading the Majors. His 42 homers were tied with Nolan Arenado for the most in the NL, behind only Chris Davis' 47. Harper has led the Majors in walks twice since then, but not in homers.

Juan González, 1992 Rangers (22 years, 354 days)
43 HRs (led MLB)

González played in three Major League seasons before 1992, exceeding rookie limits in '90. In 1991, he hit 27 homers in 142 games. A year later, he blasted 43 home runs, leading the Majors in a season that ended just before his 23rd birthday. The following season he tied for first in the Majors, hitting an AL-high 46 and tying the Giants' Barry Bonds. González totaled five 40-home run seasons in his career, but 1992-93 were the only times when he led the AL or the Majors.

HR totals through age 22

Mel Ott	115
Eddie Mathews	112
Arod	106
Tony Conigliaro	104
Frank Robinson	98
Mike Trout	98
Bryce Harper	97
Juan Soto	96
Giancarlo Stanton	93
Bob Horner	91

Four of the top ten are active. Interestingly no active player is in the age 22 cumulative leaders in hits (leader Ty Cobb 765), batting average (Ted Williams .356) or RBIs (Mel Ott 485).

In 2021, the Mendoza Line Isn't So Scary

Once a death knell, hitting below .200 isn't all that unusual anymore, provided you have discernible value elsewhere.

Even baseball fans who aren't into statistics are familiar with batting average. If it starts with a 4, that's historically good. Starting with a 3 is good, a 2 is OK, and if it starts with a 1 ... well, even a casual fan knows it's time to send that player to the minors.

But this season, as baseball's collective batting average has sunk to .243, the dreaded "1" is showing up more and more. Batters, emboldened by teams that prioritize power over consistency, increasingly swing for the fences, and with that their averages have plummeted. Many have even sunk below .200, a threshold known as the Mendoza Line, which was named for Mario Mendoza, a light-hitting infielder in the 1970s.

Through Thursday's games, 20 players with at least 200 plate appearances — enough to be considered something of a regular — were hitting below .200. By season's end they could be joined by several more who are near those thresholds in batting average or plate appearances.

In the last full season, 2019, there were only 15 such players. Further back, it was difficult to keep a roster spot with such a low average. Twenty years ago, in 2001, there were only five sub-.200 hitters, and 50 years ago, in 1971, there were six.

A player hitting below .200 can keep his job for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the manager expects the player to improve. Maybe it's a youngster who needs at-bats. Or maybe the options behind him are even worse.

But some of those Mendoza Line hitters are providing actual value to their teams. That's because, of course, batting average doesn't tell the whole story.

Take Paul DeJong of the St. Louis Cardinals, who is hitting .196 in 370 plate appearances. He plays pretty good shortstop, a key defensive position, and has 17 home runs. [Baseball Reference](#) credits him with 1.3 WAR, the best total among our sub-.200 hitters.

Ryan Jeffers of the Minnesota Twins also pulls his weight. Despite batting .199, he has 13 homers in 277 plate appearances and plays the valued position of catcher. His on-base plus slugging percentage of .673 is not All-Star caliber by any means, but it tops the sub-.200 group.

Eugenio Suarez of the Reds is batting .183, but has been sent to the plate 535 times, the most of any player in the group. He has kept himself in the lineup by hitting 27 home runs, which account for 31.4 percent of his 86 hits.

Unfortunately, some hitters who are batting under .200 don't have much else to show for their seasons. They just can't hit. At the bottom of the table is Michael Perez of the Pirates, who is hitting .141, the lowest single-season mark this century for a player with 200 or more plate appearances. Perez must be an awfully good catcher to put up with that ineffectiveness as a batter.

Outfielder Jackie Bradley Jr. of the Brewers is hitting .163, without much power and with few walks. That gives him an O.P.S. of just .501. That would be even worse if he hadn't shown a

knack for getting hit by pitches — 10 times this season. He is excellent defensively and can play all the outfield positions, however, which is why he has kept getting at-bats.

By WAR, the weakest of the players are Suarez and Jarred Kelenic, a 21-year-old outfielder for the Mariners. Among the game's top prospects heading into this season, Kelenic has 13 home runs, but his .602 O.P.S. isn't great and his defensive numbers are quite poor.

On Mendoza's Edge, but Thriving

While none of the sub-.200 players are grade-A assets this season, a few players who are flirting with the Mendoza Line are actually quite valuable.

Joey Gallo, who was traded from the Rangers to the Yankees this year, is hitting .204, but would be welcomed to just about any team in baseball. Though he leads the majors in strikeouts, he also leads the American League in walks, with 109. Add in 38 home runs and Gallo has an .837 O.P.S. to complement his top-shelf defense, which has added up to 4.8 WAR. Sure the Yanks would love it if Gallo could hit .300 — or even .250 — but his package of skills makes him a real asset despite the batting average.

Ha-Seong Kim of the Padres is hitting .206, but plays such solid middle infield that his WAR is a respectable 2.0.

And what of Mario Mendoza, the player whose name has for decades been linked with mediocrity. Was he unfairly maligned by a myopic focus on batting average? Did he have hidden skills that helped his team?

Well, not at the plate. Mendoza played for parts of nine seasons with the Pirates, Mariners and Rangers from 1974-82. While his career average was .215 he had five seasons in which his average fell below the dreaded line that bears his name.

He brought little else to the plate offensively: His best season of on-base percentage was .286, and his slugging percentage was only over .300 once. He played semi-regularly in only two seasons, 1979 and 1980, with a bad Mariners team; his best walk total in those years was 16, and his best homer total was two.

But he did play shortstop, a difficult position to fill, and enjoyed a good defensive reputation, including the nickname the Man With the Silk Hands. And after his major league career was over he returned to Mexico where he had a long tenure as a player-manager in the Mexican Leagues.

In 2000, he was inducted into the [Mexican League Hall of Fame](#). His lifetime average there was .239.

WALK UP

Your reference to "Walk Up" music brought back memories from the early 60's of an organist at Crosley Field named Ronnie Dale who played walk up music for most of the players based on their names. With the exception of "Show me the vada go home" when centerfielder, Vada Pinson walked to the plate, I can not remember any other songs, but I am sure that players like Gus Bell and Gene Freeze also had unique tunes played.

I tried looking him up and found he recently passed away. He also was credited being the first to incite crowds with the chants of "Charge". Apparently, an umpire had him removed from the park as he thought the noise to be too disruptive. The only organist ever ejected from a game!

FANTASTIC FINISHES

The epic final weekend of the 1908 season featured the Pirates, Cubs and Giants in a virtual three-way tie. The Cubs eliminated the Pirates with a victory in the final game, and then bested the Giants in a replay of a game that had ended in a 1-1 tie two weeks earlier. What Giants player's baserunning mistake on what should have been the game-winning hit resulted in the tie?

Fred Merkle

Explanation: Merkle was a 19-year-old who only played because first baseman Fred Tenney had a bout of lumbago. He was the runner on first base when Al Bridwell hit a single that scored the winning run as fans mobbed the field at the Polo Grounds. But Merkle never touched second base. Cubs second baseman Johnny Evers retrieved a ball — it might have been thrown in the stands first — and recorded the forceout. The game was called because of darkness. When the Cubs won the replayed game, "Merkle's Boner" became part of baseball history.

The Cardinals, led by brothers Dizzy and Paul Dean, won 13 of their final 15 games to capture the National League pennant by two games in 1934. But they also needed help from the Brooklyn Dodgers, who played the spoiler role to perfection and beat the New York Giants in

the final two games. What Giants manager had irked the Flatbush faithful prior to the season when he quipped, "Is Brooklyn still in the league?"

Bill Terry hit .354 as a player/manager in 1934, but his jab at the Dodgers became a legendary swing and a miss. Van Mungo, Buzz Boyle and Tony Cuccinello might not be Hall of Famers, but they were among the Brooklyn players who rose to the occasion in that final weekend to deprive the powerful Giants of the pennant.

The Pirates appeared to have the pennant sewn up in 1938 when the Cubs won 17 of 20 to charge back into the race. The Cubs officially moved into first place on Sept. 28 at Wrigley Field in a game that was tied in the ninth inning as darkness descended on the ballpark. Umpires had warned both teams that the ninth would be the final inning and if the game remained tied, it would be replayed the following day. Whose home run into the left field bleachers stunned the Pirates and delivered the Cubs the walk-off win?

Gabby Hartnett's shot became lauded as the Homer in the Gloamin' and the Pirates never recovered from it. Charles Leo Hartnett was a shy rookie who got his ironic nickname from sportswriters of the time. One of them, Earl Hilligan of the Associated Press, played off the title of a popular song, "Roamin' in the Gloamin'" to describe Hartnett's homer in his account of the game and the phrase stuck.

Ted Williams never won a World Series ring and he only played in one Fall Classic, in 1946. But the Red Sox nearly made it back in 1948, when they finished tied for the American League pennant at the end of the regular season. For the first time, a one-game playoff determined who would win the pennant. Who beat the Red Sox to advance?

Lou Boudreau hit two home runs at Fenway Park and Gene Bearden went the distance as the Indians advanced to the World Series, where they defeated another Boston club, the Braves, to win the championship. Cleveland has come agonizingly close but the team hasn't won a title since then.

The Dodgers and Giants engaged in the most storied pennant race in baseball history in 1951, when the Giants prevailed on Bobby Thomson's "Shot Heard 'Round the World" against Ralph Branca. But Branca was only in the game because the Giants collected three hits against Don Newcombe in the ninth to chase him from the mound. Whose RBI double compelled Dodgers manager Chuck Dressen to go to his bullpen?

Whitey Lockman

Explanation: Mays was in the on-deck circle with one out when Thomson's three-run home run erased a two-run deficit and sent the Giants to the World Series. Irvin hit a foul pop earlier in the inning against Newcombe. It was Dark's single that started the rally and Lockman's RBI double that set the stage for one of the most dramatic moments in baseball history.

The Giants and Dodgers took their pennant race to the West Coast in 1962, when both teams finished with 101 victories and played a three-game series to determine who would win the National League. The ending this time involved another Giants' four-run comeback in the ninth inning, but with decidedly less drama. Who drew the bases-loaded walk that gave the Giants the lead?

Jim Davenport

Explanation: The walk that reliever Stan Williams issued to Davenport has haunted him for the rest of his life. It came after Dodgers manager Walter Alston ordered an intentional walk to Ed Bailey with one out that loaded the bases. If Williams had been allowed to face Bailey, who was a .147 hitter against him, who knows what would've happened?

In 1969, the Cubs had a nine-game lead as late as Aug. 16 and appeared destined to win the National League East. The New York Mets not only caught them but their pitching staff was so dominant that they ended up winning the division by eight games. What ominous sign in a Sept. 9 game at Shea Stadium let Ron Santo and the Cubs know it wouldn't be their year?

Santo stood in the on-deck circle when a black cat crossed his path

Explanation: Santo was awaiting his turn at the plate in the fourth inning when a black cat appeared on the field, strutted between Santo and the Cubs dugout and disappeared under the stands. The real reason the Cubs were unlucky: they had to hold off a Mets rotation with Tom Seaver and Jerry Koosman. Seaver beat Ferguson Jenkins that day to cut the Cubs' lead to a half-game. The Mets went ahead the next day and never looked back.

A generation of Red Sox fans still cannot say Bucky Dent's name without adding a colorful adjective, on account of his three-run home run in the seventh inning of a tiebreaker game at Fenway Park that erased a 2-0 deficit and sent the Yankees to the postseason in 1978. Whose bat did the light-hitting Dent borrow to hit the home run?

Mickey Rivers

Explanation: Mickey Rivers told Dent to use his bat and the rest is history. Well, sort of. There were rumors that the bat was corked and that the one authenticated and sold for \$61,000 might

not be the actual one that Dent swung to hit his home run. In any event, the mere mention of Bucky "Bleeping" Dent still brings a sneer to the faces of Red Sox fans.

The 1995 Angels authored one of the greatest collapses in baseball history when they gave back an 11-game lead by losing 30 of their final 44 games. They won their final regular-season game to force a one-game playoff with the Seattle Mariners at the Kingdome. But there was no advancing past Randy Johnson. How many did he strike out while throwing a three-hit complete game in the Mariners' 9-1 victory? 12

Explanation: The Big Unit was 18-2 in 1995 and led the league with 294 strikeouts on the way to the first of his five Cy Young awards. He might have been at his most intimidating when he pitched in front of those ear-splittingly loud crowds at the Kingdome.

The 1993 NL West race between the Giants and Braves has been called the last great pennant race, both because the second-place team won 103 games and because it was the last season in which there was no wild-card for second place. Who hit .310 with 19 home runs in 68 games after the Braves acquired him in mid-July to put them over the top?

Fred McGriff

Explanation: McGriff was well worth the cost (Vince Moore, Donnie Elliott and Melvin Nieves) to acquire him from the San Diego Padres. Will the Giants win 103 or more games and finish in second place again this season? We'll find out soon enough.

IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED...

After his career as a major league outfielder wound down, Anthony Gose decided to give pitching a chance. The move seemed like a long shot, a bid to extend a career that was realistically probably over.

On Monday, Gose made his major league pitching debut for Cleveland at age 31. He threw an inning and two-thirds, giving up a run, but more impressively popped 100 miles an hour on the gun. An unlikely comeback might have begun.

Gose was a great pitcher in high school in Southern California, but [chose outfield](#) because he wanted to play every day. He was good enough to be drafted in the second round by Philadelphia in 2008.

His career never quite took off. Thanks to his top-notch speed — he once stole 76 bases in a minor league season — he spent five seasons from 2012 to 2016 with Toronto and Detroit, but only one as a regular. He wound up hitting .240 with almost no power, which wasn't good enough for a major league outfielder.

So in 2017, when it was clear his batting days were over, he decided to give pitching another try. This meant a return to the minors and more years of learning his trade, with an eventual payoff that was far from certain.

After a tough couple of years he seemed to put it together in the Puerto Rican and Dominican Winter Leagues, putting up an 0.90 E.R.A. with the Toros del Este in 2020-21. He was 6-1 with a 3.55 E.R.A. with the Class AAA Columbus Clippers this season and played at the Tokyo Olympics, where he allowed one hit and no runs in five innings as the United States won the silver medal.

In his major league pitching debut on Monday, he showed off an easy-looking left-handed delivery that hit 100 m.p.h. eight times. He gave up a walk and a double in the fourth inning, allowing one run, then got the first two outs of the fifth before being pulled after 39 pitches, 27 of them strikes. Cleveland eventually lost to Kansas City, 4-2.

Hitters who can also pitch have been in the spotlight this year thanks to the remarkable two-way success of Shohei Ohtani with the Angels, who is doing things no one has done [since at least Babe Ruth](#).

Gose's case is unusual in its own way since few players have played as hitters and then transitioned late in their career to the mound, or vice versa.

Trevor Hoffman and Tim Lincecum were drafted as hitters and then became standout pitchers. But both made the transition while still in the minors.

The closest comparison might be a player who went the other way. Despite one strong season with St. Louis in 2000, Rick Ankiel was finished with pitching four years later because of injuries and [an inability to find the strike zone](#). He refashioned himself as an outfielder, returned three years later, and managed seven more years in the majors.

A transformation like that would be more than acceptable for Cleveland and Gose.

EACH FRANCHISE'S ALL TIME WINNING STREAK

Inspired by the Cardinals winning streak:

The 2021 season has brought its fair share of long winning streaks, including a franchise record. The Astros, Brewers and Rays all put together 11 wins in a row, the A's and Yankees got to 13, and the Cardinals set a new franchise mark with their 15th in a row on Saturday against the Cubs at Wrigley Field.

How does St. Louis' run stack up next to every other franchise's record? Below is a look at the longest winning streaks within a single season for each of the 30 Major League clubs in the Modern Era (since 1900). (All-time franchise records are also noted, if different).

Angels: 11

June 16-26, 1964

The expansion Angels strung this streak together in only their fourth season of existence, and they haven't matched it since. The Halos were just 24-37 when the run began, and they just snuck over the .500 mark overall (82-80).

Astros: 12 (three times)

Most recent: June 6-18, 2018

Houston also reached 12 straight in 1999 and 2004, and they equaled that record in 2018, as part of a 103-59 season -- the club's second of three straight campaigns with 100-plus victories. Most impressively, the 2018 streak included 10 road wins.

Athletics: 20

Aug. 13 - Sept. 4, 2002

If you've seen the movie version of "Moneyball," then you can probably visualize this one, even if you weren't watching at the time. Billy Beane's feisty Oakland underdogs began the streak in third place in the AL West, 4 1/2 games out, and finished it with a 3 1/2-game lead, going on to win the division. Each of the final three victories during this stretch were walk-offs, culminating in a wild 12-11 victory over the Royals in which the A's blew an early 11-0 lead before winning in the bottom of the ninth.

Blue Jays: 11 (five times)

Most recent: Aug. 2-13, 2015

The 2015 season was a special one in Toronto. Buoyed by sluggers José Bautista, Josh Donaldson and Edwin Encarnación -- plus Trade Deadline additions David Price and Troy Tulowitzki -- the Blue Jays reeled off not one but two 11-game winning streaks (the first was in June), won the AL East and made it to the ALCS in their first playoff appearance since 1993.

Braves: 15

April 16-May 2, 2000

It makes sense that the Braves' longest streak would have come between 1991-2005, when they won 14 straight division titles (not counting the 1994 strike year). The 2000 club, which went 95-67, did not allow more than four runs in any of these 15 games.

All-time record: 18 (Sept. 16-Oct. 2, 1891)

Brewers: 13

April 6-20, 1987

If you count the end of the 1986 season, this streak actually went on for 16 games in all, with the '87 club starting 13-0. Unfortunately for Milwaukee, after moving to 20-3, it embarked upon a 12-game *losing* streak, which is tied for the second longest in franchise history. The Brew crew still won 91 games but missed the playoffs.

Cardinals: 15

Most recent: Sept. 11-25, 2021

St. Louis set a new franchise-record win streak with [Saturday's victory at Wrigley Field](#). The Cardinals sat three games back (and behind two clubs) for the NL's second Wild Card spot and held postseason odds of just 8%, per FanGraphs, when they beat the Reds on Sept. 11 to begin the streak, which gave them a firm grasp on that final playoff spot entering the regular season's final week. Player-manager Frankie Frisch's 1935 Redbirds, the just-eclipsed group that won 14 straight games, were no slouches, either. The "Gashouse Gang" Cards went 96-58 behind the pitching of the Dean Brothers (Dizzy and Paul), who combined to win half of the club's games during the streak.

All-time record: 17 (May 5-June 1, 1885)*

** The Cardinals played in the American Association until joining the NL in 1892.*

Cleveland: 22

Aug. 24-Sept. 14, 2017

This is the longest win streak in AL history and tied with the 1935 Cubs for the longest AL/NL win streak that wasn't interrupted by a tie. Cleveland, who had just lost a seven-game World Series heartbreaker to the Cubs the year prior, was loaded with a talented pitching staff headed by AL Cy Young Award winner Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco and Trevor Bauer alongside offensive stars Francisco Lindor and José Ramírez. The club's final win of the streak was arguably its most thrilling, coming on a 10th-inning, walk-off double by Jay Bruce with the entire baseball world watching.

Cubs: 21

Sept. 4-27, 1935

This was the AL/NL record for the longest win streak uninterrupted by ties until Cleveland surpassed it in 2017. It was held by an excellent 100-win Cubs team led by Hall of Famers Gabby Hartnett, Billy Herman, Chuck Klein and Freddie Lindstrom and began with the Cubs 2 1/2

games behind the “Gashouse Gang” Cardinals before it propelled them to the NL pennant. Chicago lost the 1935 World Series to the Tigers, and it would not win 100 games in any season again until the 2016 team finally snapped the franchise’s title drought.

All-time record: 21 (June 2-July 8, 1880)

D-backs: 13

Aug. 24-Sept. 6, 2017

This streak wasn’t nearly enough to help the D-backs catch the dominant Dodgers in the NL West, as Arizona trailed Los Angeles by 21 games when it picked up its first win on Aug. 24. It did help propel the D-backs into the NL Wild Card Game, however, where they defeated the division rival Rockies before falling to the Dodgers in an NLDS sweep. J.D. Martinez provided the streak’s biggest highlight when he [homered four times](#) at Dodger Stadium on Sept. 4.

Dodgers: 15

Aug. 25-Sept. 6, 1924

The Dodgers have trotted out numerous dominant teams, especially in the 2010s and early 2020s, but the franchise record win streak still belongs to manager Wilbert Robinson’s 1924 Brooklyn Robins. The club’s longest streak since moving to Los Angeles is 13, set twice by the Sandy Koufax-era Dodgers and most recently in ’65.

Giants: 26

Sept. 7-30, 1916

This remains the record for the longest win streak in Modern Era AL/NL history, though it did include a tie against the Pirates in the second game of a doubleheader on Sept. 18. New York had also reeled off a 17-game win streak (with no ties) in May of that season, but the club went 43-66-2 outside of those two streaks to somehow only finish fourth in the NL.

We’d be remiss if we didn’t point out that this was the year the Giants debuted [purple plaid uniforms](#), which team secretary John B. Foster [declared](#) were “the last word in baseball sartorial invention.”

Mariners: 15

May 23-June 8, 2001

Of course 2001 would contain the high-water mark for the Mariners, considering that year’s club tied the all-time AL/NL regular season wins record at 116. Seattle had already built an *11-game lead* in the AL West when it began this 15-game win streak, effectively putting the division title out of reach before Memorial Day.

Marlins: 9 (five times)

Most recent: Sept. 9-19, 2008

The Marlins are the only current franchise to have never enjoyed a win streak of at least 10 games, though they have come close on five separate occasions. In fact, the 2006 Marlins posted

two different nine-game win streaks in June and August before finishing 78-84 in manager Joe Girardi's lone year at the helm.

Mets: 11 (five times)

Most recent: April 12-23, 2015

This 2015 win streak came *before* the Mets acquired Yoenis Céspedes at the July 31 Trade Deadline, as New York fell to second place over the summer before Céspedes' electric addition helped it catch and surpass the Nationals for the division title. The Mets wound up winning the NL pennant in '15, and they also put up 11-game win streaks during their World Series-winning campaigns in 1969 and '86.

Nationals: 10 (five times)

Most recent: Aug. 12-21, 2014

The 2014 Nationals used this streak to seal a division title and the NL's best overall record before the Giants upset them in the NLDS. The Nationals also reeled off 10 straight wins in their debut season in Washington, D.C., in 2005, with the Expos having achieved that same streak three times in 1979, '80 and '97.

Orioles: 14 (twice)

Most recent: Aug. 12-27, 1973

This was during a period of dominance in which manager Earl Weaver's Orioles claimed five AL East division titles in a span of six years between 1969-74, with the '73 club led by the likes of Don Baylor, Paul Blair, Mike Cuellar, Bobby Grich, Dave McNally, Boog Powell and Jim Palmer, who took home the first of his three career AL Cy Young Awards. The 14 straight wins collected by that group tied the original franchise record set in 1916 when the team was known as the St. Louis Browns.

Another streak that warrants mention: Weaver's Orioles reeled off 11 straight wins (three of the last four in walk-off fashion) to roll into the 1970 postseason, swept the Twins in the ALCS and built a 3-0 lead in the World Series before finally dropping Game 4 to the Reds. They won the title the next day, and then won their first three games of their title defense in '71.

Padres: 14

June 18-July 2, 1999

The 1999 Padres still had key pieces from the club that captured the prior year's NL pennant, including Andy Ashby, Tony Gwynn, Sterling Hitchcock, Trevor Hoffman and Wally Joyner. That winning DNA revealed itself in midsummer when a 14-game win streak lifted the Friars from fifth to third place in the NL West, but the previous winter's losses of stars like Kevin Brown, Ken Caminiti and Steve Finley were felt the rest of the way as San Diego finished 74-88.

Phillies: 13 (twice)

Most recent: July 30-Aug. 12, 1991

The 1991 Phillies finished below .500 but the club already had major contributors that would lead them to the NL pennant two years later, including Darren Daulton, Lenny Dykstra, Jon Kruk, Mickey Morandini, Terry Mulholland and Mitch Williams. Philadelphia also reeled off 13

straight wins in Aug. 1977, a year in which it won 101 contests before falling to the Dodgers in the NLCS.

All-time record: 16 (Sept. 15-Oct. 8, 1887)

Pirates: 16

Sept. 9-27, 1909

This was Pittsburgh's first World Series champion club led by Hall of Famers Fred Clarke, Honus Wagner and Vic Willis. The Pirates met the Tigers in a Fall Classic that pitted Wagner against Ty Cobb -- widely considered at the time to be a showdown between the Major's two best players.

Rangers: 14

May 12-27, 1991

Manager Bobby Valentine's Rangers snapped a four-game losing streak that had dropped them to sixth place in the AL West with a win against the Red Sox on May 12, and then they kept on winning for a two-week stretch that briefly set them in first. Texas was unable to keep that momentum, however, starting a roller-coaster stretch in which it immediately lost 11 of its next 12 contests before ripping off another seven-game win streak. Things evened out to an 85-77 record at season's end.

Rays: 12

June 9-22, 2004

This streak stands out as an odd one from a period when the then-Devil Rays were not a winning ballclub. Manager Lou Piniella's team was languishing in last place in the AL East when it began this 12-game win streak, which briefly moved Tampa Bay up to third in the division before it finished fourth with a 70-91 record.

Red Sox: 15

April 25-May 10, 1946

Boston famously went 86 years between winning World Series championships from 1908-2004, but the '46 season represented one of its closest drought-snapping attempts. Ted Williams had just returned from serving as a fighter pilot in World War II and captured that year's AL MVP Award with an incredible .342/.497/.667 slash line and 38 home runs.

The first win of this streak moved the Red Sox into first place and they never looked back the rest of the season before ultimately losing a heartbreaker to the Cardinals on Enos Slaughter's "Mad Dash" home in Game 7 of the World Series.

Reds: 12 (twice)

Most recent: April 30-May 12, 1957

The 1957 Reds used this early season streak to surge to the top of the NL standings, but they relinquished that lead by mid-June and, save a brief few days in early July, were unable to stay up there before finishing the season in fourth place. Cincinnati also won 12 straight in May 1939, a pennant-winning season that culminated in a World Series loss to the Yankees. The Reds also

reeled off 13 straight wins between their last six games of the 1918 season and the first seven of '19 -- the year they defeated the Black Sox in the Fall Classic.

All-time record: 14 (July 26-Aug. 12, 1899)

Rockies: 11 (twice)

Most recent: June 4-14, 2009

Colorado's more famous 11-game win streak occurred two years prior in 2007, when the Rockies got white-hot in September to force a Game 163 tiebreaker with the Padres (which they won) before sweeping through the NLDS and NLCS in what became affectionately known in Denver as "Rocktober." The Red Sox finally cooled the Rockies off with a four-game sweep in the World Series.

Royals: 16

Aug. 31-Sept. 15, 1977

The late 1970s represented the first period of glory for a Royals franchise that entered as an expansion club in '69. Kansas City had just made its first postseason appearance in '76 before reloading for another October in '77 thanks to stars like George Brett, Al Cowens, Dennis Leonard, Hal McRae and Darrel Porter. The Royals fell to the Yankees in the '76, '77 and '78 ALCS before finally vanquishing their bitter rivals en route to the '80 pennant.

Tigers: 14 (twice)

Most recent: July 31-Aug. 14, 1934

The 1934 Tigers won a then-franchise record 101 games thanks to a stacked roster that included Hall of Famers Mickey Cochrane, Charlie Gehringer, Goose Goslin and Hank Greenberg. The club lost a tight seven-game World Series to the "Gashouse Gang" Cardinals before finishing the job in the '35 Fall Classic against the Cubs. Detroit also won 14 straight in 1909 when the club was led by Hall of Famers Ty Cobb and Sam Crawford.

Twins: 15 games

June 1-16, 1991

All but five of these wins came in the Metrodome, hardly surprising considering that the 1991 Twins dominated at home (.630 win percentage) and used their "dome-field advantage" to claim all four of their victories over the Braves in that year's World Series.

All-time record (as Senators): 17 (May 30-June 18, 1912)

White Sox: 19

Aug. 2-23, 1906

The 1906 Sox were known as the "Hitless Wonders," but they sure did a lot of winning. This streak included a tie against the New York Highlanders on Aug. 13, meaning Chicago went 20 straight games without a loss. The South Siders went on to upset the 116-win Cubs in the World Series.

Yankees: 19

June 29-July 17, 1947

This was during a time when it really seemed to fans like the Yankees never lost. This 1947 pinstripes club featuring stars like Joe DiMaggio, Phil Rizzuto, Allie Reynolds and a 22-year-old rookie named Yogi Berra went on to defeat the Dodgers in a seven-game World Series, finished third in '48 and then reeled off five straight World Series titles from 1949-53 -- part of an incredible stretch that saw the Bronx Bombers win 16 Fall Classics in a 26-year span.

AS WE HEAD INTO THE CBA, AN ANALYSIS OF HOW WE GOT HERE BY EVAN DRELICH OF THE ATHLETIC

How we got here: The decisions and changes of the last decade that brought players and owners to a looming labor fight

The seats on the bus.

For five years now, a narrative has persisted inside baseball: that when [Major League Baseball](#) and the Players Association last agreed to a collective bargaining agreement, in 2016, the union was too focused on creature comforts, on luxury bus rides. That the players lost sight of the most important part of bargaining, the core economics.

"These guys were talking about travel getaway days and more meal money, and the union leadership was afraid to talk to them," one team source said.

But like most matters of labor relations and economics inside baseball, the reality is more complicated. Although there is a camp that maintains the players' primary shortcoming was a focus on quality-of-life issues, another says that is false.

"Literally before the ink was dry on the 2016 (CBA), I can remember reading the two-seats-on-the-bus narrative," another industry source said. "That's total bullshit. It's total bullshit."

For those who say the narrative is off, the strongest argument probably lies in the proposals the union actually made to the league in 2016. Among them:

- The elimination of teams surrendering draft picks when signing free agents, which was intended to incentivize teams to bid on players.
- A considerably higher competitive balance tax (or CBT) threshold, which would have raised the amount of money a team can spend on payroll before being penalized.
- A new formula to determine draft order. Rather than the current system, which is based

entirely on win-loss record the year before and rewards the worst team with the best pick, draft position would have been calculated with a 60-40 formula: 60 percent based on record, and 40 percent on other factors, including a club's market size. This was aimed at reducing tanking.

- Doubling the percentage of players eligible for arbitration after two years of service time — the number of Super Two players. This was a way to get more money to younger players.
- In the same vein, the union also proposed standard bonuses for most players prior to arbitration, and changes to how service time is credited.
- Changes to revenue sharing, meant to address tanking.

A union that had truly lost sight of core economics, one could argue, would not have made those proposals. Yet, at the same time, few of these elements actually made it into the final deal. The CBT was raised, but not as much as the union proposed.

"I look at the result. What was the result?" one player agent said.

As the 2016 CBA nears its conclusion on Dec. 1, the industry consensus remains that players fell short in the last go-around. That the league firmly won the last round of bargaining, and perhaps the prior round as well. Today, the players' dissatisfaction with the status quo is well established, headlined by down free-agent classes in some recent years.

Mistakes were indeed likely made by the players, but a desire for better bus rides doesn't fully explain them. How baseball got here — what exactly has happened inside the sport not only in the last five years, but the last decade and beyond — is a contested story. Knowledgeable voices in the industry, almost all of whom would speak only anonymously, have different views, sometimes reflecting their own self-interest. Some believe that the answer doesn't even lie primarily with the CBA: That a sharp change in club behavior is most responsible.

The 2011 CBA

"To do a representative story," one player agent suggested, "you have to include four CBAs, not two."

Bud Selig was commissioner for more than two decades, through 2014. His background, as an owner of a smaller-market team [Milwaukee Brewers](#), is said to have greatly influenced what he pursued in bargaining with the players.

"Although he tried to mask it, he was about getting a benefit for the small-market teams," one executive said. "That's really what he was about."

Baseball's last work stoppage was [the 1994-95 strike](#). In the first labor deal the players and owners reached afterward, two important elements were introduced: revenue sharing between teams, and a luxury tax on payroll spending, known as the competitive balance tax. The league framed its desire for those mechanisms around improving competitiveness and parity.

“How it was sold to the players was that revenue sharing money was going to be used for competitive balance,” the executive said. “Luxury tax was going to be a drag on spending, not a cap on spending. And that would equal competitive balance. And as a result, you know, there was good faith that teams would honor that concept.

“What happened is, it worked. ... That wasn’t good enough for Bud.”

Over time, the league sought and gained further changes to both revenue sharing and the luxury-tax system. But some in the industry suggest the result has not been what Selig and the owners said it would be. That what the changes have stifled player salaries relative to revenues. As one agent put it: “You told us shit in ’96, in 2002, in 2012 and ’16, and none of it’s true. You’re just taking the money and pocketing it. That’s it.”

Entering negotiations for the last CBA under Selig’s tenure in 2011, small-market teams trained their sights on one area in particular, the amateur draft.

Prior to 2011, teams could spend what they wanted in the draft. The commissioner’s office made recommendations as to each pick’s worth, but teams were free to exceed them, and big-market teams often did.

The large-market teams had another draft-related weapon, too. Clubs who lost players in free agency often received compensation draft picks. The departing player didn’t have to be a superstar, either — even more middle-of-the-pack players made a team eligible to receive a pick. So a deep-pocketed club like the [Red Sox](#) not only had an increased ability to sign players who had high-bonus demands in the draft. The compensation system also allowed the Sox to sign or trade for players whom they knew they could someday let walk, and gain a draft pick for in the process.

It’s a strong example of how, even prior to this decade, front offices used [the CBA](#) to their advantage. But by 2011, the small-market teams were fed up.

The union in 2011 agreed to allow the draft to be capped. Each team would have a fixed pool of money for signing players, and to greatly exceed that pool would bring penalties so onerous that no team would be likely to do so. A new system for free-agent compensation arrived as well: the introduction of the “qualifying offer,” which was not so liberal in granting draft picks when players signed with a new team.

“Those deals were really set up to placate the pretty powerful small-market lobby,” one large-market executive said. “Even if you let a free agent walk, you get like the 80th pick as opposed to the 30th pick. When we read the ’11 CBA, we were weeping. In every possible way, it was an attack on large markets that are trying to win in different ways.”

Drafted players have always been immensely valuable. Steve Cohen, the Mets’ owner, [tweeted](#) this year that “baseball draft picks are worth up to five times their slot value to clubs. I never

shy away from investments that can make me that type of return.” A first overall draft pick might be worth upwards of \$100 million, other team executives have said, particularly when accounting for opportunity cost.

But one agent in particular, Scott Boras, believes that over the last decade, the change in the draft system has had a profound effect on free agency. Prior to 2011, a top pick could set a price to sign for and hold out for it. That’s much harder to do now, because team spending is capped.

“Because of the draft, club behavior has changed dramatically,” Boras said. “Where before you had to pay (\$15.1 million) for [Stephen Strasburg](#), now you only had to pay \$6 million. And the key thing is you’re assured of signing him. ... When you have the No. 1 pick now, you’re going to get the best player. Before, the No. 1 pick didn’t ensure you’re getting the best player, because you couldn’t afford to sign him.”

The draft, in other words, provided more certainty than before for any team that wanted to get cheap, young talent. And because draft order had always been tied to win-loss record, the only way to guarantee high draft picks became losing. And when a team doesn’t mind losing, it’s probably not going to spend much in the free-agent market.

“The surety of the draft structure allowed an overhaul of how and why teams started tanking,” Boras said. “Because those draft picks were that valuable.”

Yet, not everyone agrees with that assessment.

“Draft picks became more valuable to some degree because of the price,” one industry source said. “I think at the same time, the rise of analytics in the running of baseball teams coincides with — I’m not saying exactly — the changes in the draft. So it wasn’t just price that made draft picks more valuable. It’s the fact that draft picks are young. And young talent, the teams finally realized, was more valuable than older talent.

“I think that the decline in the free-agent market was because the teams finally figured out that, ‘We’re not going to continue to pay for what players did for us yesterday. We’re going to pay for the guys who we think are going to help us tomorrow.’”

On the players’ side, the 2011 CBA was led by Michael Weiner, who passed away in 2013 at the age of 51. Weiner was widely respected for his acumen and approach, and remains a beloved figure among those who knew him. But, at least in hindsight, some question the strength of the 2011 deal.

“That 2011 deal was really the first one where players first started to kind of give things back,” an industry source said. “I would probably say 2011 certainly emboldened the clubs as it related to 2016.”

The 2016 CBA

The next CBA, in 2016, is still in force today. It's often referred to as a "status-quo" deal, because it didn't drastically change from the previous iteration. That opens a small debate: if the '16 deal is similar to the '11 deal, is the '11 deal, then, where the union really went wrong?

"The biggest thing about '16 was the act of omission, like not significantly raising the CBT," one club-side source said.

But considering that the union did, in fact, make proposals to swing the economics in the players' direction in '16, the bigger question is: Why didn't most of those proposals go anywhere?

The answer seems to be twofold. The first is that the union didn't fully appreciate what was coming in the sport. It didn't believe that the issues, both as they understood them at the time and as they saw them developing in the future, required a massive push. Not that the union was totally ignorant to what was going on — as the two-seats-on-the-bus theory suggests — but that the players didn't grasp the importance of immediate change.

"Despite all the gnashing of teeth and that kind of thing, everybody was doing well," one person involved in bargaining said. "The industry was doing well in 2016."

Whether the players *should* have made a different assessment is a fair question. Gene Orza, a former top official at the Players Association, [said in 2017](#) that the resource the union may have lacked most was institutional recall. Weiner had passed away, and Tony Clark was in his first negotiation as the MLBPA's executive director. Orza had retired years earlier. Don Fehr, the MLBPA's longtime director before Weiner, was leading the NHL's union.

On the other side, Rob Manfred was in his first negotiation as commissioner, but he had been involved in the sport's labor scene since the 1980s. He had an experienced lieutenant, Dan Halem, as well.

"We had tremendous archival capability," Orza said in 2017. "That has changed. Rob has been around now for 20 years. Tony's been around for one negotiation. The staff is composed of people who had very little negotiating experience."

But others reject that assertion as waxing poetic about the past.

"Everybody talks about the Marvin Miller and the Don Fehr days, but they were shooting fish in a barrel at that point," one industry source said. "That's how dumb the other side was."

Regardless, there were signals that the waters would only grow colder for players. Right after the 2011 CBA was reached, two clubs notably embarked on tanking processes: the [Cubs](#) and the [Astros](#). Houston's rebuild was more extreme overall, stripping payroll down to its barebones.

But both clubs benefited from high draft picks, and Luhnow worked hard in his time with the Astros to use free agency as a supplement, rather than rely on it for his roster. Even before those teams won championships, the Cubs in 2016 and the Astros in 2017, they were considered by many to be smart and successful. Baseball is a copy-cat industry.

Entering the 2016 negotiation, clubs and owners were generally moving in lockstep in one direction: value extraction. The release of “Moneyball,” the book by Michael Lewis about the 2002 Oakland A’s, had a profound effect on front offices and owners. It set many teams on a path to find new inefficiencies, to find ways to win at as low a cost as possible. Owners have always *wanted* to win as cheaply as they can, but by 2016, the effort to do so was growing fervent. Front-office executives were young, and often products of Ivy League schools or their ilk.

Teams developed and used analytics to assign dollar figures to players with more precision than they had 10 or even five years earlier. Clubs also seemed to be more commonly exploring various corners of the CBA to figure out what they could leverage — tanking and the draft being one example, a means of acquiring the best young, inexpensive players. Clubs also started acting more brazenly in holding players in the minor leagues to keep the player away from free agency longer.

All of that was already happening by 2016. But assessing the landscape was only half the union’s battle.

In labor negotiations, either side can ask for anything it wants. But if the other side says no, or makes counter-proposals your side sees as untenable, there’s really only one decision to be made: How many games, and paychecks, are you willing to miss to fight for a given change?

For example: In 2016, the league suggested to the union that it was ready for a battle over the international amateur system. In something of a parallel to the amateur draft, big-market teams had used their muscle to sign international players, and small-market teams didn’t like it. But the owners were willing, or at least telegraphed a willingness, to fight long and hard for change. The players conceded — not by giving the league what it wanted most, which was an international draft, but by allowing a cap on each team’s international spending.

Neither side makes concessions just for fun. They do so because they think it is their best choice, given the alternative.

So even if you identify the most obvious element the union should have fought for in 2016, what remains is a question of how far the players would have, or could have, taken that fight. And on that front, the answer is clear: The players were not ready for a lockout or a strike, and that might have been the biggest error of all.

“The mistake made in 2016 was not preparing the players for a work stoppage, for a war,” one industry source said. “I don’t think that those conversations took place in 2016. I don’t think they needed to take place in 2016, because we weren’t headed there.

“Ordinarily that would be a big part of it, is preparing your guys for a work stoppage. In spring training of 2016, in spring training 2015, players were told, ‘Save your money.’ The usual speech. It was never brought to: ‘We’re about to enter a war, and the only way that we can fight this war is if you, the players, have the money to fight it.’”

Club behavior

The players didn’t leave the 2016 deal entirely empty-handed. In 2011, the new qualifying-offer system had made it newly onerous for teams to sign free agents. This time, the union got that system modified in its favor, although still not without drawbacks.

More often when the 2016 deal is criticized, it’s because of the luxury tax. The CBT threshold grew only \$6 million in the first year of the current deal, to \$195 million. Not only that, the penalties became tiered, punishing teams more severely based on how far over the threshold they went. New, as well: Some teams that went over the CBT threshold could also incur penalties in both the amateur draft and their international spending pool, through what can be termed “non-monetary penalties.”

One industry source regretted that the players did not fight harder for a greater increase. The players, they said, also “never should have agreed to the non-monetary penalties within the CBT structure. Those kinds of non-cash penalties, added together, I think did have, does have, a downward pressure on markets.”

But just how impactful the CBT is remains debated. On one hand, major-market teams that have plenty of money to spend do seem to avoid the threshold — and are irrational in doing so, some would argue — because the penalty for going just a bit over the CBT isn’t large. But nonetheless, big-market owners often want their teams to stay below the first tier.

“When the CBT doesn’t go up, it automatically means you’re going to be spending less on players and pouring it more into other places,” a large-market executive said.

But some people say the CBT doesn’t matter much at all, usually for two reasons: A, some teams would never spend enough to reach the threshold anyway; and B, almost all teams have decided free agency is best used conservatively. That a groupthink has set in during the last decade, an outgrowth of “Moneyball” and analytics, where teams mostly value players the same way, and have settled on the value of youth.

“I think going over CBT thresholds made you a bad actor in the current ownership group,” one industry source said. “Which didn’t use to be the case. You also had a lot of the kind of old-school, big-market owners die off, or sell. Not having George Steinbrenner own the [Yankees](#).

Not having Mike Illitch own the [Tigers](#). The places where you might get an owner's kind of emotional buying of a player which would drive the market, it doesn't really exist anymore. And those things ... it wouldn't matter what's in the CBA."

But would that groupthink really be divorced from the CBA, or entirely so?

"I think it's really impossible to separate club behavior from the CBA," an executive in the sport said. "Club behavior is always moving in certain directions — it's always getting smarter, it's always getting better informed, and it's always going to be ruthless, and it's always going to be self-interested. And yes, it's changed a lot, because the information age has changed. Power's been consolidated a bit in different circles, and so the types of things (front offices are) doing are different. They're going to prioritize value and winning, and yes, that's more so now because of the McKinsey effect. But that shouldn't take anyone by surprise. It's the CBA and the rules that enable certain behavior, tolerate certain behavior, allow certain behavior. Or in other cases, prevent it, or delay it. And so they're sort of inextricably linked."

It might be more accurate to suggest that the CBA was ripe for this particular type of groupthink to set in. Baseball players need six years of service to become free agents, and usually three years to hit arbitration. The wait until those paydays, then, is both long, and a long-entrenched feature. Teams have known for decades that young players were valuable, but until the last decade or so — until the advent of new and theoretically more precise ways to measure performance — teams did not see as large a gap between young players and many veteran free agents. In other words: the design of the CBA had some longstanding pores. And when clubs started to realize, largely through analytics, that there was even more value to be gleaned from young players, the system was easy to leverage.

A league win?

Should the story be only that the union has lost ground? Many people in the industry note that teams have grown savvier. That teams are still willing to pay for elite talent, but have learned they need not pay top dollar for mid-level talent, because cheaper, comparable players can be found readily.

One theory goes that Manfred and his top negotiator, MLB COO Dan Halem, have successfully guided a vision for club behavior. The commissioner's office, and its labor relations department in particular, [have become](#) something of a breeding ground for club front offices. David Stearns of the Milwaukee Brewers worked at the LRD. Chris Young of the [Rangers](#) was a top league executive. A.J. Preller worked for the league, as did several others who work for clubs.

"Rob has always been one to try to convince owners why the way they were running their businesses didn't make sense," an industry source said. "'You don't have to spend this much money.' And I think he was able, over a long period of time, to populate a lot of clubs with people who came through the commissioner's office ... To me, that's how it happens. You know, people refer to this kind of 'groupthink,' and I think there's an aspect of that, and

certainly it's a major copycat-type of industry. If you want to call that vision, then you can call it vision."

At the bargaining table, Halem's experience is said to have directly paid dividends.

"I heard Halem basically outmuscled them," an executive said of the 2016 negotiations. "It was a matter of endurance and pulling all-nighters. Halem was able to think straight and get the issues right and in the end, the union was like, so divided, so fragmented."

But there's also an opposing view: That the league actually screwed up in 2016 by agreeing to a deal some viewed as too far in the league's favor.

"Rob made the mistake, and I think he made a very bad mistake. Same with Dan," an industry source said. "They knew this was such a lopsided agreement, they knew in effect it would act as a cap, they knew in effect all through these years, that these small-market teams, despite grievances (filed by the union) and everything, were not spending money on players or player development or anything. They were putting it into their pocket.

"I knew people were going to wake up, that these were going to be the consequences: that free agents weren't going to get signed if you were in the middle. Older players weren't going to get signed. And it was going to lead to a lot of bad blood. In other words, everything about labor was incremental. This was way over the fucking line."

But the notion that either side would ever back away from a deal because it was too *good* might be pie in the collective-bargaining sky.

In 2018, the MLBPA ran its own free-agent camp during spring training because there were so many unsigned veterans. Later in the year, the union hired a new lawyer to guide collective bargaining behind Clark, Bruce Meyer. Rick Shapiro, a central figure in the 2011 and 2016 negotiations, then [was fired](#) by the union in 2019.

MLB and the union briefly held [midterm bargaining talks](#), in 2019, while the current deal was ongoing, but those fizzled out quickly. Last year, the two sides fought bitterly and publicly as the sport was restarting during the pandemic, and a grievance [filed by the union](#) following that showdown is still pending.

Where are we now?

The question now is whether the players will achieve changes that bring the system closer to their liking, and how painful the process will be either way. The union believes that through a combination of incentivizing competition and removing restraints on the free-agent market, the players will do better. It also believes there are ways for players to be better compensated prior to free agency.

“When the revenues increase in totality, the players’ salaries should increase,” Boras said. “The rights of the game that were identified in the collective bargaining agreement need to be returned to the players for free agency without the onerous taxation and prohibitions via the draft that disincentivize teams from pursuing the best players available. And baseball’s a beautiful game, because we all know that particularly in a playoff setting, that teams that are projected to win often don’t win. Because that’s the nature of the game. There’s many ways to win in our game. One is through major-market dynamics. One is through building and development. Another one is through trade intellect. But we must stop tanking.”

Compared to the last go-around, players and the union are more conscious of readying for a fight. It’s not uncommon to hear people in the industry suggest that a work stoppage is coming prior to the 2022 season.

“One hundred percent convinced there’ll be a lockout,” said an industry source who has experience in bargaining.

That doesn’t mean there will actually be one, because no one at this point knows, or could know. Too much still can and will happen between now and the expiration of the 2016 deal, on Dec. 1.

If a deal is not agreed to by then, the owners could shut out the players, pausing the standard player transactions of the offseason. But a lockout doesn’t necessarily mean any games will be canceled: It would depend on how long the stand-off lasted. Wrap up a new deal in January, for example, and spring training can still start on time.

Sorting out the core economics might well wait until the last minute, as it did in both 2011 and 2016. To this point, both sides have made one proposal each on those economics. Neither side liked the other’s, but that probably shouldn’t be surprising.

“Historically, the initial proposals by both sides have been a wish list,” one industry source said.

Said another: “It’s normal course not only for baseball but for every labor negotiation, for first proposals not to go anywhere.”

The complete details of either proposal are not known. But the union has proposed that players become eligible for arbitration after two years, instead of three. It also has again proposed a change to draft order, increases in the minimum salary, raises in the CBT, changes to revenue sharing, changes to the way service time is calculated, and bonuses for players who have yet to reach arbitration. Under certain circumstances, some players would be able to reach free agency sooner than six years, as well.

The league proposed to effectively send the luxury-tax threshold in the other direction, to \$180 million; to increase the penalties for exceeding it as well; but to also implement a soft floor, a penalty for teams who do not spend at least \$100 million. The league also proposed to

eliminate salary arbitration in favor of a predetermined pool of money to be distributed to players. Under MLB's proposal, players would become free agents once they hit age 29 1/2, which might help some players who would otherwise have become free agents later, but hurt the best players who presumably would, under the current system, become free agents younger. (Players would also be walking out into a market where teams might be less inclined to spend than they are now, because the CBT threshold would be lower and the penalties for exceeding it would be higher.) The league this year also proposed that a team could not pick in the top five of the draft three years in a row, and has again has proposed an international draft.

Some details of the league's initial proposal were first reported by *The Athletic*, others by the [New York Post](#).

Back in 2011, MLB also proposed a stiffer CBT system in conjunction with something of a floor — although the mechanism was different than what the league has proposed this go-around. The union was uninterested, and talks did not pick up steam again right away. A lull may be in the offing again now, too.

"Every negotiation is different," one industry source said. "There could be a significant amount of back and forth, or the whole thing essentially could just get put on hold until the very end. And they'll negotiate on some ancillary type of issues to try to check off as many boxes, or reaches as many agreements, as they possibly can, and leave the big economic issues to the very end. Then you could be in a world where each side is making four or five different proposals a day. So it's impossible to put any timeline on when the next economic proposals will be made."

When those next proposals do arrive, the discussion will be about everything but bus rides.

AND BECAUSE I ENJOY EVERYTHING PETER GAMMONS WRITES

He isn't going to win the MVP, but Marcus Semien has proven extraordinarily valuable to Blue Jays

Blue Jays general manager Ross Atkins says he's "never met anyone quite like [Marcus Semien](#)," and means it in the most admiring and respectful context. When Semien turned 31 on September 17, he led all major-league players in Fangraphs' Wins Above Replacement over the 2019-20-21 seasons, led the American League in games played in the two full seasons in that time period, and had recorded 33 and (through Sept. 21) 41 home run seasons. And yet when the offseason shortstop free agent gala is previewed, his name is ordinarily an addendum to the Carlos Correa/Corey Seager/Trevor Story/Javier Báez grouping headlining the market.

That's nothing new; it was the case last winter as well, when [Francisco Lindor](#) was the marquee shortstop. "I never really felt as if I went through free agency," Semien says. After finishing third in the American League MVP voting in a 2019 season in which he was on the field for more innings than anyone else in the sport, he struggled through the 60-game pandemic season, with its shortened hours of ballpark preparation interrupted daily by all that went with his duties as player representative concerning COVID-19 protocols and, in addition, the complex clubhouse issues surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement.

It speaks to who Semien is that he devoted so much time and energy to that responsibility, as he does to his position on the players' executive council for labor negotiations and other matters. He found that rather than building a wall over disagreements about vaccines, masks and Black Lives Matter, he held conversations with those with whom he disagreed. "In the end, it was productive to listen to one another and get to the core of why we might have disagreed," he says. "You cannot solve issues without understanding one another, and why we might feel the way we do."

So, while his 2020 season numbers were .223/.305/.374, the postseason series with Houston, without the complexities of distractions, was a .533/.611/.733 show that indicated that the aberrational season led to *his* aberrational season.

Oakland ownership did not even extend a qualifying offer, for fear that he would take it. The [Twins](#) were interested, but decided to sign [Andrelton Simmons](#) for \$5 million less than what it would have taken to get Semien. Coming off the 60-game season and all the uncertainty leading into 2021, free agency was effectively in suspended animation. The [Mets](#) wanted a big-name shortstop and focused on the Lindor deal. The [Phillies](#) and Twins moved on [Didi Gregorius](#) and Simmons. The Blue Jays had money, and as Ross Atkins and Mark Shapiro sought veteran leadership and star power to go with what turned out to be the youngest position player group in the majors, once they signed former [World Series George Springer](#), a one-year deal for Semien made sense.

But they had [Bo Bichette](#) at shortstop already.

Semien certainly wanted to remain at shortstop, but in spring training, he made it clear he understood his role and also made it clear how important winning was, as he put in time working with Bichette and 2020 first-round pick [Austin Martin](#), teaching them the shortstop position the way Ron Washington's defensive lessons had changed Semien's own career years before. Few young major-league infielders get the benefit of absorbing what Washington himself first learned at the Kansas City Royals Baseball Academy in the early 1970's.

In addition, the Blue Jays' regular season "home" situation wasn't exactly normal. They played at their spring training home in Dunedin, Florida with its four-digit capacity until June 1; veteran players struggled with the lighting — which seemingly didn't bother the younger players who spent full seasons there in the Jays system, and when they got to Buffalo, the lighting was better, and the ballpark was upgraded. The team finally got to Toronto and the Rogers Center

on July 30. “Unfortunately for Marcus and the other players, we have been limited to 15,000 fans,” says Shapiro.

“Hopefully if we can make it to the postseason we can have the place packed,” says Semien. “I hear it’s absolutely crazy, a great atmosphere.”

It was deafening the first time a postseason was played in what was then the Skydome, Game 3 of the 1989 ALCS, when Jimmy Key handed the eventual World Series champion [Oakland Athletics](#) their only October defeat that year. It was deafening in 1992 and 1993 when they won the World Series. It was deafening in 2015 and 2016 in consecutive ALCS matchups against the Royals and [Indians](#). For Semien, as well as Springer, [Robbie Ray](#) and anyone facing a choice of whether or not to live and play in Toronto, there is a definite appeal.

“There’s so much that’s great about Toronto and playing there,” Semien says. “I walk to work. The city’s beautiful, the walk is really nice, I really like the neighborhood. It’s very clear that Mark Shapiro wants this to be a great place for players.”

Back in the 1980s when some players were hesitant to move to Toronto (after Tom Underwood was traded by the [Cardinals](#) to the Blue Jays in December 1977, he said he “didn’t want to go some place they speak Canadian”), Pat Gillick would provide real estate agents, restaurateurs and all kinds of service assistance to free-agent players checking out Toronto. Shapiro has adopted the Gillick approach, showing the cosmopolitan nature of the city.

“It’s like a baseball paradise,” says Semien. “The batting cages are incredible. So is the weight room, all the training facilities. I cannot say enough about the training staff. For me, all that goes into the preparation that’s so important to me. I think it’s a part of the game.”

A’s manager Bob Melvin says that Marcus would “get really upset if I didn’t have him in the lineup every day, any day. He always wants to play. He believes it makes him better, that he doesn’t need rest.”

To that, Semien says, “I learn something every day. It’s important to continually learn. I don’t really care for load management. I like to hit on the field pregame, to learn more about the ballpark we’re going to be playing in that night. I want to make sure everything is right, every day.”

Semien is very much like Derek Jeter and [Chase Utley](#), masters of being able to hit the reset button each day and of maintaining a strict routine and regimen. Jeter used the same model bat he was given when he reported to the Gulf Coast League in 1992, claims he “took batting practice the same way every day” and meticulously took ground balls the way [Yankees](#) coach Brian Butterfield taught him after he made 56 errors in his first full pro season. After a game, no matter what he did, Utley closed the door on that day when he got home, and when he opened the door the next day to go to the park, his entire focus was on that day’s game, from preparation to the final out.

“The work is to continually keep getting better,” Semien says. Over the last three seasons, he has evolved as a hitter. “I still try to use the whole field according to how I’m pitched, but I’ve learned to hit fastballs on the inner half of the plate, pull them and elevate them.”

His pull percentage this season was 41.8 percent with two weeks left in the season. His hard-hit percentage is the highest of his career. He hadn’t played second base since 2014, but that obviously hasn’t bothered him. On September 19, Sports Info Solutions had him second to Kansas City’s Whit Merrifield in Defensive Runs Saved at second base, and when he pulled his 40th homer, he became the fifth second baseman ever to hit 40; he actually hit four of those 40 in the 21 games he’s played at shortstop, which speaks of his willingness to go back across second base on occasion.

The fact that Oakland didn’t make the qualifying offer allows Semien to hit the market again, something he’ll begin to consider when the Jays’ season is completed. Atkins and Shapiro clearly want to extend his contract. This winter’s market is all about highly talented shortstops, from Correa at age 27 with far and away the best Defensive Runs Saved numbers in 2021, to Seager at 28 and Story and Báez at 29.

Semien isn’t a waterbug defender or an acrobat like some other middle fielders. He’s a grounded, fundamental infielder, balanced, more in the mold of Jeter and Utley. He’s always in the lineup, and the fact that he leads all players at all positions in Fangraphs WAR the last three seasons — [Xander Bogaerts](#) is second — speaks to his reliability and preparation.

Say Correa gets a monster offer to sign elsewhere. Could Houston then be a fit for Semien, with the Crawford Boxes easily within his pull range? Now that they’ve stayed under the tax threshold for a season, could Boston pursue him to partner with Bogaerts? From a family standpoint, what if the [Giants](#) come after him and the Semiens can again have their children attend school in the Bay Area? Philadelphia? Cincinnati? The [Cubs](#)?

The Blue Jays are soon going to be paying big money to young star players like [Vladimir Guerrero Jr.](#), Bichette, et al, but right now they are committed to only \$65 million in 2022 payroll obligations.

This is the first year of what this Blue Jays regime hopes will be a five-year window. Semien and [George Springer](#) were brought to Toronto for their production, for their experience in the middle of the field, for their presence and leadership. Springer has suffered through unfortunate injuries, but his World Series MVP play and alpha dog leadership was at the heart of an [Astros](#) team that won 311 games from 2017 to 2019.

Semien has one top-three MVP finish on his resume, and when this season’s voting goes down will likely find himself somewhere in the top five, with Guerrero, [Shohei Ohtani](#), Salvador Pérez and [Aaron Judge](#). The Blue Jays offered him \$18 million to help them bring the magic of baseball back to Toronto and it has returned. And while there is no labor or contract certainty, no COVID-19 and international travel certainty and no certainty concerning what big market

teams are going to need the power and the Utleyesque character of Marcus Semien, it seems there must be sense to the dollars for a team that may well be living the high life for the next five seasons.

INTERESTING ANALYSIS BY ENO SARRIS OF THE ATHLETIC

Is this the golden age of the old(er) starting pitcher?

Sort hitters for the [best 30 position players in the game](#). No surprise, there is only one player over 33 on the list: [Brandon Crawford](#) in the middle of a late-career resurgence. There are three players under 24 in the top ten in the game. [MLB](#) is getting younger and more athletic on that side of the ball.

Now sort the starting pitchers, in search of the [best 30 pitchers](#). [Max Scherzer](#), [Adam Wainwright](#), [Charlie Morton](#) ... the list goes on. There are five pitchers over 33 among the top 30 in the game, and none under 24.

Is this a good time to be an old starting pitcher? Is there something different about the way baseball is played today that gives experience an advantage?

If you look at raw numbers of innings thrown by older starters (33 and older) and younger starters (24 and under), you'll see both are in decline. But the number of innings pitched by starters is in a general decline. If you instead compare the two innings totals, a trend emerges.

More older starting pitchers, fewer younger ones? In this economy? With the way the game is going younger everywhere else?

The 40-year-old Adam Wainwright recently ended a bases-loaded threat by the [Mets](#) by striking out [Jeff McNeil](#) with a changeup and two curves, as a callback to the same sequence he used in his infamous strikeout of [Carlos Beltran](#) to finish off the 2006 N.L. championship series.

"I like nostalgia," Wainwright said. "I gave the people what they wanted."

But that story also contains some kernels of wisdom that tell us a little bit about *why* older starting pitchers are performing well in today's game. It starts with the batters, and how they're acting in today's strikeout-laden version of the national pastime.

Despite batters [aging at about the same rates as usual](#) when it comes to power, patience, and performance on balls in play, overall they're aging a little worse over the last seven seasons in one key area. Once today's batters turn 31, their strikeout rate begins to worsen at a faster pace than it used to. Thanks to Jeff Zimmerman at The Hardball Times, we can see that [today's batters are aging worse when it comes to strikeouts](#). This matters on the pitching side, of course — pitchers are aging a little better than they used to. It's not just a trick of the eyes.

And, as we can see from the aging curves, this superior aging overall is because their strikeout abilities are hanging around longer than they used to. Their fastball velocity is sticking around longer, which could be due to better training habits, but maybe also due to this graph, which begins to explain why starters are aging better, in particular.

So older pitchers are using fastballs less than ever, retaining the velocity longer, and keeping their strikeout rate longer. Pair this with the long-known truism that starting pitchers age better because [their strikeout rate is not tied as closely to their fastball velocity](#) (they have other pitches and begin to mix it up more as they age), and the fact that older hitters are striking out more than ever, and you can start to see why the conditions are set for older starting pitchers to excel. Think back to the Wainwright story — he didn't throw a single fastball to McNeil, who was probably hunting the cheese.

"Spin ages better than velocity does, so guys with spin might be aging well, and we're looking for spin in the game," said [Giants](#) assistant pitching coach J.P. Martinez. "The three-true-outcome nature of the game is probably part of it, the guys that have the knack for strikeouts, those guys can take advantage of all the information in the game maybe more than guys ten years ago, maybe more than young guys can."

But look back at that first chart — it's not only that older pitchers are more effective, but also that there are fewer pitchers under 24. Why?

"I think fewer high school pitchers are being drafted, and same for international big money signs," said one team's pitching coordinator. And they were right.

If you're drafting more college pitchers, it's going to be hard to get them to the big leagues and throwing big innings as a starter by 24. Especially with the perhaps "overcautious" approach to bringing workload along, as one pitching coordinator put it.

"If I've got a young pitcher with major league grades on his pitches, why am I wasting his bullets in the minor leagues?" said one farm director recently when referring to the trends in pitching development that have brought us here.

Some of this, it should be noted, could be partly a trick of the calendar, as the normal process of bringing young pitchers along gradually has hit a temporary snag due to the missing minor league season in 2020.

"With the curbed season on the minor league sign, and even the delay of Triple A this year, the gap that those guys have to close, there might just be a delay," said Martinez. "Almost like the baby boomer generation, and in eighteen months we're going to see a bunch of young guys break in, and now it's like 'oh shit, now it's a regime change from the old guys to the young guys.'"

But the fact remains that the normal process now is to take young pitchers and limit their innings when they first hit the big leagues. Often by putting them in the bullpen at some point in the season.

"My time in the bullpen was the most beneficial time of my career in the big leagues," said [Padres](#) starter [Joe Musgrove](#). "It gives you a better idea of what your routine is like, what you really need to do to get your arm going, prove to yourself that you don't need all that extra stuff that you might do on a normal start day just because you have all that extra time — and it's high leverage situations every time you're out there, so you get more used to that and more used to pitching with runners on base, and you figure out what your out pitches are and how to pitch to guys."

In today's game, pitching coaches are stockbrokers, managing a portfolio of pitches, and they're pouring those resources into the best-performing pitches. That's why slider usage is at an all-time high in the game. When a pitcher lands in the big leagues, he moves from trying to develop all of his pitches to suddenly being under immense pressure to succeed. That, along with time in the bullpen, pushes them towards throwing their best pitches more often.

"It just takes a while to figure out which pitchers are your best pitches," agreed Martinez.

There's a link here between the bullpen and the starting rotation and the mentality that today's starting pitchers have. Listen to Charlie Morton discuss his fastball usage and he might sound like a reliever to you.

"Pitch speed is being valued at such a premium, guys realize that," said Morton. "I'm just trying to throw it absolutely as hard as I can x times a start."

So perhaps there's a missing link in today's development, where we are working on developing starting pitchers with broad arsenals in the minors, and then throwing them into a reality where the job of a major league starter is more like being a reliever: throwing as hard as you can and throwing your best pitches the most.

And sometimes that process can require some actual, physical changes in order to find those best pitches.

"I first started seeing the analytics in High-A, and I threw four-seams and they weren't even good then either," joked Giants starter [Logan Webb](#). "But because I could throw it 93-95, I would throw it, and I would throw four-seamers and curveballs ... the only reason I started throwing a sinker was because, when I was hurt, in 2016, I couldn't throw a four-seamer, [Andrew Suarez](#) showed me his sinker. Lot better shape. I found my natural arm slot, which is a little bit lower."

But behind the mechanical work, there are important mindset changes that happen at the beginning and end of a pitcher's career.

"I think struggling through those years made me really try to figure out who I was as a pitcher and learn as much as I can from our coaches and our analytics," said Webb. "I had to learn a lot too, about hitters and how to get outs. Learning how to execute. When you're a rookie, when you see a guy is really good at sliders, and you think, 'don't throw a slider,' and when they call one, you don't throw it with conviction. Now, unless there's a big outlier, we try to attack the same way guy to most guys."

Morton agreed with the importance of that first emotional adjustment at the beginning of a career.

"The reason I dropped my arm slot in the first place was because I had such a bad year in 2010," Morton points out. "The readiness and the peace that you find after you've failed, and you realize, maybe it's not the end of the world if I'm not in the game any more. Because you constantly question yourself. I got to a place where I realized, I may not have a job soon, I might as well go out there and enjoy this a little bit and relax a little bit and be at peace with myself. That's when I took off."

In 2010, he dropped his arm slot to a Roy Halladay-type level and found some immediate success, but that petered out, and Morton re-learned the lesson.

"I was frustrated, I was angry, my stuff wasn't great, I had a bunch of surgeries, I got booed off the field the last time I was a Pirate," Morton says. He went to work with reliever [Tony Watson](#) in the offseason, changed his workout, sat 94-96 mph in Philadelphia and entered the best phase of his career. In Tampa, they told him to throw his breaking ball even more.

“Houston told me to throw the curveball more, and then I went to the [Rays](#) and they told me, throw it even more. Holy cow! And I had the best year of my career,” Morton said of the transformation and the longevity it seems to have afforded him, as a now-37-year-old. “If you’re willing to ride it, if you’re willing to use it, it’s there for you.”

This led to an important shift in Morton’s mindset that resulted in his signing a two-year extension with the [Braves](#).

“Now, I feel like if I can stay healthy, I can still pitch in the big leagues. Before, it was like, I don’t think I’m going to stay healthy, and I’m not sure I’m going to be of much value if I do stay healthy,” Morton said. “In the clubhouse, I’m at peace with who I am now. Now I’ve actually done something in the game.”

To some extent, these emotional adjustments were always required of pitchers, but they also do have something to do with the state of the modern game. Because, if the sport is going to slow-walk the young pitchers due to injury and workload concerns, then that first mental adjustment will come later, and is likely to happen in the bullpen, leading to more maximum velocity efforts and probably more breaking balls. And that second mental adjustment? Signing an older starting pitcher requires the teams to have the desire to look past a bad start or two and find something under the hood they like about the pitcher’s performance. It requires interest from the teams.

“Now they say, this guy is throwing 96 and spinning it at 2500 RPM and his hop is 20, we know what that means, and we can project it out, and we don’t care as much what happened in that last start,” Morton said of the appraisal of a pitcher’s stuff — suggesting that the expansion of the definition of stuff beyond just velocity, to include movement and spin in the modern appraisal of a pitcher also has something to do with the success of your Wainwrights, Hills, and Mortons.

Maybe teams will re-think their approach to bringing along young pitchers, and maybe another year away from the lost minor league season will help the pipeline produce more young starters. Or maybe there is actually something to the modern game that favors the veteran starting pitcher. Maybe these *are* the golden years of starting pitching.

GREATEST SEPTEMBER SPOILERS-JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT YOU HAD IT CLINCHED

often teams that have long been eliminated from postseason contention that ultimately have the biggest influence on which teams advance to play October baseball.

After all, [Evan Longoria](#)'s walk-off homer to clinch a postseason berth on the final day of the 2011 regular season isn't quite as dramatic if not for the last-place Orioles knocking off the Red Sox just minutes earlier. [CC Sabathia](#) carrying the Brewers to the postseason with his remarkable run to end the '08 season only happens with a little help from the Marlins taking care of business against the Mets. Then there's the 1982 season in which the Dodgers eliminated the Giants from postseason contention on the eve of the final day of the season, only to have the Giants return the favor the next day.

Here's a closer look at some of the biggest spoilers -- non-postseason teams that played a pivotal role in preventing another club from qualifying -- in Major League history (in reverse chronological order):

2016 Braves (vs. Tigers)

The Tigers seemed primed to earn a Wild Card spot down the stretch in 2016. Though they sat a half-game back of the Blue Jays with two to play, Detroit was finishing its season with an Interleague series against the last-place Braves. Toronto, meanwhile, was facing the first-place Red Sox, who were still battling for home-field advantage in their American League Division Series matchup with the Indians.

Detroit's postseason hopes came to an abrupt end on Saturday when Atlanta right-hander Aaron Blair held the Tigers to two runs over six innings, while racking up a career-high 10 strikeouts. Blair had entered the game with an 8.02 ERA in 14 starts and had never struck out more than five batters in any of his previous outings. The Blue Jays finished off a 4-3 victory over the Red Sox a half hour later to secure the final postseason spot.

2011 Orioles (vs. Red Sox)

The Red Sox had a two-game lead over the Rays for the AL Wild Card with eight games remaining, five of which were against the last-place Orioles. After dropping two straight to the O's and two of three to the Yankees, Boston's advantage had dropped to a single game entering its final three-game series in Baltimore. The Rays started their final set with a pair of wins over the first-place Yankees, while the Red Sox split their first two with the Orioles, moving the teams into a tie for the last playoff spot and setting the stage for one of the [wildest sequences](#) in Major League history on the final day of the 2011 season.

Trailing by one entering the bottom of the ninth, the O's rallied to tie the Red Sox before Robert Andino delivered a walk-off single in a 4-3 Baltimore victory. Just three minutes later, Longoria hit a dramatic walk-off homer in the 12th inning at Tropicana Field, sending the Rays to the playoffs and ending Boston's season in the process.

The Orioles, who began the season 3-8 against the Red Sox, went 5-2 against Boston over the final 10 days of the season en route to finishing 69-93 and a distant last place in the AL East.

2008 Marlins (vs. Mets)

Despite holding a 3 1/2-game lead in the NL East as late as Sept. 10, the Mets instead watched the Phillies claim the 2008 division title. Still, New York entered the final day of the regular season tied with the Brewers for the NL Wild Card spot. Milwaukee had to face the Cubs, who had already locked up the top seed in the NL, while the Mets were set to host a Marlins team that had been eliminated from postseason contention.

Carlos Beltran hit a game-tying two-run homer in the sixth, but Mets relievers Scott Schoeneweis and Luis Ayala allowed back-to-back homers to Wes Helms and Dan Uggla, respectively, to begin the eighth inning, sending the Mets to a season-ending 4-2 loss. As for the Brewers, Sabathia capped off his incredible stretch run for Milwaukee by allowing just one unearned run in a complete-game victory.

2007 Marlins (vs. Mets)

Prior to spoiling the Mets' postseason hopes in 2008, the Marlins had dealt a similar blow to New York just one year earlier. The Mets entered the final weekend of the '07 season tied with the Phillies atop the NL East. They were also both just one game behind the Padres for the NL Wild Card.

New York started its final series with a 7-4 loss at Shea Stadium to the last-place Marlins, while the Phillies shut out the Nationals, 6-0. Still, the teams once again found themselves tied with only one game remaining after the Mets rebounded with a win on Saturday and Philadelphia fell to the Nats.

The Mets handed the ball to Tom Glavine for the all-important final game, but the Hall of Famer did not make it out of the first inning. He was charged with seven runs while recording only one out, as the Marlins jumped out to a 7-0 lead in the top of the first. New York never recovered en route to an 8-1 loss, all while the Phillies coasted to a 6-1 division-clinching victory.

1999 Brewers (vs. Reds)

The Reds went into the final weekend of the 1999 regular season tied for the NL Central lead -- and with a two-game edge over the Mets for the NL Wild Card. Yet after dropping the first two games of the weekend to the Brewers, a team that finished 74-87 and 22 1/2 games out of first place, Cincinnati found itself tied for the Wild Card and one game back in the Central. While the Reds bounced back with a win in the season finale, the Astros also won to clinch the Central, while the Mets won on a walk-off wild pitch to force a one-game tiebreaker. The Reds continued their stumble to the finish line, dropping the winner-take-all contest in a 5-0 loss to the Mets.

1998 Rockies (vs. Giants)

Perhaps no team has gone through a wilder rollercoaster ride over a season's final week than the 1998 Giants. They sat four games out of the NL Wild Card spot with seven to play, but rattled

off six straight wins to move into a tie with the Cubs for the final spot entering the season's last day.

The up-and-down run didn't end there. The Giants jumped out to a 7-0 lead against a sub-.500 Rockies team, only to watch Colorado rally to take an 8-7 lead. San Francisco, however, knotted the game at 8 before manager Dusty Baker received word that the Cubs had lost their final game in walk-off fashion. Less than *one minute* later, Giants all-star closer Robb Nen -- who entered the day with a 1.42 ERA and had allowed only three homers in 88 2/3 innings -- served up a walk-off homer to light-hitting infielder Neifi Perez. Perez hit only 64 home runs during his 12-year career.

The two walk-off losses less than a minute apart set up a one-game tiebreaker the following night in Chicago. The Cubs won, 5-3, ending the Giants' crazy ride.

1993 Dodgers (vs. Giants)

The Giants entered the final day of the 1993 regular season tied with the Braves for not only the National League West lead, but also the best record in the Majors at 103-58. While the Braves earned a 5-3 win over the Rockies behind Glavine, the Giants had their postseason hopes crushed in convincing fashion by the rival Dodgers. Los Angeles cruised to a 12-1 victory, with right-hander Kevin Gross throwing a complete game to lower his season ERA to 4.14.

With only the four division winners qualifying for the postseason at the time, the loss cost the Giants a shot at the playoffs, despite the fact that San Francisco's 103 wins were six more than any other team besides Atlanta.

1991 Giants (vs. Dodgers)

Two years before the Dodgers spoiled the Giants' 103-win season, San Francisco had pulled a similar stunt against Los Angeles. The Dodgers entered the season's final weekend tied atop the NL West with the Braves, but Los Angeles would be eliminated before Sunday even arrived.

Los Angeles dropped the first two games of its series against the Giants, getting outscored 8-1 in the process. Atlanta, meanwhile, began the weekend with a pair of wins over the last-place Astros to clinch the division title. The Giants finished the year 12 games under .500 at 75-87, and had a winning record against only one opponent -- the Dodgers. San Francisco won the season series, 10-8, thanks to those two wins that played a pivotal role in keeping Los Angeles out of the postseason.

1982 Giants and Dodgers (vs. each other)

When the Dodgers arrived in San Francisco for a three-game set to close out the 1982 season, it was inevitable that at least one team was going to play spoiler for its rival. As it turned out, they each put an end to one another's season.

The teams entered the series tied with one another, just one game back of the division-leading Braves. Los Angeles won the first two games of the series convincingly -- winning 4-0 on Friday and 15-2 on Saturday -- to eliminate the Giants. Yet with Atlanta also winning on both days, the Dodgers remained one game back entering the season's final day.

The Braves dropped their final game to the Padres, leaving the door open for the Dodgers to force a winner-take-all tiebreaker. That would not be necessary, however, as Joe Morgan hit a decisive three-run homer to lift the Giants to a 5-3 victory to end the Dodgers' season less than 24 hours after Los Angeles had done the same to San Francisco.

1967 Angels (vs. Tigers)

The race for the 1967 AL pennant was one of the most competitive in big league history. Four teams -- the Red Sox, Twins, Tigers and White Sox -- were separated by just a single game as late as Sept. 23. While the White Sox were finally eliminated on Sept. 29 (the Friday of the season's final weekend), the other three all had a shot at the pennant entering the final day.

The Red Sox and Twins were not only tied atop the AL, but playing one another in their final game. The Tigers, meanwhile, were a half-game back, but were closing the season with a doubleheader against the Angels. Thus, the scenario was simple: If the Tigers won both games, they would force a one-game tiebreaker against the Red Sox-Twins winner, but if Detroit lost even one game, the Red Sox-Twins winner would advance to the World Series.

Boston finished off its 5-3 victory around the same time that Detroit recorded the final out in a 6-4 win in Game 1 of the twin bill. With all eyes on the nightcap, the Tigers quickly jumped out to a 3-1 lead, only to watch the Angels respond with seven straight runs en route to an 8-5 season-ending loss for Detroit. Though the Red Sox claimed the pennant by one game over the Tigers and Twins, Boston ultimately came up one win shy in losing Game 7 of the World Series to the Cardinals.

1956 Cardinals (vs. Braves)

The 1956 Milwaukee Braves entered a season-ending three-game series in St. Louis with a one-game lead over the Brooklyn Dodgers atop the NL standings. The Braves dropped the series opener on Friday, moving the idle Dodgers to within a half-game. Things got much worse for Milwaukee on Saturday, with the Braves losing on a 12th-inning walk-off, all while the Dodgers swept a doubleheader against the Pirates to move Los Angeles a full game ahead of Milwaukee.

While the Braves rebounded with a win on Sunday, the Dodgers also closed out the season with a victory to maintain the one-game edge. The back-to-back losses to the sub-.500 Cardinals -- a team the Braves had swept in a four-game set in their previous meeting -- brought an abrupt end to Milwaukee's season.

1944 Senators (vs. Tigers)

The Tigers held a one-game lead atop the AL over the St. Louis Browns entering the final weekend of the 1944 season. The only thing standing in Detroit's way was a four-game set against the last-place Washington Senators. The Tigers split a doubleheader on Friday, while the Browns swept their own twin bill against the Yankees, moving the teams into a first-place tie.

They both won on Saturday to remain even, but the Senators knocked off Detroit in Sunday's series finale. The Browns completed a four-game sweep of the Yanks to overtake the Tigers and clinch the pennant. Tigers ace Dizzy Trout, who entered that final series with a 1.94 ERA over 339 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings in 47 appearances, was charged with both losses against the Senators. He had a 6.92 ERA over 13 innings in his two starts in the season-deciding series.

SEPTEMBER 18, 2021

Good morning baseball fans. I love crowd-sourcing and since this newsletter's subscriber base is 100 pretty serious fans, I thought I'd float a question to see if we get responses worth sharing. The questions – name your favorite baseball book(s). Over the last couple of years in this newsletter I have offered half a dozen of mine:

Men at Work

by George Will

The Cooperstown Casebook: Who's in the Baseball Hall of Fame, Who Should Be In, and Who Should Pack Their Plaques

By Jay Jaffe

Smart Baseball

by Keith Law

Veeck As In Wreck: The Autobiography of Bill Veeck

Bill Veeck: Baseball's Greatest Maverick

by Paul Dickson, Dan John Miller, et al.

Baseball Anecdotes

by [Daniel Okrent](#) and Steve Wulf

What titles would you recommend to other fans? I'll publish the list in a couple of weeks.

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

Giants and Dodgers both clinched post-season spots this week. The loser of the NL West race appears destined to be the second 100-win team to play in the wild-card game since the league adopted the two wild-card system in 2012 (the 100-win [Yankees](#) beat the 97-win A's in the AL game in '18).

The Yankees just allowed 24 runs in three games against the Mets, who had been the third-lowest scoring team in the majors.

Yankees DH/OF Giancarlo Stanton hit his 342nd career HR on Saturday to tie Ron Santo for 100th on the all-time list. Next up Curtis Granderson and Jose Bautista, tied for 98th at 344. The three active players ahead of Stanton are Albert Pujols (5th all time with 679 HRs), Miguel Cabrera (28th with 502 HRs) and Nelson Cruz (42nd place with 442).

Stanton, Aaron Judge and Joey Gallo all homered in the same game three times this week for the Yankees. The Yankee record is Ruth-Gehrig-Lazzeri who all homered in the same game 8 times.

Since the All-Star break, Bryce Harper is batting .341 with 17 homers and a major-league best 1.211 OPS. He now leads the majors in OPS and OPS-plus.

More Corbin Burnes of the Brewers and the NL Cy Young race-- His .264 opponents' slugging percentage is the third-lowest for a full season this century, behind only [Pedro Martinez](#) (.259, 2000) and [Garrett Richards](#) (.261, 2014). Scherzer pushed past Burnes on Sunday for the league lead in ERA (2.17 to 2.25, with Buehler at 2.32). Burnes set a record for most strikeouts to start the season without a walk (58), and on Aug. 12 tied another major-league mark with 10

consecutive strikeouts against the [Cubs](#). Scherzer, since joining the Dodgers, has a 0.88 ERA in 51 innings, 72 strikeouts and five walks.

Rays outfielder [Randy Arozarena](#) should become the first player to win Rookie of the Year *after* getting named MVP of a League Championship Series. Arozarena since the All-Star break has batted .323 with a .991 OPS, ranking fifth in the AL in the latter category. His on-base percentage is .355, his 533 plate appearances are nearly double that of teammate [Wander Franco](#) and he rates as a plus defender at the position he plays most frequently, left field.

Attendance is down across the major leagues, falling around 36 percent from 2019. Ten teams have seen attendance drops compared to pre-pandemic 2019. From the Blue Jays (who have the excuse of not being allowed in Canada for a good part of the season) 21,606 down to 7,592 (almost 66% down) to 33,671 down to 18,814 (down 44%).

A's, Angels, Diamondbacks, Yankees, red Sox, Giants, Cards and Twins are also down from 57% to 44%.

Willie McCovey. He hit 445 homers between 1960 and 1975, the most by a left-handed hitter. From 1968 to 1970, McCovey averaged 40 homers, 119 runs batted in, 110 walks, and hit .300 while slugging over .600 and more than 300 total bases. He was National League Most Valuable Player in 1969, and could have won it in 1968 too. He received MVP votes in seven straight seasons from 1965 to 1971.

Marcus Semien of the Blue Jays hit his 40th HR on Saturday. With 14 games remaining, Semien also has a chance at history by hitting the most home runs by a second baseman in a single season.

Most HR in a single season by a 2B (at least 50 percent of games at 2B):

1. Davey Johnson: 43 (1973)
- T2. Brian Dozier: 42 (2016)
- T2. Rogers Hornsby: 42 (1922)
- T4. Ryne Sandberg: 40 (1990)
- T4. Marcus Semien: 40 (2021)**

Tigers: [Eric Haase](#), C

The well-traveled catcher had one home run in his career heading into this season. Right now, he has 21, and he may well end up with the team lead by the end of the year.

Freddie Freeman hit his 30th HR on his 32nd birthday Sunday. It was his third season reaching 30 HRs for the pending free agent first baseman.

Walter Johnson reached 3,000 career strikeouts in 1923, the first pitcher to do so. It took 51 years for someone to join him--Hall of Famer Bob Gibson (July 17, 1974)

Roberto Clemente got a hit in 14 straight World Series games -- every one in which he played. The record for the longest hitting streak in Fall Classic contests belongs to the Yankees' Hank Bauer (17 straight World Series games with a hit)

Born in the state of Delaware, Cardinals first baseman Paul Goldschmidt (1,549) doubled in the fourth inning to pass former Cardinal and current Reds first-base coach Delino DeShields (1,548) for the all-time mark for hits by a player born in the "First State." Goldschmidt leads in almost all other Delaware-born offensive categories, including runs, doubles, home runs, RBIs, walks and extra-base hits.

We've seen players get ejected from baseball games. We've seen managers get tossed. We've even seen mascots get thrown out (see: [Youppi, Montreal Expos mascot](#) -- Aug. 23, 1989).

But until Wednesday night in Baltimore, it's hard to fathom anyone had ever seen an entire grounds crew be ejected by an umpire.

That's exactly what happened at Camden Yards during a Yankees-Orioles contest threatened by inclement weather. In the ninth inning, third-base umpire Tim Timmons saw the O's grounds crew sitting on and behind the tarp, ready to spring into action at the final out.

Not on Timmons' watch. He walked from his position behind third base all the way across the diamond while signaling that the grounds crew needed to leave the field -- every member. And they did, running off into the right-field corner.

Perhaps the Orioles wish they hadn't. Moments after the ejection, a 3-2 lead over New York became a 4-3 deficit on a two-run single by [Brett Gardner](#), which held up as the final score.

Royals catcher Salvador Perez hit his 45th HR on Friday to tie Johnny Bench's record for HRs in a season from a player who played at least 75% of his games at catcher. Bench did it in 1970.

Perez, who was the designated hitter in the finale, has hit 30 home runs as a catcher -- five shy of Hall of Fame backstop Ivan Rodriguez's AL record of 35 set in 1999. His 45th blast tied him with Vladimir Guerrero Jr. atop the Major League home run leaderboard and Perez leads the Majors with 112 RBIs.

It was also Perez's 197th career homer, tying Mike Sweeney for second on the Royals' all-time home run list. (George Brett 317). With 16 games to play this season, Perez is three homers shy of tying Jorge Soler (48 in 2019) for the franchise's single-season mark.

Ryan Mountcastle set a new Orioles rookie record with his 29th home run. The leftfielder-first baseman-DH passed Cal Ripken Jr. who hit 28 in 1982.

GOODBYE RYAN BRAUN

Ryan Braun of the Brewers retired this week. I'm not big on highlighting juicers but Braun was a pretty good player. The Brewers' all-time leader with 352 home runs and a six-time All-Star who won the 2007 National League Rookie of the Year Award and the 2011 NL MVP Award. Braun is fourth in franchise history with 1,766 games played and second to Robin Yount in doubles (408) and RBIs (1,154). Among players who have logged at least 2,500 Brewers plate appearances, Braun is second to Prince Fielder with a .532 slugging percentage and an .891 OPS.

Braun was part of five of the first seven postseason entrants in franchise history, including the 2008 Brewers team that ended the club's 26-year postseason drought thanks to CC Sabathia's complete game and Braun's go-ahead two-run home run in the eighth inning of that season's regular-season finale.

Three years later, Braun hit another go-ahead home run in the eighth inning of a postseason clincher for a team that won the franchise's first division title since 1982. His career lasted long enough for Braun to make three more postseason appearances with the Brewers from 2018-20 before his club-record contract came to an end after last season.

DWIGHT GOODEN

Those of us of a certain age remember how awesome Dwight Gooden was at his peak. Gooden made himself a legend for arguably the greatest first two seasons in MLB history, beginning with an AL/NL rookie record 276 strikeouts (and NL Rookie of the Year trophy) in 1984 and following it up by going 24-4 with a 1.53 ERA (while winning the NL Cy Young Award) in 1985.

But it was the year before he even made his debut when the baseball world found out just exactly what Gooden was capable of, and where the legend of Doctor K was truly born.

Gooden on the 1983 Class A Lynchburg Mets was nearly untouchable. He had reached a whole other level of pitching, before he had even reached the Majors. Before he had even gotten out of his teenage years.

The 18-year-old went 19-4 with a 2.50 ERA. He struck out 300 batters in just 191 innings -- good for a mind-blowing rate of 14 strikeouts per nine innings. He threw 10 complete games, including six shutouts. He won pitching's Triple Crown, leading the Carolina League in wins, strikeouts and ERA.

Lynchburg went an impressive 96-43. A 20-year-old Lenny Dykstra slashed at an obscene .358/.472/.503 rate with 105 steals. Infielder Dave Cochrane hit 25 homers with 102 RBIs. Randy Milligan had 41 steals and a .430 OBP. Future big leaguer Jay Tibbs contributed 14 wins and a 2.92 ERA.

The still-teenage Gooden was in the Mets' starting rotation in '84 and the rest is history. He was on top of the baseball world in the sport's biggest market. It all culminated in 1986, when he helped bring home a World Series to Queens with a dominant 17-6 record, 2.84 ERA and 200 whiffs.

Seventeen players from that '83 Lynchburg team would eventually make an appearance in the Majors, with Gooden being the most talented. His 300 Ks are second to Nolan Ryan's Minor League record of 307 in 1966 (Ryan pitched in 11 more innings, for two teams in the Mets organization, than Doc). He was one victory away from what would've been a Carolina League record of 16 straight wins. He was named Minor League Player of the Year -- rare for someone who spent the majority of the season in Class A.

MAX SCHERZER REACHES 3,000 STRIKEOUTS

37-year-old Scherzer has accomplished just about everything in his career. He won a World Series title with the Nationals in 2019. He's a three-time Cy Young Award winner and is making a strong bid for a fourth. He's also an eight-time All-Star and is one of just four pitchers to start at least four Midsummer Classics.

In the Dodgers' 8-0 win over the Padres on Sunday at Dodger Stadium, Scherzer added another feat to his surefire Hall of Fame career, becoming the 19th member of the 3,000-strikeout club. Scherzer recorded his 3,000th career strikeout when he fanned Padres first baseman Eric Hosmer in the fifth inning. Not satisfied with that, he then made a deep run at a perfect game.

Scherzer is one of just two active pitchers -- along with Justin Verlander -- to reach the 3,000-strikeout plateau. Scherzer is also one of just seven pitchers on the list — chock full of Hall of Famers — to have multiple Cy Young Awards.

In an era of baseball defined by more velocity, more movement on pitches and more strikeouts, few have been better than Scherzer. Of [the pitchers with at least 1,000 innings](#) since the start of the 2012 season, he led all with a strikeout rate of nearly 32 percent entering Sunday.

He struck out Trent Grisham to start the game. Scherzer then followed it up by striking out the side in the second inning. Oh, and he did it as part of an [immaculate inning](#) -- nine pitches, nine strikes, three strikeouts. It's Scherzer's third career immaculate inning; he joined Chris Sale and Dodgers legend Sandy Koufax as the only pitchers on record to accomplish the feat three times.

Over the next few innings, Scherzer had a couple of two-strike counts, but Padres hitters were able to delay the inevitable for a couple of frames. Then in the fifth inning, Scherzer struck out Hosmer swinging on a 3-2 changeup, resulting in No. 3,000. Scherzer, who famously doesn't like to be touched or talked to during starts, took a moment to tip his cap to the fans and received a loud ovation.

The milestone in hand, Scherzer went after the perfect game. He struck out nine over eight scoreless innings retired the first 22 batters he faced, finishing with one hit allowed.

Scherzer has been putting up video game numbers since joining the Dodgers at the Trade Deadline. Los Angeles has won all eight of Scherzer's starts, and he is 6-0 with a 0.88 ERA and 72 strikeouts since joining the club. The 0.88 ERA is the lowest for a pitcher in his first eight starts with a team since the stat became official in both leagues in 1913.

Then on Saturday Scherzer beat the Reds in Cincinnati. Scherzer's track record at Great American Ball Park in Cincinnati is worth noting. Including his seven-inning performance Saturday that led the Dodgers to a [5-1 win](#) over the Reds, Scherzer has a 0.33 ERA in four starts in the Queen City. He's allowed one run over 27 innings, while racking up 42 strikeouts.

He struck out seven Saturday, marking the only time he did not record double-digits strikeouts while pitching in Cincinnati.

Scherzer, a leading candidate to win the National League Cy Young Award, hasn't lost since May 30, when he allowed two runs over six innings to the Brewers. Since then, he's won 11 decisions in a row, and in his last 16 starts (since June 4), he has a 1.90 ERA and 131 strikeouts. Seven of those 11 wins came after he joined the Dodgers.

In nine starts for Los Angeles, Scherzer has a 0.78 ERA and 0.66 WHIP. He has walked seven and struck out 79.

Of all of baseball's top accolades, 3,000 strikeouts remains an exclusive club, with fewer members (19) than 3,000 hits (32) or 500 home runs (28). Scherzer is one of two active players among that group, along with Houston's [Justin Verlander](#), who hit the mark in 2019. Scherzer, though, reached 3,000 strikeouts in just 404 games, the second fewest behind only Hall of Famer Randy Johnson (362 games).

How many of the following do you think the 37 year-old Scherzer can catch?

- | | |
|--------------------|------|
| 1. Nolan Ryan | 5714 |
| 2. Randy Johnson | 4875 |
| 3. Roger Clemens | 4672 |
| 4. Steve Carlton | 4136 |
| 5. Bert Blyleven | 3701 |
| 6. Tom Seaver | 3640 |
| 7. Don Sutton | 3574 |
| 8. Gaylord Perry | 3534 |
| 9. Walter Johnson | 3509 |
| 10. Gregg Maddux | 3371 |
| 11. Phil Neikro | 3342 |
| 12. Fergie Jenkins | 3192 |

13. Pedro Martinez	3154
14. Bob Gibson	3317
15. Curt Schilling	3316
16. CC Sabathia	3093
17. John Smoltz	3084
18. Justin Verlander	3013

Sept. 12, 2021: 3,000-strikeout club

Scherzer joined one of baseball's most exclusive clubs when he became the 19th pitcher in MLB history to reach [3,000 strikeouts](#). And that milestone was just one part of an epic day for Max.

Taking the mound for the Dodgers against the rival Padres, Scherzer nearly threw a perfect game. He went 7 1/3 perfect innings before Eric Hosmer -- also his 3,000th strikeout victim earlier in the game -- broke up the bid with a double.

On his way to strikeout No. 3,000, Scherzer also threw an [immaculate inning](#) (striking out the side on nine pitches). It was the third of his career, making Scherzer, Chris Sale and Sandy Koufax the only pitchers on record with three immaculate innings.

Aug. 4, 2021: Dodgers debut

After the Dodgers swung a blockbuster trade to land Scherzer from the Nationals at the Trade Deadline, he delivered a gem in his first game in Los Angeles. Scherzer pitched seven innings of two-run baseball with 10 strikeouts to beat the Astros in his team debut.

Oct. 30, 2019: World Series champion

Scherzer led the Nationals to their first World Series championship, and the first championship of his career, in 2019. He was the starting pitcher for the winner-take-all Game 7 against the Astros, taking the mound just three days after he was scratched from his Game 5 start due to neck spasms and gutting through five innings of two-run baseball. Scherzer's start kept the Nationals in the game until they could rally late to win it.

Scherzer was excellent throughout the Nationals' postseason run, posting a 2.40 ERA in his six appearances and winning a game apiece in the NLDS, NLCS and World Series.

Sept. 25, 2018: 300-strikeout season

Scherzer joined an exclusive single-season pitching club in 2018: 300 strikeouts. He's one of only 19 different pitchers in the modern era (since 1900) with a 300-strikeout season. Scherzer

actually finished the year with exactly 300 K's, reaching the mark with a 10-strikeout performance in his final start.

2017: Third Cy Young Award

When Scherzer went 16-6 with a 2.51 ERA and a National League-leading 268 strikeouts for the Nats in 2017, he joined another short list: three-time Cy Young Award winners. Scherzer is one of only 10 pitchers who have done that, along with Roger Clemens (seven), Randy Johnson (five), Steve Carlton (four), Greg Maddux (four), Clayton Kershaw, Koufax, Pedro Martinez, Jim Palmer and Tom Seaver. Scherzer's '17 Cy also made it back-to-back awards for him.

July 11, 2017: Starts All-Star Game for NL

Scherzer has started four All-Star Games in his career now. This was his first for the NL after starting in the American League in 2013. Scherzer became the fifth pitcher to start an All-Star Game in both leagues, joining Vida Blue, Roger Clemens, Randy Johnson and Roy Halladay. He pitched a scoreless inning and struck out Aaron Judge and George Springer.

2016: Second Cy Young Award

Twenty-one pitchers have won multiple Cy Young Awards. Scherzer joined that list in his second season in Washington after leading the NL with 20 wins, leading the Majors with 284 strikeouts and posting a 2.96 ERA in 34 starts. He also became the sixth pitcher to win a Cy Young in both leagues, along with Gaylord Perry, Martinez, Johnson, Clemens and Halladay.

May 11, 2016: 20-strikeout game

Scherzer achieved one of baseball's rarest feats when he struck out 20 batters in a single game. Only five times has a pitcher had [20 K's in a regular nine-inning performance](#): Clemens in 1986 and '96, Kerry Wood in '98, Johnson in 2001 and Scherzer in '16. A 20-strikeout game is rarer even than a perfect game. Scherzer did it against his former team, the Tigers.

Oct. 3, 2015: Second no-hitter

In his final start of the 2015 season, Scherzer threw one of the most dominant no-hitters ever -- a 17-strikeout performance against the Mets where only one batter reached base, on an error. It was Scherzer's second career no-no and second of the year. He's one of six pitchers with multiple no-hitters in the same season, along with Roy Halladay in 2010 (including his postseason no-hitter), Nolan Ryan in 1973, Virgil Trucks in 1952, Allie Reynolds in 1951 and Johnny Vander Meer in 1938.

June 20, 2015: First no-hitter

Scherzer came as close to perfection as possible in this one but had to "settle" for his first career no-hitter. He had retired 26 in a row and was a strike away from completing the perfect game when Jose Tabata leaned his elbow into a pitch to break it up with two outs in the ninth inning. Scherzer retired the next batter, Josh Harrison, to finish off the no-no.

2013: First Cy Young Award

Scherzer truly took his place as one of the game's elite pitchers in 2013, when he won his first

career Cy Young Award with the Tigers. He went 21-3, leading MLB in wins, with a 2.90 ERA and 240 strikeouts.

July 16, 2013: Starts All-Star Game for AL

This was the first of what is now eight consecutive All-Star seasons for Scherzer. He earned the start for the AL, throwing a 1-2-3 inning capped by a strikeout of Joey Votto.

2012: First 200-strikeout season

Scherzer's breakout year was the season before his first Cy Young Award. He reached the 200-strikeout mark for the first time (he's now done so in each of the last nine full seasons) and helped the Tigers reach the World Series.

April 29, 2008: MLB debut

A 23-year-old Scherzer made his Major League debut in relief for the D-backs early in the 2008 season. It was brilliant -- he threw 4 1/3 perfect innings with seven strikeouts against the Astros.

WHO ELSE MAY MAKE 3,000 STRIKEOUTS?

Veterans with a shot

[Zack Greinke](#), **Astros**

Age: 37

Career K: 2,799

Career K/9 rate: 8.1

[Clayton Kershaw](#), **Dodgers**

Age: 33

Career K: 2,653

Career K/9: 9.8

[Chris Sale](#), **Red Sox**

Age: 32

Career K: 2,037

Career K/9: 11.1

Likely will fall Short

[Cole Hamels](#)

Age 37

Career K: 2,560

Career K/9: 8.5

[Jon Lester](#), Cardinals

Age: 37

Career K: 2,467

Career K/9: 8.2

Likely too late

David Price (2,037 strikeouts), Adam Wainwright (1,993), Madison Bumgarner (1,936), Stephen Strasburg (1,718)

Keep an eye on ...

[Gerrit Cole](#), Yankees

Age: 30

Career K: 1,647

Career K/9: 10.4

[Jacob deGrom](#), Mets

Age: 33

Career K: 1,505

Career K/9: 10.7

Further down the road

José Berríos (age 27, 830 strikeouts), Germán Márquez (26, 807), Lucas Giolito (27, 675) and Shane Bieber (26, 629) could all surpass 1,000 strikeouts before their 30th birthdays, giving them at least an outside shot if they go crazy in their second decades. ... Walker Buehler (27, 609) has the wide-ranging arsenal to be a strikeout artist throughout his career. ... Jack Flaherty (25, 563) is still racking up K's, despite some steps backward from 2019. ... Freddy Peralta (25, 430) lost valuable young innings in a relief role but is flourishing now as a starter. ... Julio Urías (25, 407) got a useful head start by debuting at age 19. ... Sandy Alcantara (26, 408) has some of deGrom's high-velo characteristics (and looked deGrom-esque in [striking out 14 Mets](#) recently), but he would need to make up ground in a hurry.

VLAD'S WEEK

The Triple Crown watch is officially on for [Vladimir Guerrero Jr.](#), who slugged his way into a tie for the MLB lead in home runs on Sunday with his 44th of the season against the Orioles.

Now tied with Shohei Ohtani of the Angels, Guerrero has breathed life back into his season with an incredible two weeks at the plate, including eight home runs over his last 14 games. The 22-year-old took a dip in August, leading to some worry after he had run out of gas late in the season as a rookie and in 2020, but Guerrero is back to powering one of baseball's most dangerous offenses.

As of Monday

Home runs:

1. Vladimir Guerrero Jr. -- 44
2. Shohei Ohtani -- 44
3. Salvador Perez -- 42

Batting average:

1. Vladimir Guerrero Jr. -- .319
2. Yuli Gurriel -- .315
3. Michael Brantley -- .315

RBIs:

1. José Abreu -- 107
2. Salvador Perez -- 105
- T-3. Vladimir Guerrero Jr. -- 102
- T-3. Rafael Devers -- 102
- T-3. Teoscar Hernández -- 102

Then Friday... TORONTO -- [Vladimir Guerrero Jr.](#)'s hunt for 50 homers continues, and the Blue Jays' superstar reclaimed the MLB home run lead on Friday night by launching No. 46.

This one looked like so many of the others, a no-doubt shot hit hard enough to blow through the wall in left field if it didn't clear it. Leaving Guerrero's bat at 110.7 mph, the 399-foot shot broke Guerrero's tie with Salvador Perez (45) and now moves him two ahead of AL MVP favorite Shohei Ohtani (44).

All-time record for the most home runs in a single season by a player age 22 or younger. Guerrero has now tied DiMaggio (1937) for the second-most all time, trailing only Eddie Mathews (1956).

Guerrero's 10 home runs in his last 18 games have also positioned him to do something that only one Blue Jays hitter has done: reach that elusive 50-homer plateau. José Bautista's club record of 54 home runs, set back in 2010

FUN WITH RBI'S

Runs batted in takes a lot of hits as an outdated stat (please see two pieces at the end of this edition for one point of view) but intuitively guys who deliver runners in scoring position are valuable.

From age 25 to 35 (11 seasons) Tony Perez drove in 90 or more runs. He drove in 1652 runs in his 23 year career. In 1970 he was third in NL MVP voting when he hit 40 HRs and drove in 129 runs while hitting .317 for the Reds.

I was surprised to discover that Joe Carter drove in 100 or more runs ten times with Cleveland, Toronto and San Diego.

Ryan Howard drove in 130 or more runs in four straight seasons for the Phillies 2006-2009.

Albert Belle drove in 100 or more runs in nine straight seasons 1992-2000 for White Sox, Indians and Orioles.

George Foster led the NL in RBIs 3 straight seasons 1976-78.

Cecil Fielder led the AL in RBIs 3 straight seasons 1990-92.

Reggie Jackson, Fred Lynn, Nomar Garciaparra, ARod, Garret Anderson, Anthony Rendon, Scooter Gennett, Mark Reynolds all had a 10 RBI game in the majors.

Roberto Clemente is the Pirates all time leader with 19 walk off RBI hits.

POST SEASON DROUGHTS

Cleveland Indians have the longest World Series win drought. They last won the World Series in 1948, though they have reached the Fall Classic four times since then: 1954, 1995, 1997 and 2016. Their last two trips to the World Series have resulted in gut-wrenching Game 7 defeats.

In game 7, 2016 Mike Montgomery induced a groundout to third off the bat of Cleveland utility man Michael Martínez in the bottom of the 10th to record the save and land the longtime “lovable losers” their first title since 1908.

Eleven teams are currently carrying a World Series drought of at least 30 years.

The Dodgers are attempting to repeat as champions. Last repeat-- the Yankees, who pulled off a three-peat from 1998-2000.

The Red Sox won the World Series in 1918, and then not again until 2004. They made up for that by winning four in the last two decades. Boston swept St. Louis in 2004 to put to rest their World Series hex. Terry Francona’s bunch then topped the Rockies in four games in 2007. John Farrell led the Red Sox to another title over the Cardinals in 2013, and Alex Cora directed the 2018 club to its fourth championship in a 15-year span.

Six active franchises are searching for their first World Series title—Mariners, Padres, Brewers, Rays, Rockies, Rangers.

Rays (1998)

The Rays don't have a lengthy history like some of the other clubs on this list, although they have reached the World Series twice. They won their first AL pennant in 2008 before bowing out to the Phillies in a five-game World Series. Tampa Bay claimed its second pennant in '20, but lost in six games against the Dodgers.

Rockies (1993)

The Rockies clinched consecutive postseason berths for the first time in franchise history in 2017 and '18, but they didn't win a single playoff game in either run. In fact, over their three playoff appearances (they also reached in '09 as the National League Wild Card) since reaching the World Series in the well-revered "Rocktober" of '07, Colorado has only one won postseason contest since its NL-pennant clinching win against Arizona; the Rox were swept by the Red Sox in that year's World Series. The Rockies have never won the NL West, though they did force a Game 163 against the Dodgers in '18 for the right to win what would've been their first division title.

Mariners (1977)

The Mariners have not only never appeared in a World Series, but they are riding the longest playoff drought in any of the four major pro sports at 19 years. Seattle has had some of the game's biggest superstars through the years -- Ken Griffey Jr., Alex Rodriguez, Randy Johnson, [Ichiro Suzuki](#) and many more -- but it has also had some of the postseason's biggest

disappointments, most notably in 2001, when the Mariners set an MLB record with 116 wins (a feat some suggest may never been matched), yet lost to the Yankees in the ALCS in just five games.

Rangers (1972)

Rangers fans have had some of the most agony lately among clubs on this list, particularly given that their five postseason appearances since 2010 have failed to produce a title. Prior, they had made the postseason only three times -- including their time as the Washington Senators, who were founded in 1961. Texas was *twice* a strike away from winning the title in Game 6 of the '11 World Series against St. Louis, and the Rangers lost in five games to a Giants team that simply got hot at the right time in 2010. They also lost the 2012 AL Wild Card Game at home to the Orioles and were knocked out of the ALDS by the Blue Jays in '15 and '16.

Brewers (1970)

The Brew Crew has made it to only one World Series -- a memorable seven-game loss to the Cardinals in 1982 with the "Harvey's Wallbangers" team -- and that was when they were in the AL. They nearly made it back in 2018, taking the Dodgers all the way to Game 7 of the NL Championship Series.

Padres (1969)

The Friars have reached the World Series twice, but both times they ran up against buzzsaws. The first was a dominant Tigers team that beat Tony Gwynn and Steve Garvey's Padres, 4-1, in the 1984 World Series, and the second was a sweep at the hands of the incredible '98 Yankees, who won 114 games in the regular season and are considered among a handful of teams as the greatest of all-time.

LONGESTS GAPS BETWEEN WORLD SERIES APPEARANCES

Cubs: 71 years (1945-2016)

White Sox: 46 years (1959-2005) and 40 years (1919-59)

Athletics: 41 years (1931-72)

Indians: 41 years (1954-95)

Braves: 34 years (1914-48)

The Marlins won a title just five seasons into the franchise's existence. Which current major-league manager scored the winning run in the 11th inning of Game 7 in 1997?

Current Brewers manager Craig Counsell scored the winning run. The rookie infielder raised both arms in the air as he crossed home plate after Edgar Renteria's single up the middle narrowly avoided the outstretched arm and glove of Cleveland hurler Charles Nagy.

The Twins have dropped 18 consecutive playoff games. Their last WS triumph came in 1991, when they topped the Braves in an epic Game 7 pitcher's duel between Jack Morris and John Smoltz. Who delivered the walk-off hit in that game for Minnesota?

In only his fourth at-bat of the series, Gene Larkin broke a scoreless tie in the bottom of the 10th with a pinch-hit single off Alejandro Peña to score Dan Gladden for the walk off win.

Aside from Cleveland, which franchise with at least one World Series title to its name owns the longest active title drought?

The Pirates last stood atop Major League Baseball in 1979, their last appearance in the World Series.

In the last 30 years, the Braves have qualified for the postseason 20 times. They haven't reached the World Series, however, in the 21st century. How many times did Atlanta appear in the World Series in the '90s?

5 Atlanta fell short against Minnesota in '91 and Toronto in '92. The Braves topped the Indians in '95. They lost to the Yankees in '96 and again in '99.

Everyone knows about the Giants' success in even years. When did they last win a title in an odd year?

They did win the World Series in 1921, back when it was a best-of-nine affair. They also won it all in 1933, their most recent odd-year championship. They did sweep — sigh, I'm so sorry — Cleveland in 1954 and then after a 65-year drought, they rattled off three championships in a span of five seasons.

A World Series drought is one thing; a postseason drought is another. Which team holds the longest playoff spell, dating back to 2001?

Seattle Mariners (sorry Jeff). They won a record 116 games that year and topped the Indians in the ALDS — you know what, Cleveland fans? Beers on me — but bowed out against the Yankees in the ALCS. They haven't been back since.

HOW HARD IS IT TO HIT .400 FOR A WHOLE SEASON?

Everyone knows that Ted Williams is the last hitter to hit over .400 while qualified for the batting title. A subscriber asked me if I knew about Bob Hazle (I had not). Hazle had a 3 year career and played for the Milwaukee Braves in 1957-58. In 1957 the lefty batting outfielder hit .403 in 134 at bats. (he went 2 for 14 in the World Series against the Yankees). Hazle didn't hit over .241 in parts of two other seasons.

So that got me looking for how deep into a season hitters were over .400. In the last 80 years:

The following hitters went 75 or more games into a season batting over .400 (season ending batting average in parens).

1980: Sept. 4 (134 games) -- George Brett, KC (.390). Brett's 1980 season represents the latest that a qualified hitter has been at .400 since Williams' 1941 season. It's one of just two 100-plus-game bids, along with Olerud's 1993 season.

1993: Aug. 2 (107 games) -- John Olerud, TOR (.363). Olerud's 1993 batting title is the only one in Blue Jays history. He hit 54 doubles that year, nine more than anyone else in the Majors and 12 more than any other AL player. His own teammate Devon White was second with 42.

1997: July 17 (96 games) -- Larry Walker, COL (.366). Walker led the Majors in OPS and slugging percentage in his MVP season, but he didn't win the NL batting title, thanks to Tony Gwynn's .372. Walker would win the batting title the following year.

2000: July 20 (91 games) -- Nomar Garciaparra, BOS (.372). Garciaparra won his second straight batting title in 2000, becoming the first Red Sox player to win consecutively since Wade Boggs won four straight from 1985-88.

1983: July 13 (85 games) -- Rod Carew, CAL (.339). From 1969, Carew's third season in the Majors, through '83, Carew's third-to-last season in the Majors, he hit at least .300 each year. His .339 average in '83 was the last time he'd do that, hitting .295 and then .280 in his final two seasons.

1977: July 10 (85 games) -- Rod Carew, MIN (.388). Not only did Carew remain the latest .400 batting average standing the most since 1942, his bids were long. He had two of the seven 85-plus-game bids, and no other hitter had multiple such seasons.

1948: July 11 (76 games) -- Stan Musial, STL (.376). Musial's .376 average in 1948 was the highest in any qualified season of his career. He hit .300 or better in 17 qualified seasons in his career, third-most in the modern era (since 1900), behind Ty Cobb (21) and Tris Speaker (18).

Carew not only got more than 75 games into a season twice, he went 49 games above .400 in 1969 and 71 games in 1974 and 56 games in 1975. Other notables include Stan Musial (37 games in 1950), Jackie Robinson (44 games in 1951), Mickey Mantle (49 games in 1956), Ted Williams (46 games in 1957), Willie Mays (54 games in 1958), Hank Aaron (60 games in 1959), Chipper Jones (73 games in 2008).

Best average in Majors ... but no batting title?

[Starling Marte](#) leads the Majors with a .321 batting average.

Starling Marte will not win a batting title this year.

Wait, what? Let us explain. It's one of baseball's most fascinating record-keeping quirks, and it involves a fun history lesson, too.

Marte's situation

Marte indeed leads in batting average, entering Friday four points ahead of Vladimir Guerrero Jr. and Trea Turner, both at .317. But Marte is ineligible for a batting title because, despite being a qualified hitter overall -- having amassed at least 3.1 plate appearances per team game -- he won't qualify in either league alone.

To win the AL batting title, a player must reach 502 plate appearances (that's 3.1 times 162, for a normal-length season) while in an AL uniform. To win in the NL, a player must reach that mark in an NL uniform. And while we recognize which batter leads the Majors overall each year, there isn't a specific MLB batting title. A batter *must* qualify in a specific league in order to win a batting title.

Marte, of course, was traded on July 28 from the Marlins to the A's for Jesús Luzardo. At the point when he was traded, he'd hit .305 in 275 plate appearances as an NL player. He wasn't in the batting title conversation, for two reasons: Nick Castellanos led the NL, at .329, and Marte wasn't even a qualified NL player at *that point*, due to injury time missed.

But since he's joined the A's, Marte has hit .343 in 191 plate appearances, which has done two things: gotten him back into the qualified players list overall, with 466 PA in the A's 146 games, and also raised his overall season average to .321, skyrocketing him to the top of the list. Now,

Marte is atop that overall batting leaderboard, because he is a qualified player, MLB-wide, even though he isn't qualified in the AL or NL alone.

Again, it's important to note that this quirk applies only because Marte was traded across leagues. If he'd gone from the Marlins to the Cardinals, or any other NL team, he'd be a qualified NL player at this point, if he had the same exact stats that he has today.

This means that, if the season ended today, or at any point in this current order, Marte would be your 2021 leader in batting average in MLB, but he would not win a batting title. That's important in relation to Guerrero, too: Marte's batting average cannot preclude Guerrero from winning the AL batting title -- as it currently stands, Guerrero would win it, in [his quest for the Triple Crown](#). But Marte does stand in the way of Guerrero becoming the first player since Mickey Mantle in 1956 to lead all players in all three Triple Crown categories, since he's qualified overall.

Has this happened before?

Marte wouldn't be the first player to lead the Majors in batting average and not win a batting title. Here's where the history lesson comes in. He'd be the second player in the Modern Era (since 1900) to find himself in that spot, joining Eddie Murray in 1990.

Murray, unlike Marte, didn't change teams, but instead lost out on a batting title because *another* player changed teams. Here's what happened.

Murray hit .330 for the Dodgers, finishing a point ahead of the Royals' George Brett for the MLB lead. Brett won the AL batting title. But Murray finished five points behind another player for the NL batting title -- despite leading the Majors overall.

Enter: Willie McGee. He hit .335 in 542 plate appearances for the Cardinals, through Aug. 29. That day, like Marte, he was traded to the A's, with whom he finished up the season. He hit .274 in 123 plate appearances in Oakland, finishing with a .324 average overall.

But since he was traded across leagues, that .335 average in the NL froze the moment he put on an A's uniform. And since he was traded in August and had accumulated enough plate appearances to be qualified at the end of the season, he led the NL in batting average and won the batting title -- despite finishing the season in an A's uniform, and with an overall batting average below Murray's .330.

What about his stolen base totals?

While rate stats involve qualifying, as noted above, there's more potential history with Marte's cross-league stats if we look at counting figures -- namely, his stolen base totals. Overall, he leads MLB with 45, five more than Whit Merrifield and 16 more than Turner.

But if we break it down by league, it gets fascinating. His 23 stolen bases with the A's are tied for fourth in the AL. And his 22 with the Marlins before the trade? That figure still ranks fourth in the NL.

No player has ever finished even in the top 10 in stolen bases in both the AL and NL in the same season, according to the Elias Sports Bureau. And Marte could be top five in each.

The researchers at Elias were kind enough to dig through other "whole number" stats -- hits, doubles, strikeouts and so on -- to see if anyone had ever finished in the top 10 in both leagues in any of them. The only one they could find was complete games by pitchers.

In 2009, Cliff Lee was tied for fifth in the AL in CGs with the Indians and tied for third in the NL with the Phillies, who acquired him in late July. The year before, CC Sabathia led the NL in complete games with the Brewers after they traded for him, and he was tied for third in the AL with the Indians. In 2002, Bartolo Colon finished tied for fourth in the AL in complete games with the Indians and was tied for fifth in the NL with the Expos after a trade. And in 1998, Randy Johnson finished tied for eighth in the NL in complete games with the Astros after a trade, and his AL total with the Mariners beforehand was tied for fifth.

There's some precedent for this concept, but not very much. And that's pretty much the story of Marte's season: In addition to chasing a postseason spot, he's chasing the chance at a few unique records and marks.

The Padres' Austin Adams Is the Greatest Hit Man in MLB History (from WSJ)

The San Diego reliever has tied the record for hit batsmen in a season, plunking one in 10 of the hitters he has faced

There may be nothing more daunting in baseball than stepping up to the plate and seeing Austin Adams standing on the mound. That's because there's a shockingly good chance that the hitter will walk away from the encounter with a painful bruise caused by a baseball traveling nearly 90 mph slamming into his body.

Adams, a right-handed pitcher for the San Diego Padres, is having what could reasonably be described as one of the most remarkable seasons in the history of the sport. He entered Wednesday having hit 23 batters in 2021. When he plunked Los Angeles Dodgers outfielder Mookie Betts on Sunday—the third batter he hit in the inning—he tied Howard Ehmke of the 1922 Detroit Tigers for the most hit batsmen in a season during the live-ball era, which began in 1920.

That's not even the craziest part. Adams is a relief pitcher. He has thrown 48 2/3 innings this year and faced just 221 batters. In other words, if you happen to be unlucky enough to face

Adams, there's an outrageous 10.4% chance that you will end up hobbling to first base with a nasty welt to show for it.

When Ehmke hit 23 batters nearly a century ago, he threw 279 2/3 innings and faced 1,232 batters, meaning he hit fewer than 2% of them. Only one other pitcher has hit 10 or more batters in fewer than 50 innings: Orel Hershisser, who hit 11 in 24 2/3 frames for the 2000 Dodgers at age 41.

"It's unfortunate," Adams said earlier this season, "but not intentional, obviously."

Hit batsmen have been on the rise in baseball over the last several years. There were 1,922 in 2018, which was an all-time record only until 1,984 batters were hit in 2019. The four seasons with the highest rate of hit batters since 1920 are the last four seasons.

There are plenty of reasons for this increase in batters being drilled, including an influx of inexperienced relief pitchers who throw very hard but might not always know where the ball is going; an increased reliance leaguewide on breaking balls as opposed to fastballs; and hitters feeling more emboldened to crowd to the plate while wearing large protective elbow pads.

Adams, 30, hits so many batters for the same reason batters have so much trouble hitting his pitches. Despite being far from a household name, Adams possesses a slider few in the major leagues can match, and he knows it: He throws it on nearly 88% of his pitches.

Much of the time, it works to great effect. Adams's slider has an average spin rate of 2,836 rpm. That is second-best in the majors among all pitchers who have thrown at least 500 sliders this year, trailing only Dylan Cease of the Chicago White Sox. (Cease currently leads the American League in wild pitches.)

In his 48 2/3 innings, Adams has allowed only 24 hits and has struck out 70 batters, or 13 per nine innings. Opponents are batting .150 against Adams in 2021, which is third-best in the majors among pitchers with at least 40 innings, behind only New York Mets ace Jacob deGrom and Milwaukee Brewers closer Josh Hader.

"When he's in the zone, historically guys don't hit him," Padres manager Jayce Tingler said.

The problem is that far too often, Adams isn't in the zone. His slider moves so much that it tends to move directly into batters. All 23 of his hit batsmen this season have come on sliders, a pitch that has an average velocity of about 87 mph.

It has resulted in some frustrating inconsistency at the worst possible time for the Padres, who are fighting with the St. Louis Cardinals and Cincinnati Reds for the final wild card spot in the National League. Adams posted a 1.71 ERA in his 40 appearances before the All-Star break, emerging as one of the most effective relievers in the NL in spite of his 14 hit batsmen. The second half has been a struggle; Adams has a 6.88 ERA, has hit nine of the 82 batters he's faced and has seen his role in the Padres' bullpen diminish. He has hit five batters in September alone, which is more than about half of the teams in the majors.

“It’s just one of those sliders that has so much spin on it that if it doesn’t catch the seam, sometimes it’s going to back up and hit guys,” Padres catcher Austin Nola said Sunday.

Batters appear to understand that Adams’s propensity for hitting them with baseballs isn’t intentional—even Dodgers catcher Will Smith, who has been hit by Adams three times this year. His errant pitches have not caused any fights, and many of the batters he has drilled were hit in the leg or foot. Adams is less of an enforcer and more of an analytics wonk who can fluently discuss the spin rate of his pitches.

Not everybody has escaped unscathed: On July 22, one of Adams’s wayward sliders hit Jon Berti of the Miami Marlins on the back of helmet, leaving him with a concussion. Berti hasn’t played since.

Tingler attributes Adams’s issues to a delivery that “at times gets a little bit out of whack,” which is a nice way of putting a flashing warning sign on Adams that reads: Step up to the plate at your own risk.

“It’s either hot or cold,” Tingler said, “and really nothing in between.”

FRIDAY UPDATE: Adams set a new MLB record for the Live Ball Era (since 1920) for most hit-batsmen in one season when he plunked Cardinals catcher Yadier Molina in the eighth inning of San Diego's [8-2 loss](#) at Busch Stadium on Friday night.

And, yes, he hasn't even reached the 50-inning mark for the season.

It's not as if Adams has pitched poorly in 2021 -- he entered Friday's game with a 3.65 ERA in 62 appearances for the Padres this season. He throws his wicked slider nearly 90 percent of the time and is [among the MLB leaders](#) in lowest hard-hit rate, barrel rate, expected batting average against, whiff rate and strikeout rate.

But the slider doesn't always go where it's supposed to, and despite the dominance it results in most of the time, it also leaves bruises pretty frequently.

The [prior record](#) for hit-batsmen in one season during the Live Ball Era was held by Howard Ehmke, who hit 23 batters in 1922 -- in 279 2/3 innings. Ninety-nine years later, the hit-by-pitch king has been dethroned by Adams, who came into the 2021 campaign having hit exactly two batters in his entire five-season career (42 innings).

THE BEST PLAYER IN BASEBALL

It's a discussion/argument as old as the game itself. I remember going round and round with my buddy George Bacso in 6th grade while playing stickball and then five decades later with Chris Compton and Angry Cliff over beers at Chrones. Often there is no right or consensus answer, but it's an enjoyable discussion worth having. So when this piece by Will Leitch ran on mlb.com I thought it would spark your thinking.

So, as an experiment today, I thought we'd come up with a theoretical holder of the mythical belt every year since 1969 — when the mound was lowered. The thing about the belt is, of course, like an actual championship belt, someone has to come take it from you. You can be the best player in baseball for a moment and not necessarily hold the belt; there have been a couple of players who have had better individual years (Mookie Betts, even Tatis or Shohei Ohtani this year) during Trout's last decade, but none of them (so far) have been consistent enough to take it from him. That's not to say there haven't been one-year wonders who broke through. But on the whole: You have to forcibly take the belt, not have it handed to you.

Here's our look at the Best Player In Baseball belt holders and the years of their reign. Your mileage may vary.

1969-70: Bob Gibson

Gibson firmly established himself as one of the most overwhelming pitchers in baseball history right as the Age of the Pitcher kicked off, but he was still incredible for a few years after that, including winning another Cy Young in 1970. (And he may have actually been better in 1969.) Gibson would pitch all the way to 1975 — it is funny that he was briefly teammates with Keith Hernandez — but this was the prime of his reign.

Honorable mentions: Carl Yastrzemski, Tom Seaver

1971-75: Tom Seaver

Seaver took over for Gibson in 1971 with a 1.76 ERA in 262 innings that should have won him the Cy Young. He went ahead and won it in 1972 with 21 wins for a Mets team that had Yogi Berra as a manager and Whitey Herzog as the team president. 1973 was another Cy Young year, the second of his three. He had a down year, for him, in 1974, but not enough to cost him the belt, and he secured it the next season with his third Cy Young in six seasons.

Honorable mentions: Johnny Bench, Pete Rose

1976-77: Joe Morgan

There is a mindset now, because Morgan was so good at so many things (on-base percentage, stolen-base percentage) that we value more now than we did then, that he was underappreciated in his time. But, you know, the guy did win two straight MVP awards. His second win in 1976 grabs him the belt, and while 1977 was the first sign of decline, he was still a slam-dunk All-Star and obvious future Hall of Famer. Sometimes you really can see the genius in your midst.

Honorable mentions: Rod Carew, Dave Parker

1978: Ron Guidry

One of only four one-year wonders on this list, Guidry earns the spot because Morgan only hit .236 in 1978 and because, of course, Guidry's 1978 was one of the best pitching seasons of the last 50 years. He went 25-3 with a 1.78 ERA in 273 2/3 innings, including nine shutouts. He somehow finished second to Jim Rice in MVP voting, but those voters were totally wrong. He was good again in 1979, but not good enough to hold off the looming charge in Philadelphia.

Honorable mentions: Dave Parker, Jim Rice

1979-81: Mike Schmidt

Schmidt had already won three Gold Gloves by 1979, but that was the year he started hitting like Mickey Mantle. He had 45 homers that year, and he followed it up with two straight MVP awards, including one in the strike-shortened 1981 season. He probably would have kept the belt through 1982 — he was great that year too — but someone was about to strip it from him in the most entertaining way possible.

Honorable mentions: George Brett, Rickey Henderson

1982: Rickey Henderson

Can you believe Rickey Henderson finished 10th in MVP voting the year he had 130 steals? He stole 130 bases!!! Henderson would have “better” seasons — this is not the last time he will show up on this list — but 130 steals is 130 freaking steals.

Honorable mentions: Dale Murphy, Robin Yount, Mike Schmidt

1983-84: Cal Ripken

1983 was the first year Ripken played 162 games, which he'd make a bit of a habit out of, and it was also the season he emerged not just as the best player in baseball, but the sort of icon we'll be talking about 100 years from now. Also: How about winning a World Series at the age of 23?

Honorable mentions: Dale Murphy, Gary Carter, Ryne Sandberg, Rickey Henderson

1985: Dwight Gooden

The second one-year wonder on this list, and how could it be anyone else? I was 9 years old when Gooden had his otherworldly 1985 season, and it was legitimately surprising anyone ever got a hit off him: Any hitter who even made contact with a pitch had their bat splintered into dust. Forget what happened after with Gooden. It's possible no one can pitch better than he did in 1985.

Honorable mentions: Rickey Henderson, Ozzie Smith, Don Mattingly

1986-88: Roger Clemens

Clemens would prove (considerably) more durable than Gooden with his breakthrough season, in which he won the AL Cy Young and MVP awards and almost got himself his first World Series ring. This was his first Cy Young; his final, seventh one would come 18 years later.

Honorable mentions: Tony Gwynn, Wade Boggs

1989-91: Rickey Henderson

Look who's back. For all the Bash Brothers fun, Rickey was the best player on this team, and his 1990 season has to be seen to be believed: He led the Majors in OPS and stolen bases.

Honorable mentions: Wade Boggs, Barry Bonds, Cal Ripken Jr.

1992-93: Barry Bonds

The first run for Barry, the younger, skinnier Barry (it's OK to talk about him like Elvis), won him his second and third NL MVPs. What's wild when one looks at Bonds' numbers from this time is that he was obviously the best player in the Majors, yet they pale in comparison in every way to what he'd do a decade later.

Honorable mentions: Frank Thomas, Greg Maddux

1994-95: Greg Maddux

It's tough to pick a specific time frame for Maddux, since his dominance was so consistent over his entire career, but the third and fourth of his four straight Cy Youngs is a good place to land. He had a 1.56 ERA in 1994 and a 1.63 ERA in 1995, a year in which he went 19-2 and won his lone World Series ring. He walked 23 batters in 209 innings that year. (He struck out 181.)

Honorable mentions: Randy Johnson, Barry Bonds, Jeff Bagwell

1996-97: Ken Griffey Jr.

Griffey's numbers were always great, but his power and influence always came from how much pure fun it was to watch him play. He had an ineffable joy and bounce to his play: Still, 25 years later, it never felt cooler to like baseball than it did when Griffey ruled.

Honorable mentions: Juan Gonzalez, Larry Walker, Barry Bonds

1998-99: Mark McGwire

Sorry Sammy Sosa, but when you hit 70 homers and capture every aspect of the American culture, you get to hold the belt. He was nearly as good in 1999, by the way: He hit 65 homers that year, no big deal, just 65.

Honorable mentions: Sammy Sosa, Pedro Martinez, Barry Bonds, Ken Griffey Jr., Alex Rodriguez

2000: Pedro Martinez

1999 was the year of the All-Star brilliance at Fenway Park which led Pedro into a run of dominance that felt magical at the time: This small, wiry guy completely ruling baseball during the time of extreme offense and monster home runs. He could have run for a while, except for ...

Honorable mentions: Todd Helton, Chipper Jones, Barry Bonds

2001-04: Barry Bonds

You can make a legitimate argument—and you won't get much pushback—that Bonds could be the guy from 1990-2004. His 2001-04 seasons were so good he seemed to have solved the game itself: I am not sure it is physically possible to be better than he was those four seasons. If you are wondering what it was like to witness those seasons in person, know that nearly everybody hated him and was rooting against him. Which, in retrospect, is weird.

Honorable mentions: Ichiro Suzuki, Albert Pujols, Alex Rodriguez, Vladimir Guerrero, Derek Jeter

2005-06: Albert Pujols

Pujols was the second-best player for a half decade until Bonds finally aged, and then he took over. He could have had a Trout-esque run, except someone got in the way for one season ...

Honorable mentions: Alex Rodriguez, Derek Jeter

2007: Alex Rodriguez

I know that there are few players in baseball who are more polarizing than Alex Rodriguez was (and sort of is still), but his 2007 was the culmination of an already fantastic career: 54 homers, 156 RBIs, 1.067 OPS and ... yeah, still no one ever cut him a break until the Yankees won the World Series two years later. And then only briefly.

Honorable mentions: Albert Pujols, Derek Jeter

2008-11: Albert Pujols

Pujols took the belt back and held it for the rest of his time in St. Louis, which of course ended with his second World Series title in 2011. He then left for the Angels, who thought they would

have the best player in baseball for the next decade. And they did! It just wasn't the guy they thought it would be.

Honorable mentions: Justin Verlander, Miguel Cabrera, Josh Hamilton, Alex Rodriguez

2012-21: Mike Trout

We could have had Pujols physically hand the belt to Trout in 2012. Tatis is probably one year away from taking it from him—and if you want to give it to Ohtani this year and Tatis next year, you can—but Trout's run has been monumental. And all told: If he's healthy in 2022, he's still my pick.

Honorable mentions: Fernando Tatis Jr., Mookie Betts, Clayton Kershaw, Shohei Ohtani

RBI'S ARE NOT A USEFUL STAT FROM CALL TO THE BULLPEN

While most traditionalist stats are all but gone from most Major League front offices, the casual fan and the older generations of die-hard fans have stuck with the statistics. Classic and easy to remember, a century of celebrating records has some people holding on to these numbers for good. Sometimes classic theories and ideas can still be relevant, but in this case that isn't true.

I have nothing against people who like these stats. Many of them have spent their entire lives having RBI records, batting average records, win-loss records and other statistical feats drilled into their heads. These were the only options, so people didn't question them.

One of the arguments that 'old school' guys continually trot out against the sabermetric community is that they have no empathy for the game of baseball. Everything is too driven by statistics and the 'eye test' ultimately wins out.

Fantasy baseball hasn't helped either as it rewards players for almost meaningless stats and lot of fans get an unrealistic impression of how valuable a player is just because of how much he has helped their fantasy team.

One of the skills a 'stats guy' must have is deciding which stats are useful and which have little to no value.

What is the goal of using statistics for individual players? The answer is simple: to isolate production. Simply, to tell how talented a player is. In theory, the best statistics are affected only minimally by other players, otherwise a statistic can be as much a measure of a team's ability as the individual player's.

Even the best statistics, things like WRC+ are imperfect. You can't take wOBA as a perfect measure of truth or be certain that FIP is a perfect estimate of pitcher performance. In many cases, they may be the best we have, but we acknowledge the limitations. While it's true that even our favourite metrics have flaws, that doesn't mean that we should give equal considering to extremely flawed statistics.

There are serious problems associated with some of the more popular traditional metrics.

RBI is one of the more famous baseball statistics and measures the number of runners who score due to your hit, walk, sacrifice, or fielder's choice. Generally speaking, a 100 RBI season is considered worthy of admiration and the notion of 'driving in runs' or being an 'RBI guy' is highly valued.

There are essentially two ways to approach the problem with RBI as a statistic. First, there is very little evidence that timely hitting or clutch hitting is a skill separate from regular hitting. Alex Rodriguez was always regarded as someone who couldn't do it on the big stage until one great post-season that boosted his stats so they were in-line with his career numbers. Second, even, if those are real skills, RBI is a very crude way to measure that skill and you should use something else.

Before I go any further, we need to decide if we value getting hits with men on base particularly with men in scoring position. Should it matter if a hitter has a .350 wOBA (weighted On Base Average) with most of his hits skewing towards RISP (Runners in Scoring Position) situations or a .350 wOBA with most of his hits skewing towards bases empty situations. Is one player better than the other?

In order to make the argument that the RISP hitter was better, you would have to argue that he was able to influence the timing of his hits. To date, there is very little evidence that this is a unique skill and there is little to support the idea that certain hitters "know how to drive in runs."

Clutch numbers and offensive metrics with men on base or men in scoring position correlate very poorly from year to year and you are better off judging a player based on how he performs in general rather than how he performs in "run producing situations."

However, let's for these purposes make the assumption that we do care about a hitter's production when men are on base and it is a run scoring opportunity. Do RBI do a very good job of measuring whether a hitter is a "run producer?"

You get an RBI if your hit/walk/etc sends a runner to the plate, but some RBI are easier than others. With a man on third and no outs, it's quite easy to drive the runner home, but with a man on first and two outs, it's much more difficult.

And that's a problem. If you get to bat with more men on second and third, you'll have more RBI even if you have identical rate stats across the opportunities that you do have. It's not right to reward a hitter just because the quantity of his RISP situations is high. You might want to

reward a hitter for their performance in each type of situation, but surely not for the number of those situations.

A classic example of this is the Phillies' Ryan Howard. Whilst nobody, I don't think, could argue that the first baseman was at all good last season, there he was 4th in the National League RBI producers with 93. A lot of this was down to him hitting in the middle of the order and playing a majority of his team's games, not because he has the ability to produce runs.

It goes beyond that. Maybe we're all capable of mentally adjusting for the idea that certain hitters in better lineup spots on better teams will have a higher number of chances and we don't really mind that Miguel Cabrera has more RBI than someone like Brandon Crawford, but there's another serious issue that adds more haze to the whole endeavour.

You can contribute to run scoring even without being the hitter who plates the runner. Imagine you're batting with a man on first base and one out. You rip a clean single to the right centre field and the runner advances to third base. You moved him up two bases. Then the next hitter hits a routine fly to centre field and the runner scores on a sacrifice fly. Who gets the RBI? The guy who hit after you did, even though one could easily suggest you played a bigger role in driving in that run. Not only did you register a hit, but you advanced the runner two bases rather than one. RBI gives you no credit whatsoever.

And this runs counter to the idea of situational hitting. The guy who hit the sac fly "drove him in" but you did more heavy lifting. If he had been standing on second or third base when you came up, your hit would have scored him. Instead, the next hitter claimed the RBI in less impressive fashion. It's not just about the number of chances it's about the collective action of run production. Even if you want to evaluate hitters in context, you have to look at every step along the way, not just the one that comes at the end.

So while there isn't really evidence that hitting with men on base is a skill independent of your regular abilities, the more important reason RBI isn't a good measure of offensive performance in any way is that it doesn't even capture the performance it means too. Batters do not have equal opportunities to collect RBI. In fact, in some cases the stars can align and hitters can rack up tons of RBI despite performing quite poorly, simply because they were given very favourable circumstances.

A good example of opportunity providing inflated numbers can be found in basketball. NBA teams average, on the whole, between 90 and 100 points per game. Somebody has to get those points for each team. Nobody would argue that Rudy Gay was an especially good player, in fact he is one of the most inefficient players in the whole league. Yet, there he is 13th in the NBA with 21 points per game.

Generally speaking, RBI is not a useful measure of offensive performance. If one player has 100 RBI and another 75 it tells you almost nothing about the seasons they had. RBI is as much of a team statistic as it is an individual one, influenced as much by what the players do in front of a batter as what that batter does himself.

THOUGHTS ON RBI'S FROM THE SPORTING NEWS (2017)

Stat to the Future: If you're still in love with RBIs, here's why you shouldn't be

Since becoming an official statistic back in 1920, the RBI has been one of the most popular numbers used in discussing players, and joins batting average and home runs as a part of the MLB Triple Crown.

Despite the long history of the RBI, statisticians have taken a less-than-favorable view of the stat in recent years. Fangraphs calls RBI [“a stat to avoid.”](#) In Michael Lewis' "Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game," the author called the historical obsession with RBI a “good example of ... general madness.”

To reaffirm this, stat guys realized that the RBI does a poor job measuring players' individual hitting abilities, and is far more a product of the players' environment. Thus, assigning RBI statistics to individual players is unfair to players who are in poor run-creating environments.

A tale of two Angels

This also evidenced anecdotally. Mike Trout, the consensus best player in the MLB, finished tied for 20th in the majors in RBI last season with 100. Trout slashed .315/.441/.550 — yet, he finished with the same number of RBI as Carlos Gonzalez and Jose Abreu, who slashed .298/.350/.503 and .293/.252/.468 over a similar number of plate appearances. While both Gonzalez and Abreu are fine players, Trout is miles ahead of them in terms of talent (and everyone else in the MLB), but he still finished far down the RBI leaderboards.

That same season, Trout's teammate Albert Pujols finished fourth in the MLB with 119 RBI. Pujols is decidedly past his prime, whereas his teammate Trout is just entering his. Despite Trout beating him in almost every offensive statistic in 2016 (except for HR, where Pujols barely edged out Trout — 31 to 29), Pujols solidly beats out Trout in RBI. But evaluators know that Trout was the more productive player by far — so RBI fails us in this instance.

How RBI falls short

There are three parts as to how Pujols gained more RBI despite being a worse player than Trout. The first being Pujols, despite being past his prime, still is a capable batter. He can still muscle home runs, doubles and knock base hits. This is the part of RBI that Pujols can control — this is part of a 39 percent that takes into account a player's batting skills, discussed further below.

The second part is Pujols' positioning in the order. Pujols spent 117 games in 2016 batting cleanup for the Angels, and 34 games batting third. The cleanup hitter will come up to bat with

runners on the most frequently because three of the best hitters in the lineup usually precede the cleanup spot. Thus, the cleanup hitter tends to receive the most RBI opportunities — unless he hits a home run, he cannot knock someone in if there's no one on base ahead of him. Players batting third experience the same effect, but to a smaller degree.

Of the 22 hitters who accumulated 100 RBI in 2016, 17 of them batted mostly at third or at cleanup. It may seem like they have those slots locked down because of their hitting prowess, but it may be mistaking cause for effect and vice versa — batting cleanup or third simply yields more RBI than it does batting elsewhere, because a player gets more ABs per game than the bottom of the order *and* because most lineups are set up so that the players batting leadoff and second get on base frequently, yielding more opportunities.

The third part of Pujols' high RBI total are the players batting in front of him. While Pujols typically batted third or cleanup, Trout regularly batted second or third in the order, always ahead of Pujols.

Trout posted a .441 OBP, the best in the majors, and Kole Calhoun, who usually batted ahead of Trout, also posted a high OBP in 2016. Pujols frequently came up to the plate with one of them already on base, and occasionally both — giving him an extremely high number of RBI opportunities. If Pujols had batted cleanup on a team without players of higher caliber ahead of them, it's unlikely that he would have matched his RBI total.

There is still a substantial amount that players can do to affect their RBI totals. But in general, RBI are the result of being placed in RBI situations frequently — coming to bat with runners in scoring position.

A bad player could finish the season with more RBI than a good player by having more opportunities, and it is for this inconsistency that the RBI's effectiveness is limited. RBI paints only a limited picture, and most of the factors influencing RBI are out of a players' control, leaving RBI as a stat that deserves more scrutiny than it gets

Here's what you should be using instead

Let's compare RBI to **Weighted Runs Above Average** (or **wRAA**). wRAA is a cumulative offensive stat, like RBI, that measures a players' productivity. The difference between wRAAs and RBI is that wRAAs determine productivity based on a player's performance at the plate alone — how frequently a player reached base and hit for power. Think of it like OPS, but it's a cumulative stat, not an average (wRAA uses a stat like OPS called **wOBA** in its calculation, which is explained in part [here](#)).

wRAA is a stat that measures only what a player contributes in terms of productivity. wRAA is solely the player's responsibility. And if we compare RBI to wRAA, we can see that there's a big difference between the two stats — only 39 percent of a player's RBI total can be accounted for by a player's batting skills. There's more to getting high RBI totals than players can realistically control.

PITCH CLOCK

Last week I commented on the minor league pitch clock and pace of play at the Portland Seadogs. I've now seen the pitch clock in action in Durham and Lancaster, PA. I like it. Here are some other thoughts from The Athletic.

Minor-league pitch clock cut game times by 21 minutes in 2021

The Low-A West League is speeding up time, in baseball games, since it began experimenting with a 15-second pitch clock in June. As a result, the league has cut game times by 21 minutes.

That's the direct opposite of MLB, where the average time of a nine-inning game is up by nearly 20 minutes, just over the last 10 years — and by more than a half-hour since the '80s. With major-league games filled with plenty of dead time, the MLB commissioner's office is taking notice of the pitch clock's impact on the Low-A West League (formerly the California League).

"It really is an incredible experience," says former big-leaguer Raul Ibañez, who is one of the people overseeing this experiment in his role as a senior vice president of on-field operations for MLB. "It feels like the baseball games that I grew up watching in the '80s."

The length of games isn't the only thing affected by the newly implemented pitch clocks. The Low-A West League has also seen more runs and home runs, as well as fewer walks and strikeouts.

For more on minor-league pitch clocks and their future use across baseball, read Jayson Stark's full story in the Go Deeper section below.

Why pitch clocks work

Jayson Stark, senior MLB writer: The first time I watched a Low-A West League game, the first word that popped into my head was "rhythm." These games have it. And once that becomes clear, you can't stop yourself from being obsessed with it.

I watched a Sept. 7 game between the Stockton Ports and San Jose Giants. It started a little after 6:30 p.m. It was over at 8:47. Do you know how many nine-inning major-league games have been over in 2 hours and 13 minutes this year? That would be two — out of more than 2,000!

Two words: Dead time. With a 15-second pitch clock, every ounce of dead time was suctioned totally out of that minor-league game. Gone. And not missed. Like at all.

Do minor-leaguers feel rushed by the clock?

Stark: I asked two guys who play for the Stockton Ports — pitcher Grant Judkins, signed by the A's in 2020 out of the University of Iowa, and catcher CJ Rodriguez, a 2021 fifth-round pick by the A's out of Vanderbilt. For what it's worth, Rodriguez did play with a clock at Vandy, but one that was rarely enforced. This is Judkins' first go-round with a clock.

Rodriguez: "I like to work pretty quick. When I'm in the box, I try to take my time a little bit more. But when I'm catching, I try to work quick to keep the defense on their toes. I think if the game slows down, the pace gets really bad. The defense falls asleep. The fans fall asleep. And you want to keep everybody engaged. So I'm trying to keep the game going as fast as I can."

Judkins: "Actually, there have been quite a few times where the pitcher either had to rush or the catcher had to call time because the hitter was taking too much time getting ready. So I guess it'd be nice to see that enforced more often to where it's not always called on the pitcher because they're waiting on the hitter. But do I feel rushed? I wouldn't say that."

Where does baseball go from here?

Stark: In baseball, it's never simple to peer into the future and see it clearly. What lies ahead on the other side of the almost certain labor war to come? Not even the ghost of Marvin Miller could predict that. But here is what seems likely:

Barring some surprise agreement with the players on phasing in a clock, there would seem to be an excellent chance that by next season, every minor league is playing with a 15-second clock. MLB wouldn't need union approval for that. And here's why expanding this clock to all leagues seems obvious:

- Vastly increases the sample size so everyone can see if the impact on the game in the Low-A West League replicates itself on every level, in every way.
- Allows more players to experience life with a 15-second clock. Which gives big-league players more firsthand input, from fellow players, on the pros and cons.

Then, if the results are similar, it feels logical for MLB to approach the union to try to negotiate the arrival of this — or any sort of clock — in the big leagues in 2023, 2024 or pick a year that works. Players are a good bet to resist. We've seen this movie before. But here's what people who have spent the summer living with this rule would like to see them try:

Keep an open mind — because amid the two gazillion rule experiments being tried out across the minor leagues, there might be more potential in this one, to pave a path for a better game, than all the others put together.

Can this minor-league pitch clock solve all of MLB's problems?

“Within the ballpark, time moves differently, marked by no clock except the events of the game.”

—Roger Angell, *“The Summer Game”*

“It’s a lot more enjoyable to be a part of a game that’s just over two hours than a game that’s close to four hours.”

—[Grant Judkins](#), pitcher for the Stockton Ports

Time never really flies, you know. Not in life. Especially not in baseball. It’s all relative. Tick-tick-tick.

So it isn’t quite true to say that time now flies in that minor league once known, in simpler times, as the California League. But time definitely ticks to a whole different beat these days.

You probably haven’t noticed, unless you’re a resident of someplace like Lake Elsinore or Rancho Cucamonga. But you know who has totally noticed? The office of the commissioner of baseball, where *everyone* has noticed.

And here’s the first thing they’ve noticed, since this league began experimenting with a 15-second pitch clock in June:

2021 Average Game Time, Low-A West League*

Before pitch clock: 3:02

After pitch clock: 2:41

*(*Formerly the California League)*

Wait. They’ve cut game times *by 21 minutes*? Yeah, they have. Could anyone possibly have known, even three months ago, that it would be possible to lop that many minutes off the average time of every baseball game, just by introducing one simple change — even if that change happens to be the tightest pitch clock in professional baseball?

That answer is no. But we know now. And it’s worth paying close attention, if only because the powers that be are paying even closer attention.

“It really is an incredible experience,” says long-time big-leaguer Raul Ibañez, who is one of the people overseeing this experiment (and lots more) in his new role as a senior vice president of on-field operations for [Major League Baseball](#). “It feels like the baseball games that I grew up watching in the ’80s.”

On the other hand, you know what *doesn’t* feel like the baseball games he grew up watching in the ’80s? The baseball games that kids grow up watching now (or possibly not watching). Here’s why:

AVERAGE TIME PER 9 INNINGS, MLB

1981 2:33

1991 2:48

2001 2:58

2011 2:51

2021 3:09

Time is relative, remember? So relatively speaking, it's hard not to get fixated on these two trends:

- In Major League Baseball, as that chart shows, the average time of a nine-inning game is *up* by nearly 20 minutes, just over the last 10 years — and by more than a half-hour since the '80s.
- In the Low-A West League, though, the average game time is *down* by more than 20 minutes, just in the last three months, all since they flipped on their pitch clocks.

Hmmm. Any questions about why so many people who have witnessed 15-second-clock life with their own eyes are suddenly incredibly upbeat about their hot new experiment? Like Stockton manager Rico Brogna, for example.

"At first, I'd say I was skeptical," says Brogna, who spent nine seasons playing first base in the big leagues not so long ago, "because I'm an old-fashioned, *it's the only game without a clock*, kind of person. And I always thought that's kind of neat and unique to baseball ... But I have been shocked, surprised, and pleasantly, that it has been a really, really good addition."

But zipper game times aren't the only reason this rule has people rethinking that whole *Only Game without a Clock* mantra. It's turned out that playing games with better rhythm and almost no dead time has had an impact on much more than the time of the postgame fist-bump line. Since the arrival of the clock, this league has also seen:

- More runs
- More action
- More homers
- Fewer walks
- Fewer strikeouts

So what the heck is happening here — and why? And is it possible that of all the experiments going on in the minor leagues and independent leagues, this is the one that could fix just about everything?

These are important questions. We've looked into them. So here's everything you ever wanted to know about minor-league pitch clocks but never realized you'd ever want to ask.

The pitch clock is 15 seconds (17 seconds with runners on base), down from 20 seconds at the upper levels of the minors. Pitchers have 15 seconds to start their delivery. Otherwise, the umpire can call an automatic ball.

The batter is required to be in the batter's box and "attentive" to the pitcher with eight seconds left on the clock. Otherwise, it's an automatic strike.

Why pitch clocks work

The first time I watched a Low-A West League game, thanks to the miraculous streaming options on MiLB.com, the first word that popped into my head was "rhythm." These games have it. And once that becomes clear, you can't stop yourself from being obsessed with it.

I watched a Sept. 7 game between the Stockton Ports and San Jose Giants. It started a little after 6:30 p.m. It was over at 8:47. You know how many nine-inning major-league games have been over in 2 hours and 13 minutes this year? That would be two — out of more than 2,000!

I could tell you in writing why that is, but it's so much easier to show you through the magic of video. So I found a big-league game with a comparable first inning that also went down last week: [Blue Jays](#) at [Orioles](#), Game 1 of their Saturday doubleheader.

Both the minor-league game and major-league game featured a scoreless top of the first inning and a two-run homer, for all the scoring, in the bottom of the first. Both games saw 24 pitches thrown in the inning. That's where the similarities end.

Time of Low-A West League inning*: 8 minutes, 22 seconds

Time of Orioles-Blue Jays inning*: 13 minutes, 48 seconds

*(*not including between-innings breaks)*

So why would that big-league inning last nearly 5 ½ minutes longer than that minor-league inning? Two words: Dead time. With a 15-second pitch clock, every ounce of dead time was suctioned totally out of that minor-league game. Gone. And not missed. Like at all.

Rico Brogna: "The pitcher stays on the rubber. I mean, literally, the catcher throws it back, he gets the sign, and he's in his delivery. It happens every pitch — for the entire game."

Raul Ibañez: "It feels like a [Cliff Lee](#) versus [Mark Buehrle](#) matchup. It's constant action."

And it's not only managers, coaches and folks watching in the seats who don't ever think: "I wish they could inject more dead time back into these games." It's also players, because why wouldn't they want to play in games with better rhythm?

Stockton catcher [CJ Rodriguez](#): “More things are happening quicker. And there’s not those 30-minute periods of time when there’s nothing going on and you can go to the bathroom and you’ve missed nothing ... (This) is how it should be.”

This is how it should be? Wow. But if it was just game time that was affected, how much would that really matter? What’s potentially more significant, though, is ...

What else pitch clocks change

More runs ... higher batting averages ... more homers ... fewer strikeouts ... fewer pitchers throwing ball four. All of that has happened since the pitch clocks began to tick. Here’s the data. See for yourself.

Runs per game 5.5 without clock, 6.0 with clock.

Batting average .244 without clock, .269 with clock

Slugging Pct .379 without clock, .429 with clock

HR Pct 1.8% without clock, 2.4% with clock

Walk Pct 11.7% without clock, 10.0% with clock

Maybe all those shifts toward more action were some kind of coincidence. We won’t know for sure until we see this clock in more leagues, in future seasons. But it’s safe to say it doesn’t seem like a coincidence to those who have paid attention. What’s harder to pinpoint is why the clock’s effect on the games has been this dramatic. Is it...

RHYTHM? Is it possible that it actually helps hitters to spend less time fidgeting with their batting gloves, marching around the dirt, messing with pitchers’ timing? Maybe it does.

Rico Brogna: “Hitting is rhythm. There is a physical part of hitting, an energy, transfer of weight, transfer of motion. And if you stop your energy, or divert it in a different direction, I always thought it prevents you from being as good as you can be as a hitter.”

LESS VELOCITY? The data doesn’t support the theory that pitchers delivering a pitch every 15 seconds lose velocity, because average fastball velocity without a clock (92.3 mph) and with it (92.4) is almost identical. But questions remain about that impact, despite the raw numbers.

Raul Ibañez: “I don’t think it did anything to the radar-gun fastball. But who knows if it did something to the pitch characteristics or the quality of the fastball.”

None of this is clear, at least not yet. But this is an area people throughout baseball remain highly curious about. And not just inside the Low-A West League.

One high-ranking AL executive: “A pitch clock would address a lot of concerns. There’s no one silver bullet. But having to throw more pitches more quickly would reduce velocity (because of less recovery time). What you’d expect to see is less break, less velocity, more contact and quicker pace. So it would address a lot of concerns.”

In other words, if there really is a direct cause and effect, think about what this means. Isn’t it worth asking ...

Could a pitch clock fix everything?

Let’s reflect on this. When we talk about what has happened in this league over the last three months, we are talking about a world in which...

- Baseball games take less time – a lot less, actually.
- Those games are cramming more offense and more action into a lot less time.
- And virtually everyone who has seen this raves about how much they enjoy watching a brand of baseball with a smoother pace and almost no dead time.

So could it be possible? Could just this one rule solve so many of baseball’s self-proclaimed problems — and produce the style of baseball we would certainly design if we were sculpting this sport from scratch here in the 21st century?

Yeah, well, sorry! Too soon to answer that question. But there’s a long list of people who would like to find out.

Raul Ibañez: “This is the most exciting development that I’ve seen, as far as impacting the game, as far as having a positive impact on the game of baseball.”

So bear that in mind. But before we get too excited, we should remember ...

Big-league players still hate the clock

Ah, yes. None of this can happen, in the complicated world we live in, without players signing off on it. And that’s how it should be. None of this *should* happen without players giving their thumbs-up.

But how likely are they to do that, as another stormy labor negotiation looms? You know the answer. Major-league players are, by far, the most wary group of all, when it comes to pitch clocks.

[Mets](#) catcher [James McCann](#) is one of baseball’s most thoughtful players. As a hitter, he also takes more time between pitches with runners on base than all but a handful of men in the big

leagues (29.2 seconds per pitch, according to Baseball Prospectus). And as a catcher, he leads a Mets staff that has a number of pitchers on the Most Time Between Pitches leader board.

So it's no surprise that he told *The Athletic's* Tim Britton this week that he's not a fan of pitch clocks. Not this clock. Not any kind of clock.

James McCann: "I think it's ridiculous. One of the beautiful things about baseball is the fact that there is no time associated with it. There's no way for the winning team to hold on to the ball a little bit longer and not let the opponent have a shot to come back and score. Every team gets the same amount of outs. For me, that's something (special) about baseball, that there is no time factor."

McCann's biggest reservation about clocks is one shared by many big-league players. This isn't some beer-league softball game. This is the major leagues, and there's a weight attached to every pitch that isn't there in any other setting, including any minor league you want to study. So that time between pitches shouldn't be rushed, they believe — for any pitcher, catcher or hitter, because there's so much to process.

James McCann: "It's huge. As a catcher, on defense, there's a time period for me. I'm going through my head what our scenario is, how we're going to attack this hitter. Then I have to put down a sign, and he agrees or disagrees with me, (so) there could be another sign.

"From a hitter's standpoint, I probably rank as one of the longest hitters to get in the box. I remember vividly having a conversation with Victor Martínez. I was young in Detroit. He was obviously a veteran who'd had a lot of success in his career. One of the things he talked about is: 'This is your at-bat. Take your time. Do what you've got to do to get ready. This at-bat doesn't go on the back of anyone's baseball card but yours.'"

McCann has every right to think that, and all of us should understand why he does. But here's something else to consider: He's also among a shrinking percentage of big-league players who have been in the big leagues so long, all they know is life without a clock.

In the minor leagues, pitch clocks of some sort have been in place for the last *seven* seasons. It had only been in Double A and Triple A before this year. And those clocks are less aggressive (20 seconds per pitch with no one on base) than those Low-A West clocks. Nevertheless ...

The number of hitters who have never played in one of those leagues with a clock is now down to slightly more than two per team. The number of pitchers who fit the same profile is around three per team.

Now let's do that math. It essentially means that more than 80 percent of all players in the major leagues in 2021 have now played with some kind of pitch clock. So they know it's possible. And it didn't stop them from doing what they do successfully enough to make it to the big leagues.

So in time, shouldn't the firm opposition of big-league players melt away? After all, some day, that number will be 100 percent, right?

James McCann: "It could be something that, over the course of time, it just becomes part of the game, as far as grandfathered in — and guys are so accustomed to it at the minor-league level that when they get to the big leagues, you don't have to have a clock up there because guys' routine is to get it and go."

But meanwhile, there is also some level of curiosity building among big-league players about many of these minor-league rules experiments, and especially this one.

[Andrew Miller](#), [Cardinals](#) reliever and member of the executive board of the players' union: "My instinct is to be against any clock in the game of baseball. (But) I also see the other side and appreciate that dead time isn't any good to watch, and cutting that down is good for the game. Ultimately for me, I think it's great that there is a good experience being had in a testing ground so that we can learn from it."

Then Miller added something of special significance: "The experience of players will be huge, though. And I would expect to lean on their experience with it when it does come up."

So if they're sincerely interested in what their peers who have had that experience would report ...

What minor leaguers would tell big leaguers (so far)

See how helpful us sportswriters can be sometimes? Every once in a while, we show up and ask the big questions so players don't have to. So, yeah, I volunteered for that heroic duty.

In this case, I asked two guys who play for the Stockton Ports — pitcher Grant Judkins, signed by the A's in 2020 out of the University of Iowa, and catcher CJ Rodriguez, a 2021 fifth-round pick by the A's out of Vanderbilt. For what it's worth, Rodriguez did play with a clock at Vandy, but one that was rarely enforced. This is Judkins' first go-round with a clock.

QUESTION NO. 1: Do hitters ever feel rushed by this clock?

CJ Rodriguez: "I like to work pretty quick. When I'm in the box, I try to take my time a little bit more. But when I'm catching, I try to work quick to keep the defense on their toes. I think if the game slows down, the pace gets really bad. The defense falls asleep. The fans fall asleep. And you want to keep everybody engaged. So I'm trying to keep the game going as fast as I can."

QUESTION NO. 2: Is there any part of their between-pitch routine they had to give up because there wasn't enough time?

CJ Rodriguez: “Honestly, no. I’m just kind of a straight up, I’m a there-to-do-my-job, kind of guy, and that’s it. So it didn’t really play a big role in what I do.”

The Athletic: So you still have time to tighten your batting gloves between every pitch?

Rodriguez: “Yeah, but that’s half a second. So it doesn’t really affect me.”

QUESTION NO. 3: DO PITCHERS EVER FEEL RUSHED?

Grant Judkins: “Actually, there have been quite a few times where the pitcher either had to rush or the catcher had to call time because the hitter was taking too much time getting ready. So I guess it’d be nice to see that enforced more often to where it’s not always called on the pitcher because they’re waiting on the hitter. But do I feel rushed? I wouldn’t say that.”

QUESTION NO. 4: IS IT A BIGGER ADJUSTMENT IN A CRITICAL SPOT?

Grant Judkins: “It’s definitely hard when things aren’t going your way. You have to kind of slow down, think about what’s going on, how you can make an adjustment to fix it. So I mean, when things aren’t going well, it’s definitely harder. But when you’re in the groove and you’re pitching well, it kind of all just flows.”

QUESTION NO. 5: SO WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO BIG LEAGUERS?

Grant Judkins: “I think it could be implemented in the big leagues in the future. I think they’d have to really make sure that it’s been used universally throughout the league in the same way, because one thing I’ve kind of run into is, it’s up to the scorekeeper, or whoever is running the clock. So ... that could definitely be improved upon to make sure it’s the same everywhere you go. But if that’s the case, I think it definitely can be used in the big leagues.”

The Athletic: “How about the idea that in the late innings, with men on base, should there be a slightly longer clock than earlier in games, and with nobody on base?”

Judkins: “I like the idea that it would be longer with people on base, but I think not necessarily. And I don’t think it shouldn’t matter what inning it is, because every inning’s important. Every inning matters. It doesn’t matter if you score early or late. You still can win the game. So I think definitely, with runners on, it should be more than without (runners on). But I think it should be the same no matter what inning it is.”

QUESTION NO. 6: WHAT ARE PLAYERS MISSING IF THEY FIGHT THIS?

Raul Ibañez: “I would say that players — every player — would rather play a two-hour-and-30-minute game than a three-hour-and-15-minute game. If you ask them honestly, nobody wants to stand on the field for three hours and 30 minutes to play a nine-inning game. Nobody ...

“So I actually think it’s going to be beneficial to all the players — hitters and pitchers. That constant action is going to be better — for focus, for intensity of focus, for crispness and for quality of play. And I also think there’s something to knocking 20 minutes off a game, times 162 games. That’s a lot of time, guys. That’s a lot of extra recovery time for players.”

Rico Brogna: “I’m a players’ union guy. I was a rep for two teams. So ... I have a lot of different perspectives, and I understand a lot of different sides. But this one is easy. Believe me, it’s easy.”

All right, take a breath now, because it’s not that easy. It can’t possibly be easy. So finally, let’s ask:

Where do they go from here?

In baseball, it’s never simple to peer into the future and see it clearly. What lies ahead on the other side of the almost certain labor war to come? Not even the ghost of Marvin Miller could predict that. But here is what seems likely:

Barring some surprise agreement with the players on phasing in a clock, there would seem to be an excellent chance that by next season, every minor league is playing with a 15-second clock. MLB wouldn’t need union approval for that. And here’s why expanding this clock to all leagues seems obvious:

- Vastly increases the sample size so everyone can see if the impact on the game in the Low-A West League replicates itself on every level, in every way.
- Allows more players to experience life with a 15-second clock. Which gives big-league players more firsthand input, from fellow players, on the pros and cons.

Then, if the results are similar, it feels logical for MLB to approach the union to try to negotiate the arrival of this — or any sort of clock — in the big leagues in 2023, 2024 or pick a year that works. Players are a good bet to resist. We’ve seen this movie before. But here’s what people who have spent the summer living with this rule would like to see them try:

Keep an open mind — because amid the two gazillion rule experiments being tried out across the minor leagues, there might be more potential in this one, to pave a path for a better game, than all the others put together.

Rico Brogna: “I’ll admit that I’m still scared about some of the other changes being talked about. But that’s one way to do it. You make 10 rule changes, but really, you’re just looking for the one ... That’s why you experiment — to find out what works and what doesn’t.

“And this — this is the one. I mean it. This one’s OK.”

ADAM WAINWRIGHT KEEPS ON ROLLING – NYT's TYLER KEPNER

In an Era of Throwers, a Pitcher Remains

Still an ace at 40, Adam Wainwright of the St. Louis Cardinals is having his best season in years. His secret? “It starts with a game of catch.”

Adam Wainwright is having fun, as expected from a 40-year-old pitcher in a renaissance season. More pointedly, though, he made a decision to have fun six months ago, back in spring training, when his schedule could have annoyed him.

For three consecutive starts, Wainwright, the stalwart right-hander for the St. Louis Cardinals, found himself matched against the same opponent, the Houston Astros. Not a big problem, really, but still inconvenient — repeatedly facing the same hitters, he said, might have robbed him of mystery and led to allowing a lot of hits.

Then Wainwright considered the wondrous possibilities of his job. He throws four pitches — a sinking fastball, a cutter, a changeup and a knockout curveball — and, of course, he can vary their locations. With so many looks at the same hitters, he would overload their internal hard drives and scramble their scouting reports on him. He would toy with them.

Now Wainwright is 16-7 with a 2.88 earned run average across 190⅓ innings. He could pitch in the playoffs for the ninth time in 16 seasons, should the Cardinals (76-69) nab one of the National League's wild-card spots, and he is standing out as a throwback — the kind of pitcher who believes he has the advantage when facing a team for the third or fourth time through the order. Many teams turn to the bullpen at that point, a reflex that bothers a craftsman.

“When you get to the third or fourth time through, if you're a *pitcher*, it shouldn't be that big a deal, honestly, because you've got a lot of different ways to get people out,” Wainwright said, in the dugout at Citi Field on Tuesday.

“Now, don't get me wrong, if I could reach back and throw it 100, I would love to try that. But there's still pitching behind it. What a great thing it is to watch Brandon Woodruff from the Brewers pitch: he's throwing 98, but he's sinking it and cutting it and sliding it and changing it. Man, is that fun to watch.”

This season, batters have hit .227 off Wainwright in his first two times through the order, but just .188 in his third and fourth. He has three complete games and is the majors' active leader with 27 — not many, historically, but impressive in an era when teams ask so little of their starters. Plenty of pitchers could defy the trend, Wainwright believes, if only they knew how.

“If you can throw that hard, you have so much ability already,” said Wainwright, whose average fastball is 89.1 miles per hour, well below the league average of 93.5, according to FanGraphs. “There’s the ability to be a lockdown, No. 1 starter for a very, very, very long time, if you can learn how to pitch with that incredible stuff. I have to pitch, because if I go out there and try to heave the ball, it’s going to be over quick.”

For most in his role, it is. Major leaguers are averaging only 5.1 innings and 80 pitches per start in 2021, the lowest full-season marks in recorded history. In the 2005 season, when Wainwright made his major league debut, 50 pitchers threw at least 200 innings. In 2019, that number had dwindled to 15.

Even with teams showing more caution this season after a pandemic-shortened 2020 schedule, it is startling to see only three pitchers besides Wainwright — Zack Wheeler of the Philadelphia Phillies, Walker Buehler of the Los Angeles Dodgers and Sandy Alcantara of the Miami Marlins — who have topped 180 innings this year.

The modern emphasis on strikeouts and pitch counts does not lend itself to durability. In 2000, when Wainwright was drafted in the first round by Atlanta, there were 466 games in which a pitcher threw at least 120 pitches. This season, there have been five. Strikeout rates have risen from 6.45 per team per game in 2000 to 8.71 now.

“When you’re striking out a lot of guys, you’re throwing a lot of pitches,” said Dave Duncan, 75, now retired after more than 30 years as a pitching coach, including 16 with St. Louis. “The majority of my coaching career, you started to get concerned around 110, 115 pitches, but you thought everybody should be able to get to 125 without a problem. Well, now you’ve gone from 125 to 110 to 100, and you’re getting your bullpen up when a guy gets into the 80s.”

Wainwright was a borderline power pitcher in his prime, Duncan said, and he averaged more than a strikeout per inning (postseason included) as a rookie reliever in 2006. But even then he had a feel for nuance; Wainwright’s fastball averaged 91.4 m.p.h. that season, blazing for a pitch-to-contact staff, but barely above league average.

This year’s staff is an odd mix: Cardinals pitchers lead the majors in walks while recording the fewest strikeouts. The team plays exceptional defense but has few reliable arms besides Wainwright; only one other pitcher, the left-hander Kwang Hyun Kim, has worked 100 innings in a St. Louis uniform.

Yet despite a barrage of injuries, the Cardinals have resisted the use of scripted bullpen days, where several relievers patch together a game. Some of the majors’ best teams, like the Tampa Bay Rays, the San Francisco Giants and the Dodgers, often design games this way. But while the strategy might work — as a way to win games and save money on starters’ salaries — it diminishes a vital role.

“A lot of ideas have been thrown around on how do we get the starting pitcher to be more prominent and last longer, because that’s a draw,” said the veteran Cardinals reliever Andrew Miller, who serves on the executive subcommittee of the players’ union.

“If we’re selling ourselves as an industry and we want as many fans and as many people watching on TV, what’s better: Jacob deGrom versus Adam Wainwright, or an opener and eight bullpen guys versus a guy who is going to finish the season with 117 innings? There’s no doubt it’s the ace pitcher. And it doesn’t have to be just aces. Starting pitcher was always a brand-name position, and we’ve probably pushed away from that a little bit.”

Teams still value the ace; there are seven starting pitchers among the majors’ 10 highest-paid players in 2021. But mid-rotation starters have lost much of their earning power, and with so many hard throwers now, there is greater inventory of interchangeable (and low-paid) pitchers who can get by for an inning or two.

Throwing hard often, for dozens of innings a month, takes a physical toll; the Mets’ deGrom, the majors’ hardest-throwing starter, dazzled for 92 innings this season but has not pitched since July 7 because of elbow trouble. A potential workaround — holding back dominant stuff for just the right moments, to save wear and tear — is easier said than done.

“You hear about that stuff, but not a lot of guys can do that,” said the Cardinals’ Jon Lester, who has eight 200-inning seasons. “I don’t want to say all guys throw max effort, I don’t think that’s true, but I would maybe compare it to hearing PGA guys talk about their swing: they’re trying to be at 90 percent, almost like controlled chaos. So that’s kind of what you want to try to be. There’s times where you try to reach back for more when you have that — but there ain’t really reaching back for anything more now.”

When Lester, 37, was with Boston in 2013, he beat Wainwright twice in the World Series, including a Game 5 duel that was 1-1 in the seventh inning, with both starters still in the game. Back then, Lester said, he threw hard enough to bury cutters inside and go away as a surprise. Now, as he approaches his 200th career victory, he has essentially reversed his game plan.

But while Wainwright has adjusted, too — in concert with his timeless battery mate, catcher Yadier Molina — he is coy with details.

Secrecy matters, Wainwright explained, citing a playoff game a few years ago. Wainwright said he read an article in which an opponent divulged a plan to take Wainwright’s curveball and let it break out of the strike zone. Wainwright dutifully flipped curve after curve into the zone to win the game.

Amateurs often prioritize velocity and spin rate to impress scouts and college recruiters, but to thrive in the long run, Wainwright said, they should master the basics.

“I’ll tell you where it starts: it starts with a game of catch,” he said. “I see so many pitchers now — *throwers* now — playing fetch instead of catch. A good game of catch is where learning how to pitch really starts.”

And how does Wainwright define a good game of catch?

“You should be able to throw the ball and hit me in the chest, or really close,” he said. “Let’s say I have a hula hoop-shaped target. You should be able to throw within that hula hoop out to a really good distance, and you should learn how to do that. That’s a skill, and it takes practice and it takes a plan. It takes intention. It’s not just throwing to throw.”

Wainwright grew up in Georgia idolizing Greg Maddux, the Braves’ Hall of Fame starter, and internalizing his example. Maddux was a wizard of pitch movement who chiseled the edges of the strike zone, a model of efficiency for more than 5,000 innings mostly for the Cubs and Atlanta.

“He was sculpting it in there, because that’s what it is — we’re artists,” Wainwright said. “Real pitchers are artists out there, and they’re painting their picture as the game goes on. There’s a lot of different ways to get to the end result. Sometimes a hitter makes you do different things, and that’s what pitching is all about — changing speeds, changing angles, changing up and down, in and out, up and in, down and away.

“There’s so much fun stuff there that people are missing by just raring back and throwing the ball as hard as they can.”

Wainwright had carved up the Mets the night before. He lasted only six innings, his shortest start in a month, but it was good enough to win for the fifth start in a row. Later Wainwright trolled the fans, telling reporters with a smile that he used a changeup and two curves to fan Jeff McNeil with the bases loaded — a sly reference to his famous strikeout of Carlos Beltran that clinched the 2006 N.L. championship series at Shea Stadium.

“I like nostalgia,” Wainwright said. “I gave the people what they wanted.”

The funny thing? Nobody even referenced Beltran in a question. That was all Wainwright, still loving his work at age 40, because he knows how to do it in the most rewarding way.

WHAT IT COSTS TO ATTEND MLB BASEBALL

The package used for comparison—4 non-premium tickets, park one care, 4 hot dogs, 2 sodas and 2 beers and 2 hats. It may not be exactly how every family of 4 allocates spending at a game but it’s a good way to compare costs of family day at the ballpark across MLB teams.

It now costs an average of \$253 for four people to attend an MLB game, which is a 4.5 percent year-over-year increase that’s in line with Consumer Price Index inflation, according to the [2021 Fan Cost Index](#) that published this week. The FCI data report has been produced since 1991 by Chicago-based sports business intelligence firm Team Marketing Report.

Atop the overall FanCostIndex average is Boston. [Red Sox](#) games average \$376 for a group of four, which is a 4 percent increase. And the least-expensive team for a group outing is the [Arizona Diamondbacks](#) at \$144, down 0.2 percent over last season’s planned costs.

The best deal for fans? The [Tampa Bay Rays](#) are 90-56 and their FCI is \$179 — third cheapest in all of baseball.

Red Sox	\$376
Cubs	\$364
Astros	\$348
Yankees	\$340
Nationals	\$338
Dodgers	\$308
Giants	\$297
Rangers	\$287
Phillies	\$268
Cardinals	\$260
Mariners	\$258
Mets	\$255
White Sox	\$253
Orioles	\$246
Indians	\$245
Braves	\$243
A's	\$241
Brewers	\$240
Twins	\$229
Royals	\$225
Reds	\$218
Tigers	\$216

Rockies	\$214
Padres	\$210
Angels	\$193
Pirates	\$184
Rays	\$180
Marlins	\$175
D'backs	\$144

The fan pocketbook cost data comes after months of number crunching to align this season's numbers within the context of how the pandemic skewed ballpark prices on tickets and concessions as fans began to return to ballparks this season. The comparisons are imperfect because of all that has occurred since COVID-19 upended things, and not everyone buys a hat or a Miller Lite, but the data is a good snapshot estimate of how fans are affected financially.

And how is baseball itself affected?

MLB said last year that it [lost](#) \$3.1 billion (with an EBITDA loss of \$2.7 billion) because of the pandemic keeping fans out of stadiums and limiting the season to 60 games. Owners of several teams laid off ballpark and other staff. This season began with limited attendance that increased over time but also had adjustments to fan-based revenue generators beyond tickets such as concessions and merchandise costs.

With varying levels of attendance permitted inside stadiums this season, teams will begin to recover from some of the financial damage inflicted by the pandemic. We can safely assume that none of the clubs, all owned by enormously wealthy people, are in any jeopardy of folding but many took on millions of dollars in borrowing debt to pay the bills. Even with skyrocketing team values, and deep-pocket owners with access to cheap cash, teams typically have to live within their owner-set budgets, and full recovery from not having fans and a full schedule in 2020 is expected to take several years once the world is back to pre-pandemic life.

Baseball was a \$10 billion business before the pandemic, and fan revenue (tickets and other game-day spending) accounts for about 40 percent of that total.

MLB attendance this season wildly varies. The [Los Angeles Dodgers](#) lead all teams with 33,471 average per game. At the bottom are the [Miami Marlins](#) at 7,889 per game, according to ESPN's [attendance tracking](#) through Wednesday.

The overall MLB per-game average is 18,308. Last season it was zero. Two years ago — can any of us remember 2019? — the average was 28,317, per ESPN's database.

Twenty years ago, the MLB FCI average was just shy of \$138, meaning the cost for a family or group of four to attend a game has increased 84 percent since then.

SEPTEMBER 12, 2021

Good morning baseball fans, With my Yankees unwatchable over the last ten days (that 13 game winning streak is a distant memory) we hit the Portland Sea Dogs (AA Boston) against the Binghamton Rumble Ponies (AA Mets). 6,000 seat stadium was 1/3 full. The pitch clock (which we had seen in Durham at the Bulls (AAA Tampa)) kept the game moving along. 2 hours and 10 minutes. Sea Dogs won 3-1. \$17 for box seats 5 rows behind the dug out. And they will bring food & drink to any seat in the house via their web site. MLB could learn a few things.

Dodgers look great but don't count out the Brewers—some Milwaukee pitching items below. Enjoy your Sunday.

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

Did you know that Roberto Hernandez holds the Rays career saves record with 101?

Last week the Phillies scored 7 or more runs in 7 straight games—their longest streak since 1933.

The Giants became the first team to sweep the Rockies at home this season and the first team to reach [90 victories](#) this year. At 90-50, the Giants moved to a season-high 40 games over .500 for the first time since Sept. 7, 1993.

On Monday, [Vladimir Guerrero Jr.](#) hit his 40th home run, the first of what will presumably be many seasons in which he reaches that mark. (His previous high? 15. To be fair, he is 22 years

old.) Forty is a big number, and harder to reach than you might think. Cal Ripken Jr. never did it; Stan Musial never did it.

Vladimir Guerrero Jr. became just the third player in AL history with a season of 40-plus HRs and 100 RBIs before turning 23. The other two--Joe DiMaggio (1937) and Juan Gonzalez (1992)

Barry Bonds only had one year with more than 50 homers, which was in 2001, when he set the single-season record with 73, but he had seven other seasons with at least 40.

Yankees fans may be frustrated by the rollercoaster season. But as Peter Gammons mentioned his week, “the last time the Yankees had a losing season, Mel Hall was playing left field and George Herbert Walker Bush was president”.

One thing to keep in mind about [Robbie Ray](#)’s bid for the American League Cy Young award: He pitched in three different home ballparks this season, and two of them – TD Ballpark in Dunedin, Fl., and Sahlen Field in Buffalo – were among the most hitter-friendly in the game. Ray leads AL starters with a 1.51 ERA since July 30, the day the Jays returned to Rogers Centre.

Explaining McHugh’s intentional balk

For the record, [Collin McHugh](#)’s intentional balk on Monday in the 10th inning of the Rays’ 11-10 victory over the [Red Sox](#) was not solely out of fear that Jonathan Araúz would steal signs as the automatic runner at second. Rays manager Kevin Cash said McHugh preferred to pitch out of the windup, and the pitcher said that was indeed part of the equation.

“We are not worried about other teams getting pitches, whether via our sign sets or by looking into the glove, but we know it happens,” McHugh said in a text. “With a runner that can’t decide the outcome of the game, it made the most sense to us to take away the possibility of

that competitive advantage. And yes, throwing from the windup makes the inning feel more like a standard inning and not the 'runner on second' stress of extras."

As McHugh noted, runners on second are not only stealing signs. They also have become increasingly proficient at determining the type of pitch a pitcher might throw by detecting his grip when the ball is in his glove. Both tactics are permissible under the rules.

Orioles recent 19 game losing streak

During the streak 315 games were played

23 players made their MLB debut

832 players made a pitch

Yankees gained 9 games in wild card standings

Mets dropped 10 games in NL east standings

Cecil Fielder and Prince Fielder finished with the exact same career home run total. The father-son duo each hit 319 dingers.

The Blue Jays stumbled into the seventh and final inning on Saturday night at Camden Yards hitless, on the verge of a disappointing loss to a team with the worst record in the American League. Then, they put together one of the best innings in franchise history.

With 11 runs and 11 hits, the Blue Jays tied two franchise records for a single inning en route to the 11-2 win in Game 2 of their doubleheader against the Orioles. This was just the fourth time the Blue Jays had plated 11 in the same inning -- the first time since 2007 -- and they did it amid the sky-high stakes of the AL Wild Card race.

Alejandro Kirk homered, a two-run shot to right field, then Marcus Semien stepped in and launched his 39th home run of the season to bring in three more. Teoscar Hernández got in on the action next, ripping a line-drive homer over the wall in left-center field. Then George Springer homered. Along with being just the second time in franchise history the Blue Jays had

11 hits in one inning (1984), it was also just the second time they'd hit four home runs, which was first done on Aug. 17, 2001.

Brewers Corbin Burnes and Josh Hader no-hit the Indians Saturday 3-0 in Cleveland.

Burnes, who took a perfect game into the seventh, and Hader combined not just on the second no-no in Brewers history -- the first since Juan Nieves' gem on April 15, 1987, against the Orioles -- but also the ninth of this Major League season, topping 1884 for the most in a year in MLB history (pending the inclusion of Negro Leagues stats).

Burnes has his place in Brewers history, handling the bulk of the duties in a combined no-hitter that stands as the franchise's first no-no of any type since 1987, while simultaneously sharpening his National League Cy Young Award case.

They pushed the Brewers' record to a franchise-best 33 games over .500. Their [magic number](#) to clinch the [NL Central](#) is down to seven.

Burnes threw a career-high 115 pitches. The right-hander racked up 14 strikeouts, raising his season total to 210.

All night, though, the Indians batters looked like they had no shot against him. Cleveland became the [first team to suffer three no-hitters](#) in a season, and remarkably, each of those games was started by Zach Plesac. Only one pitcher previously, Jim Perry, had been on the losing team's end of three no-hitters throughout the course of his career (once in 1970, twice in '73). Plesac is also the first player to pitch in three different no-hitters in a single season -- from either side.

This season, Carlos Rodón of the White Sox pitched a no-no in an 8-0 win vs. the Indians on April 14, and 23 days later, Reds starter Wade Miley etched his name into the record book during a 3-0 victory.

The 26 year old Burnes began his great season by setting an MLB record for strikeouts without a walk, at 58. Now, with a Major League-best 2.25 ERA, 1.49 FIP, 35.4% strikeout rate (tied with the Dodgers' Max Scherzer) and 7.1 FanGraphs-calculated pitching WAR and an NL-best 4.9% walk rate, Burnes' NL Cy Young Award case is growing

Burnes and Hader bring the Major Leagues' second-longest team no-hitter drought to an end. The Brewers had played 5,473 games between Nieves' no-no against the Orioles on April 15, 1987, and the combined effort on Saturday. The Majors' [longest no-hitter drought](#) belongs to the

Crew's opponent; Cleveland has not enjoyed one since Len Barker spun a perfect game against the Blue Jays on May 15, 1981. Second place on that drought list now goes to Toronto (Dave Stieb -- Sept. 2, 1990, against Cleveland).

[Bill Schroeder](#) was the man who caught Nieves' no-hitter in 1987, and he was in the Brewers' broadcast booth on Saturday for the franchise's second no-no.

This is the ninth no-hitter of the 2021 season, setting the record for most in a single season in MLB history, pending the inclusion of Negro Leagues stats. The previous total of eight had been tied with the 1884 campaign -- which was before the mound was even moved to its current distance in 1893.

Burnes and Hader authored the 16th [combined no-hitter](#) in AL/NL history and the second of 2021, following a combined effort by the Cubs (Milwaukee's rival) against the Dodgers on June 24. There were also two combined no-nos in 2019 (Astros, Angels) and in 1991 (Braves, Orioles). It's the first time Cleveland has suffered at the hands of a combined no-hitter.

Cleveland is now the first team in AL/NL history to be no-hit three times in the same season, and that doesn't include the hitless loss it suffered to the Rays in the seven-inning, second leg of a doubleheader on July 7.

Burnes became only the third pitcher in AL/NL history to be lifted from a game after eight hitless innings and not come back out to begin the ninth. San Diego's Clay Kirby (July 21, 1970, vs. Mets) and Houston's Don Wilson (Sept. 4, 1974, vs. Reds) were the other two.

(That list does not include the Yankees' Andy Hawkins on July 1, 1990, and the Red Sox's Matt Young on April 12, 1992, as the opposing team won and did not need to bat in the bottom of the ninth inning.)

Cleveland hitters struck out 16 times, thanks to Burnes (14) and Hader (two), tied with Nolan Ryan's 16-strikeout no-hitter for the Rangers on May 1, 1991, for the third-most in any official no-hit performance. Ryan struck out 17 Tigers by himself during his July 15, 1973, no-hitter, and Max Scherzer punched out 17 for the Nationals on Oct. 3, 2015.

Every no-hitter seems to have "The Play" that aids it on defense, and who better than Brewers center fielder [Lorenzo Cain](#) to [provide it Saturday night](#). With two outs in the bottom of the eighth, Wisconsin native Owen Miller lined a ball to center field that looked like it could be Cleveland's first hit. But Cain covered 55 feet in just 3.5 seconds and made an excellent sliding catch to end Burnes' night with a flourish. Statcast gave Cain just a 10% probability of making the play, based on that time and distance.

For Brewers fans, Cain's play probably called to mind [Robin Yount's diving catch](#) that secured the final out of Nieves' no-hitter.

Burnes racked up 26 swings and misses against Cleveland. He now owns the Brewers' two highest single-game whiff totals in the pitch tracking era (dating back to 2008), as he set the

Milwaukee record with 30 whiffs against the Cubs on Aug. 11 -- the game in which he [tied Tom Seaver and Aaron Nola for the AL/NL record](#) for consecutive strikeouts (10) in a single contest. Cleveland whiffed on 42% (13 of 31) of its swings against Burnes' signature cutter, 57% of its swings against his curveball, 60% against his changeup and 33% against his slider.

Burnes finished with a 44.8% overall whiff rate on the night, but that's only good for the third-best rate by a Brewers pitcher in the pitch-tracking era behind ... two other Burnes starts *this year* (Aug. 11 and June 6). That's how dominant he has been.

Saturday marked Burnes' seventh start of 2021 with at least 10 strikeouts, one or fewer walks and one or fewer runs allowed, tying him with five other pitchers for the third-most such starts in a single AL/NL season behind Pedro Martinez (nine in 2000) and Clayton Kershaw (eight in 2015).

Burnes' effort was the Brewers' 12th different start of at least six innings and one or fewer hits allowed, far and away a [single-season record](#) for any AL/NL team since at least 1901. [Freddy Peralta](#) owns four of them, followed by Burnes with three, [Adrian Houser](#) and [Brandon Woodruff](#) with two and [Brett Anderson](#) with one.

Burnes became the first Brewers pitcher to strike out 10 or more batters while allowing no hits in a single outing. Milwaukee's previous high for strikeouts in a hitless appearance was eight, recorded by the man who finished off Saturday's no-no. Hader did it in an electric 2 2/3-innings save on April 30, 2018, against the Reds.

This is the fourth no-hitter thrown on the date Sept. 11. Eric Milton threw one for the Twins against the Angels in 1999. In 1991, three Braves pitchers combined to no-hit the Padres. And way back in 1882, Tony Mullane threw one for the Louisville Eclipse at the Cincinnati Red Stockings in the Major League American Association.

HALL OF FAME STUFF

Derek Jeter. He played all 20 seasons with the Yankees. The record for longest one-team career is shared between... Carl Yastrzemski and Brooks Robinson each played 23 seasons with their respective teams.

Jeter, he was born in 1974. How many current members of the Hall of Fame were born later? Class of 2018 member Vladimir Guerrero was born in 1975. Roy Halladay, a 2019 inductee, was born in 1977.

Just 333 people have a spot in the Hall of Fame, and only 10 were shortstops who played for one team. Somewhat surprisingly, five did it in the free-agent era: Jeter; the Cincinnati Reds' [Barry Larkin](#); the Baltimore Orioles' [Cal Ripken Jr.](#); the Detroit Tigers' [Alan Trammell](#); and the Milwaukee Brewers' [Robin Yount](#), who played almost half of his career in the outfield.

Jeter, meanwhile, collected 3,465 hits for the Yankees, batted .310 and made 2,660 starts at shortstop, the most in baseball history.

Jeter was elected with 99.7 percent of the vote, the second-highest percentage ever. Only higher total was Mariano Rivera, the only player to ever be unanimously voted into the Hall of Fame. Nolan Ryan was at 98.8 percent, Ken Griffey Jr. at 99.3 and Babe Ruth — *the* Babe Ruth — only received 95.1 percent of the vote.

Yankees: 13 years straight post-season (1995-2007). Over the Yankees' 13-year streak, Jeter led the team in games (1,835), runs (1,379) and hits (2,356). The Yanks won four World Series during that streak, then added a fifth in 2009 -- one year after the streak ended.

Jeter had played 15 games with the Yankees when their streak began with a 1995 AL Wild Card berth; he won the AL Rookie of the Year Award as the Yanks' everyday shortstop in '96. Jeter's career is distinguished by the fact that the Yankees started winning World Series championships as soon as he became their everyday shortstop in his age-22 season.

Three players are tied for the smallest margin over the 75 percent threshold for induction, at 75.4. Al Simmons, Fergie Jenkins, and Ralph Kiner each received 75.4 percent of the vote.

Willie Mays is the oldest living hall of famer, born May 6, 1931.

Yankees have the most HOF members with 27.

Among the 39 hitters elected to the Hall of Fame on the first ballot, Ozzie Smith (28 career homers) hit the fewest home runs.

Ten HOFers died this year:

Hank Aaron

Lou Brock

Whitey Ford

Bob Gibson

Al Kaline

Tommy Lasorda

Joe Morgan

Phil Neikro

Tom Seaver

Don Sutton

More Larry Walker

Walker was often injured, playing in 150 or more games in just one of his 17 Major League seasons -- 153 in his 1997 NL MVP campaign. He didn't have the round-number milestones so hallowed in baseball -- 3,000 hits and 500 home runs are not on his resume. He collected 2,160 hits and belted 383 home runs.

Walker's fellow Hall of Fame inductee, [Yankees great Derek Jeter](#), was elected on his first ballot with 99.7 percent of the vote. Jeter put together a legendary career as the captain of a team that won five World Series championships on his watch. According to Baseball Reference, Jeter produced 71.3 WAR for his career.

Walker produced 72.7 WAR but did so in 759 fewer games than Jeter.

Walker was also a seven-time Gold Glove Award winner, won three batting titles over a four-year span from 1998-2001, and was the 1997 NL MVP in a season during which he had a higher OPS on the road (1.176) than in the thin air of Denver (1.169). He also stole 230 bases.

Walker played just 30 percent of his career games at Coors Field. Yes, he hit a ridiculous 1.172 OPS in Colorado. But only 10 other players who entered the Hall of Fame since 1945 have a better road OPS than Walker's career .865 mark. Ken Griffey Jr.'s career road OPS was .860.

While he experienced just one brief trip to the playoffs with the Rockies, Walker rallied in the spotlight after his trade from Colorado to St. Louis in 2004.

In the Cardinals' run to the World Series in 2004, Walker was nearly unstoppable. He hit a 1.086 OPS over 15 games, with 16 home runs, five other extra-base hits, 11 RBIs and 14 runs scored.

Among the [24 players](#) in the Hall of Fame we can consider primary right fielders, from Elmer Flick to Hank Aaron and Babe Ruth to Tony Gwynn, Walker compiled a defensive WAR, according to Baseball-Reference, that trailed only Roberto Clemente and Al Kaline. His base-running WAR and stolen-base success rate each ranked second only to Aaron. And his OPS was behind only Ruth.

He will almost surely be the final former Expos player to reach the Hall of Fame. [Bartolo Colon](#) pitched for 21 years in the majors, including one year in Montreal in 2002. And when he retired three years ago, Colon was the last of the ex-Expos. The Rockies' [Ian Desmond](#), who stopped playing after the 2019 season, was the lone player remaining from the Expos' final draft class in 2004.

Walker, though, will join a standout group of former Expos in the Hall. Gary Carter, Andre Dawson and Tim Lincecum each have Expos caps on their Hall plaques. But like Walker, [Vladimir Guerrero \(Angels\)](#), Randy Johnson ([Diamondbacks](#)) and Pedro Martínez ([Red Sox](#)) all count themselves as ex-Expos, among others.

CORBIN BURNS' AWESOME SEASON AND FIP

Milwaukee ace [Corbin Burnes](#) is having one of the most dominant pitching seasons on a per-inning basis in the last century of baseball but because he has thrown just 144 innings (the Brewers have been using a 6 man rotation) so he is very unlikely to win the National League Cy Young award.

Burnes is "having one of the most dominant pitching seasons on a per-inning basis in the last century of baseball," we're going to need to back that up.

There are, obviously, a million different metrics that all tell their own stories. For this, we're looking at Fielding Independent Pitching, or [FIP](#), which takes the things a pitcher has a great deal of control over (strikeouts, walks, home runs and hit by pitches) and puts them on an ERA scale. You might prefer ERA and that's fine; we're using FIP because it attempts to take the effects of good or poor defense, and good or poor batted ball luck, out of it. (Importantly, here, because there's [evidence Milwaukee's defense has not performed well behind Burnes](#).)

So let's go back to 1920 and look at the [8,735 different seasons where a pitcher has thrown 140 or more innings](#), sorted by lowest FIP, and ... oh, wow. There are a few pitching seasons that are just burned into your brain as "iconic years of greatness," and it's hard to do better in that department than "1999 Pedro" and "1968 Gibson," right?

Lowest FIP, 1920-2021, min 140 innings

1.39 -- Pedro Martinez, 1999
1.58 -- *Burnes, 2021*
1.69 -- Dwight Gooden, 1984
1.77 -- Bob Gibson, 1968
1.80 -- Clayton Kershaw, 2016
1.81 -- Kershaw, 2014
1.85 -- Sandy Koufax, 1963

Yes, there's an innings gap on that list. Martinez threw 213 1/3 innings in '99. Gibson threw 304 2/3 innings in '68.

Strikeouts: His 34.4% strikeout rate is [third best](#) this year, among those with 140 innings pitched.

Walks: His 4.9% walk rate is tied for [second best](#).

Home runs: His 0.31 HR/9 -- that's a mere five homers against 569 batters -- isn't just the best in 2021 [by a lot](#), it's the [third lowest of the 21st century](#).

Burnes has the [fifth lowest](#) hard-hit rate. He has the [lowest](#) barrel rate allowed.

In the seven-year history of Statcast, [Burnes's 2021](#) is the *best* season on record, combining quality of contact with strikeouts and walks.

Plus, to go back to the old-school for a second, Burnes' 2.38 ERA is the

Setting aside shortened seasons and relievers, no primary starting pitcher has [won the Cy](#) with fewer innings than Blake Snell's 180 2/3 in 2018, overcoming a 35-inning deficit behind [AL leaders](#) Corey Kluber and Justin Verlander. Snell's case was much more an old-school one, as he was fueled by the shiniest of the traditional stats (21 wins and a 1.89 ERA) to get there.

the game has certainly changed since Gibson and friends were piling up 300-inning seasons half a century ago; it's changed even since Snell's 2018. Wheeler will get to 200 innings, but he might be the only one who does; [there were](#) 13 just three years ago; there were 39 a decade ago; there were 108 back in Gibson's "Year of the Pitcher" 1968.

NL leaders, innings per start (min 140 innings)

6.7 -- Wheeler
6.5 -- Adam Wainwright
6.4 -- Buehler
6.1 -- Sandy Alcantara
6.0 -- *Burnes* (tied with Woodruff, Wade Miley)

Looking at it with pitches per start, Wheeler leads with 101, while Burnes is tied for 10th with 93. Are eight pitches per start enough to decide a Cy Young Award? The difference, then, comes down to the fact that Burnes has four fewer starts than Wheeler, easily explainable by the two-week COVID absence and Milwaukee's near-constant usage of a six-man rotation.

Put another way, Wheeler has tossed 15.6% of Philadelphia's innings, Buehler has thrown 14.3% of Los Angeles' and Burnes has thrown 11.6% of Milwaukee's. It's a difference, a meaningful one, probably enough to cost this year's most dominant pitcher the award.

Definition

FIP is similar to ERA, but it focuses solely on the events a pitcher has the most control over -- strikeouts, unintentional walks, hit-by-pitches and home runs. It entirely removes results on balls hit into the field of play.

For example: If a pitcher has surrendered a high average on balls in play, his FIP will likely be lower than his ERA. Balls in play are not part of the FIP equation because a pitcher is believed to have limited control over their outcome.

The formula

Where the "FIP constant" puts FIP onto the same scale as the entire league's ERA: $((HR \times 13) + (3 \times (BB + HBP)) - (2 \times K)) / IP + \text{FIP constant}$.

THIS WEEK IN WANDER FRANCO NEWS

[Wander Franco](#) extended his historic on-base streak to 35 games last Sunday, when the Rays' switch-hitting rookie shortstop skied a double to deep left-center field in the seventh inning of a [6-5 loss](#) to the Twins at Tropicana Field.

Franco's streak is the third longest by a player 20 years old or younger in American League/National League history, behind Hall of Famers Mickey Mantle (36 games, from 1951-52) and Frank Robinson (43 in 1956). If he reaches safely in his next game, he'll match Mantle for the longest on-base streak by a player under 21 in AL history.

Regardless of age, Franco's streak is the longest by a rookie shortstop since Hanley Ramirez reached in 36 straight games for the Marlins in 2006. It is also the longest active on-base streak in the Majors, the longest by a rookie in club history and the longest single-season streak by a Rays player since Johnny Damon reached in 39 consecutive games from May 3-June 14, 2011. It is the third-longest single-season on-base streak in team history overall, behind Damon in 2011 and Ben Grieve (37) from April 18-May 30, 2001.

Another one of Franco's impressive streaks ended Sunday afternoon, however. After going 41 consecutive plate appearances without a strikeout, he went down swinging against Twins starter Griffin Jax in the fifth inning. He immediately bounced back with a double in his next plate appearance and an infield single in the ninth.

Franco has struck out only three times in his last 85 plate appearances, however, and he hasn't gone a full game without reaching safely since taking an 0-for-5 against Cleveland on July 24 at Progressive Field.

Then on Monday rookie [Wander Franco](#) reached base in his 36th consecutive game Monday, tying baseball legend Mickey Mantle for the second-longest on-base streak by a player 20 years old or younger. Frank Robinson holds the MLB record at 43 games.

Franco, 20, reached base in his first at-bat of the game, hitting a triple off of Boston starter Chris Sale. He would go on to score the game's first run following a Nelson Cruz single.

Franco went 4-for-6 with three hits in Tampa Bay's 11-10 win over the Red Sox in 10 innings.

Even on a hitless night at Fenway Park, Rays shortstop [Wander Franco](#) managed to make history.

By drawing a walk in the seventh inning of the Rays' [12-7 win](#) over the Red Sox on Tuesday night, Franco extended his on-base streak to 37 games. The 20-year-old switch-hitter now owns the longest on-base streak in American League history by a player 20 years old or younger, breaking a tie with Mickey Mantle.

Franco was 0-for-3 entering the seventh inning of Tuesday's game, and finished 0-for-4, but he worked a walk against Red Sox right-hander Brad Peacock to surpass the 36-game on-base streak Mantle put together from Sept. 5, 1951-May 4, 1952.

After drawing a walk late in Wednesday's game, Franco pushed his streak to 39 on Friday with a first-inning single against the Tigers, but he left moments later with a hamstring injury that landed him on the 10 day IL

PETE ALONSO

Mets first baseman [Pete Alonso](#) belted his 100th career home run in his 347th Major League game Tuesday, becoming the second-fastest player in American League/National League history to reach 100 home runs. Former Phillies star Ryan Howard did it in 325 games.

Alonso is also just the eighth player in AL/NL history to hit 100 or more home runs within his first three seasons.

Alonso is the ninth Mets player to record multiple seasons of 30 or more home runs and the first to do so within his first three seasons. He hit an AL/NL rookie record 53 homers in 2019.

His home run total ranks 15th in club history. Carlos Delgado, with 104 homers, is next on the list.

MORE VLAD JR.

[Vladimir Guerrero Jr.](#) seems to make headlines with every swing of the bat in his breakout 2021 season, and that was certainly true on Monday, when the Blue Jays' 22-year-old star launched his 40th home run of the season in [Toronto's 8-0 win](#) at Yankee Stadium.

Not only did Guerrero become the youngest Blue Jays hitter to reach 40 homers and one of just 10 in franchise history, but he and his father are now one of just two father-son duos to hit 40 home runs, joining Prince Fielder and Cecil Fielder.

Vlad Sr. hit 42 home runs when he was 24 with the Montreal Expos and reached the 40-homer plateau once more the next season, totaling 449 in his Hall of Fame career. Vlad Jr. has a long way to go to reach that mark, but he is now third in the Majors in home runs this season behind Salvador Perez (41) and Shohei Ohtani (43).

Cecil Fielder reached the 40-homer mark twice in his career, first in 1990 when he clubbed 51, then again the next year when he hit 44. Both totals led the Majors and came during Fielder's seven-year run with the Tigers. He also hit 39 in 1996, which he split between Detroit and the Yankees. Prince Fielder reached the mark twice with the Brewers; he led the NL with 50 homers in 2007, then socked 46 in 2009.

Bobby and Barry Bonds came just short of joining the club. Barry, the all-time home run king, hit at least 40 homers in eight of his 22 seasons. His father, who amassed 332 dingers in his memorable 14-year career, came so close when he hit 39 with the Giants in 1973. He came close again in 1977 when he went deep 37 times.

Similarly, Ken Griffey Jr. hit at least 40 homers seven times in his Hall of Fame career, but his father, Ken Griffey Sr., wasn't as much of a power threat, topping out at 21 in 1986, which he split between the Yankees and Braves.

DIRTY SANCHEZ

Gary Sánchez wasn't to blame in a Yankee loss last week against Baltimore. The 28-year-old catcher smacked his third career grand slam in the second inning, then added a two-run homer in the sixth to almost singlehandedly carry New York's offense.

But not even his six RBIs and 15th career multi-homer game could carry the day.

Sánchez's six-RBI showing tied his career high, which also came against Baltimore on Apr. 7, 2019. It also made him just the fourth Yankee in franchise history to [record at least six RBIs](#) out of the No. 9 spot in the order since the stat became official in 1920; he joined Spud Chandler (July 26, 1940) with six and is behind only Joe Girardi (Aug. 23, 1999) and Vic Raschi (Aug. 4, 1953), who each had seven.

SCHERZER CONTINUES TO ROLL

Matt Scherzer has been a machine since joining a Dodgers rotation that had been decimated by injuries. He has allowed only five earned runs in his first seven starts, the second of which was shortened by inclement weather. Across 43 innings, he has struck out 63 and has a 1.05 ERA. The Dodgers are 7-0 in those starts and Scherzer, after Monday's 13-strikeout performance, has again thrust himself into the NL Cy Young Award race.

Scherzer is one of 10 pitchers in MLB history to win at least three Cy Young awards. Among active pitchers, he ranks fourth in career WAR (65.7), WHIP (1.085) and innings pitched (2,511 1/3). His 3.15 career ERA and 394 starts ranks fifth. He has been named to eight consecutive All-Star games since 2013 and started four times (the most among active pitchers).

This weekend, Scherzer could join the exclusive club of pitchers with 3,000 strikeouts.

[9 HIGHLIGHTS MAX SCHERZER \(FROM A FREE SITE WORTH CHECKIGN OUT—BASEBALLEGG.COM\)](#)

He stands out among the elite pitchers of his era: Clayton Kershaw, the masterful lefty with the herky-jerky delivery; the powerful, model-marrying Justin Verlander and his stoic game face; Zack Greinke, the quirky, enigmatic pitching savant.

Kershaw is the descendent of Sandy Koufax, and Verlander is the modern embodiment of Nolan Ryan, and Greinke has the characteristics of the Great Thinker of the Mound, Greg Maddux. But Scherzer, to whom do we compare? Maybe Bob Gibson, the snarling flamethrower who once pitched an inning with a broken leg.

1 Grew up in Missouri a huge Cardinal fan. Went to University of Missouri, was that school's first ever 1st round pick when Diamondbacks took him 11th in 2006.

2 On April 29, 2008, Max Scherzer made his MLB debut against the Astros when he came on in relief and threw 4 1/3 perfect innings while striking out seven. In his appearance, Max set an MLB record for the most consecutive batters retired for a pitcher making his MLB debut as a reliever, with 13.

It remains one of only nine regular season relief appearances Scherzer has made in his major league career as of 2021.

As the 2013 season got underway, Scherzer was known as “the other pitcher” on the Detroit Tigers. Teammate Justin Verlander was a Cy Young and MVP winner and author of two no-hitters. At that time, JV was the unquestioned best pitcher in the game.

3 But starting with his first start in April, Scherzer made it his mission to get recognition. In the first month of the season, Scherzer went 3-0 in five starts. The following month he improved to 7-0, and in June he won all five of his starts, allowing just nine runs. He entered the All-Star Game 13-0, having started 19 consecutive games without suffering a defeat. He lost his first start of the second half, but proceeded to reel off six straight wins to push his mark to 19-1. By that time, the Cy Young race was over.

Scherzer finished the 2013 season with 21 wins and a league-best .875 winning percentage. He not only won his first Cy Young, he also finished 12th in MVP voting, helping the Tigers to a third straight division title

4 After his amazing 2013 regular season, Scherzer stepped on the gas in the playoffs. In his Game One start in the ALDS against Oakland, he struck out 11 batters to win the opener for Detroit. Four days later he answered the call out of the bullpen and pitched gutsy innings of relief to get the win and force a Game Five. In the next series against Boston, Max was even more lethal.

In Game Two of the 2013 AL Championship Series, Scherzer mowed down the vaunted Red Sox lineup, striking out eight of the first twelve batters he faced. As he entered the sixth, Scherzer had yet to allow a hit. That inning he surrendered a pair of hits, but he finished with 13 K's in seven innings, a new record by a Detroit pitcher in a post-season game.

5 What do you get for \$210 million? Try a pair of no-hitters in the first year.

The Nationals inked Scherzer to a seven-year deal worth \$30 million per season in January of 2015, plucking the free agent from the market and nabbing him as their ace. He paid immediate dividends.

In just his 14th start for Washington, on June 20, Scherzer tossed a no-hitter against the Pirates at National Park, nearly getting a perfect game. He set down the first 26 batters before a slider got away and hit the 27th batter. But Max only needed three more pitches to complete his no-hitter.

less than four months later, on the final day of the regular season, Scherzer mowed down the Mets in New York for a second no-hitter. In that game, he struck out 17 batters and was even more overpowering.

6 On May 11, 2016 against his former team Detroit, Scherzer added to his legend when he tied the nine-inning single-game strikeout record with 20. In the contest, Scherzer struck out five different Tigers batters three times each, including All-Stars Ian Kinsler, J.D. Martinez, and Miguel Cabrera.

In this same game (which was his first back in Detroit against his former teammates), Scherzer became the youngest pitcher (at age 30) to defeat every other team in baseball.

7 Despite critics predicting an arm blowout because of his violent delivery, Scherzer has been remarkably durable. From his last start in May of 2010 through the middle of the 2019 season, the righty made 298 consecutive starts without missing a turn in the rotation. He also made 13 starts in the postseason during that stretch.

There have been many great strikeout pitchers in baseball history: Cy Young, Walter Johnson, Bob Feller, Sandy Koufax, Nolan Ryan, Roger Clemens, Randy Johnson to name a few of the all-time greats.

8 But Scherzer stands alone as the only pitcher to have as many as six straight seasons with 230 or more strikeouts. In fact, Scherzer is the only pitcher to do it in seven seasons or eight seasons. From 2012 to 2019, he recorded at least 230 K's every year. His streak was only halted in 2020 due to the shortened pandemic season.

Scherzer is one of only five pitchers to strikeout 250+ batters in as many as five seasons (through 2020). The others are Randy Johnson (with nine seasons) Nolan Ryan (eight), Justin Verlander (five), and Roger Clemens (also five).

Only Scherzer, Nolan Ryan, and Randy Johnson have struck out 250+ batters in four consecutive seasons.

9 In 2017, Scherzer won his third Cy Young Award, his second in a row for the Nationals. The following year he finished runner-up to Jacob deGrom of the Mets. Then, in 2019, Max finished third when he averaged 12.7 K's per nine innings, a career best.

Scherzer finished in the top five in Cy Young Award voting for seven consecutive seasons from 2013 through 2019. He became just the third pitcher in history to accomplish that. The other two? Greg Maddux and Clayton Kershaw. All three won three Cy Youngs during their streaks, and had at least one runner-up finish (Kershaw had two second place finishes).

WILD 2021 STATS FROM MLB.COM

.608, .335

Well, of course we had to start with the most bonkers baseballer of this, or any, season. We could fill up this entire piece with awesome [Shohei Ohtani](#) statistics. The Angels' ace and DH has had an unfathomable year -- arguably the most impressive individual season in the history of the sport (yes, we said it).

But enough hyperventilating. Let's let these two numbers do the talking. The first number is Ohtani's slugging percentage as a hitter. The second is his opponents' slugging percentage when he's a pitcher.

What this means is that Ohtani could give up a home run to the next 32 batters he faces, and his opponents' SLG would *still* be two points lower than his own.

.417

This is White Sox catcher [Yasmani Grandal](#)'s on-base percentage. OK, that's good. But what makes it so special?

Well, Grandal's batting average is just .230. Per Baseball-Reference, there have only been three players in history to log at least 200 plate appearances with an OBP of at least .410 and a batting average of .240 or below: Wally Schang (1929 St. Louis Browns), Eddie Yost (1956 Washington Senators) and Gene Tenace (1977 Padres).

With 69 walks and 49 hits, Grandal is on pace to become just the 10th player in history with more than 60 walks and fewer than 60 hits. The most recent was Jay Buhner (69 walks, 59 hits) with the 1999 Mariners

20

... is the number of hit batsmen for Padres pitcher [Austin Adams](#). Yes, the hit-by-pitch rate across MLB has been climbing consistently over the past decade. But Adams leads the Majors in this category by five HBPs.

In the modern era, dating back to 1901, there have been 34 times in which a pitcher plunked at least 20 batters in a season, most recently when the Cubs' Kerry Wood hit 21 batters in 2003. So while Adams' total is unusual, it's not exactly unprecedented ... except that ... wait a minute ... Adams is a reliever! He's done this in only 46 2/3 innings of work!

None of the other pitchers who hit 20 batters had fewer than 178 2/3 innings pitched. We regret to inform you Adams won't be breaking Chick Fraser's record of 32 hit batsmen with the 1901 Philadelphia Athletics. But he still has a shot at the post-Deadball era of 23 hit batsmen, set by Howard Ehmke of the 1922 Tigers.

0

... is the times Dodgers (and former Nationals) pitcher [Max Scherzer](#) has reached base in 53 plate appearances. He's already broken Wei-Yin Chen's record of 49 plate appearances [without reaching base](#) by hit, walk or hit-by-pitch, which was set in 2016 with the Marlins.

But fear not. Scherzer will not have enough plate appearances to touch right-hander Bob Buhl's all-time record for most at-bats without a hit -- set when Buhl went 0-for-70 for the Cubs and Milwaukee Braves in 1962 (Buhl reached base seven times via walk and hit-by-pitch, hence the distinction from Chen).

That said, given the strong possibility that the NL adopts the designated hitter next season, the mark Scherzer has set might instantly become unbreakable. (He's still a pretty good pitcher, though.)

1.327

Remember that "Slam Diego" storyline built off the Padres' unprecedented success with the bases loaded last season? Well, this is the opposite of that.

This is the Twins' *opponent* OPS with the bases loaded. Yes, this would be a new record, surpassing the mark set by the 2015 Tigers (1.215). But what makes this even more incredible is that the 2020 Twins pitching staff had a .404 opponent OPS with the bases loaded -- the fifth-best mark all-time (albeit in a shortened season).

At least the Twins have company, because the Nationals' pitching staff (1.099 through Wednesday) is on pace to set the all-time NL mark.

8

The [no-hitter](#) count. You already know this one, but that doesn't make it any less bonkers.

Thank you to Joe Musgrove, Carlos Rodón, John Means, Wade Miley, Spencer Turnbull, Corey Kluber, Zach Davies/Ryan Tepera/Andrew Chafin/Craig Kimbrel and Tyler Gilbert for matching

the single-season no-no record set in 1884. What's more, we've had two no-hitters in a seven-inning game ([Madison Bumgarner](#) and a [five-pitcher effort](#) by the Rays) and two no-hitters broken up in the ninth inning (Germán Márquez and Patrick Sandoval).

The Mariners, Rangers and Indians were each no-hit twice (no team has ever been no-hit three times in a season).

42

Home runs for [Salvador Perez](#). That makes him just the sixth catcher in history with a 40-homer season and the first since the Braves' Javy Lopez hit 43 in 2003. Perez still has a real shot at Hall of Famer Johnny Bench's single-season record for a catcher (45), set in 1970.

All of that is pretty amazing, but what makes it doubly so is that Perez, who is 31 years old and has caught more than 8,600 innings in the big leagues, had never hit more than 27 homers in a season. Lopez and Roy Campanella (1953) are the only other catchers with a 40-homer season at age 31 or older, and both of them had at least one other 30-homer season in their career.

.350

We've long known the Rockies are a different ballclub at Coors Field. But this is ridiculous. This is the differential between Colorado's 2021 home winning percentage (.625) and road winning percentage (.275). That's an expanse as wide as the Rocky Mountains. And depending on how these last few weeks go, it could be historic.

Currently, the largest full-season differential between home and road winning percentages in the modern era is held by Connie Mack's Philadelphia A's in 1945, when they went 39-35 at Shibe Park (.527) and 13-63 elsewhere (.171) -- a differential of .356.

2

We're trying to focus this piece on season-long trends, not snapshots from certain segments of the season. But this was so unusual, we just had to point it out. This was the number of teams that had a road losing streak of 20 games or more this season. The D-backs set an MLB record with [24 straight road losses](#) -- a streak finally snapped on June 26. Perhaps they were inspired by the Orioles, who just one night earlier had snapped a [20-game road losing streak](#) of their own (before eventually embarking on a streak in which they lost 19 straight overall).

According to Elias, this marked the first time since 1894 that two teams had road losing streaks of 20 games or more. That year, the Louisville Colonels lost 20 in a row and the Washington Senators lost 21 in a row.

But just to make this all even crazier, there's still a chance that neither of these clubs winds up with the worst road record in baseball this season. Entering Thursday, the bottom five in road winning percentage were the D-backs (.246), the aforementioned Rox (.265), the Pirates (.282),

the Rangers (.282) and the Marlins (.309). Yes, the Orioles lost 20 in a row on the road yet still have “only” the sixth-worst road winning percentage (.333).

30

Blown saves by the Phillies. While this number is large, it is not yet truly bonkers. It's the ninth-most all-time.

Remember, though: We've got some games left. Despite dramatically reshaping a bullpen that last year posted the highest ERA in 90 years, the Phillies stand a real chance of climbing into this top eight:

Most blown saves in a season

1. 2004 Rockies, 34
2. 2002 Rangers, 33
3. (tie) 1973 Braves, 32
- 1996 White Sox, 32
5. (tie) 2006 Royals, 31
- 2008 Mariners, 31
- 1998 Cardinals, 31
- 2008 Cardinals, 31

That the Phillies are still in postseason contention in spite of all the blown saves is oddly impressive. Then again, if they do wind up on the above list, chances are they won't have any chances to convert or blow saves in October.

44

... is the number of steals for [Starling Marte](#). A nice total, though not bonkers. What's bonkers is how he's divvied up the thefts evenly between the NL and AL.

Marte had 22 steals for the Marlins before he was dealt to the A's in July. He's swiped 22 bags since. That puts Marte in the top 10 in each league in stolen bases -- a feat no player has accomplished. Actually, Marte could wind up finishing in the top five in each league. He's fifth in the AL in steals, and his NL total is still fourth ... even though his last steal for Miami was more than six weeks ago!

NOT SO FAST

The New York Yankees will have to defend their shedding of a local minor league team as part of the restructuring of Minor League Baseball after a state judge ruled Thursday that there was enough evidence to consider whether the Bronx Bombers breached a contract with their affiliate.

Nostalgic Partners, owners of the Staten Island Yankees, formerly of the NY-Penn League, sued the Yankees and MLB in December after the Bronx team dumped its affiliation as part of the 2020 reduction in the number of MiLB teams from 160 to 120. The Yankees argued that their agreement with the SI Yanks lapsed with the old MiLB agreement, and that they were within their rights to sever the affiliation.

But NY State Judge Barry Ostrager wrote of the 2011 sale of the team by the Yankees to Nostalgic, “the Court cannot ignore the various representations made by the NY Yankees in the Offering Memorandum on which Nostalgic claims to have relied when deciding to purchase the SI Yankees (for \$8.35 million). Those representations included the benefits of being affiliated with MiLB as a member club, the benefits of being affiliated with the NYPenn League, and the promise of continued marketing assistance by the NY Yankees that was confirmed in the 2011 Letter Agreement Amendment.”

For more than 100 years, MLB and minor league baseball were organized under the umbrella of the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues: MLB and MiLB, separate entities. The relationship between MLB and MiLB was governed by the Professional Baseball Agreement (PBA), which outlined the terms of the parties’ relationship: the MiLB teams helped to develop talent for their MLB affiliates and also paid MLB 8 percent of their ticket sales. Effectively, MLB has now assumed control of MiLB, and in doing so reduced the number of teams by 25 percent and ended the PBA.

A LOOK BACK AT THE 28 ULTIMATE (WALK-OFF) GRANDSLAMS

(from famous guys to nobodies)

Daniel Vogelbach, Brewers: Sept. 5, 2021, vs. Cardinals

"Vogey" became the first Brewers hitter to join this list, and even better, he did so against the archrival Cardinals. Vogelbach hit the Brewers' first walk-off grand slam of any kind since Ryan Braun clubbed one in 2008 and get this -- Vogelbach's [came on Ryan Braun Bobblehead Day](#) at American Family Field.

[David Bote](#), Cubs: Aug. 12, 2018, vs. Nationals

In a rematch of their postseason series the October prior, the Cubs couldn't muster anything against Max Scherzer, putting just five runners on base over the first eight innings. Bote, a utility infielder whose role has increased with the left shoulder injury to superstar Kris Bryant, worked into a 2-2 count against Nats reliever [Ryan Madson](#), then lifted a well-placed 95-mph four-seamer in the bottom of the zone 442 feet to straightaway center, keeping the Cubs in first place. Bote is one of just three on this list who did the ultimate as a pinch-hitter and with two outs.

Steve Pearce, Blue Jays: July 30, 2017, vs. Angels

Down six entering the ninth, Toronto appeared to be toast. But against the Angels' bullpen,

each of the Blue Jays' eight batters that frame reached base, capped by Pearce, who skied a 364-foot shot narrowly over the left-field wall at Rogers Centre. It was all the more impressive given that Pearce had hit a walk-off grand slam three days prior against the A's (though that one came with the game tied).

[Rajai Davis](#), Tigers: June 30, 2014, vs. A's

Days before he was selected to his first All-Star Game, [Sean Doolittle](#) was spoiled with a blown save by the first-place Tigers and Davis, who laced a liner to left with one out after [Nicholas Castellanos](#), Alex Avila and [Austin Jackson](#) reached to load the bases.

[Ryan Roberts](#), D-backs: Sept. 27, 2011, vs. Dodgers

Just before the D-backs were on their way to their first postseason appearance in four years, Roberts lasered a first-pitch fastball off then-Dodgers reliever Javy Guerra with two outs in the 10th inning, becoming just one of three players to do the ultimate in extras.

[Brian Bogusevic](#), Astros: Aug. 16, 2011, vs. Cubs

Bogusevic, a converted outfielder whom Houston drafted as a pitcher, hit just 19 homers over his five-year career, but none was more dramatic than his walk-off slam against Cubs reliever Carlos Marmol. It marked the Astros' lone walk-off homer in 2011.

Travis Hafner, Indians: July 7, 2011, vs. Blue Jays

Hafner hit a moonshot into the right-field stands that sent Indians fans into a frenzy, helping Cleveland maintain a 1 1/2-game lead over Detroit in the American League Central standings.

[Brooks Conrad](#), Braves: May 20, 2010, vs. Reds

Conrad's opposite-field shot off Cincinnati's Francisco Cordero could have gone either way; the ball bounced off Laynce Nix's glove and into the left-field stands for a dramatic walk-off at Turner Field. Conrad stood at first base for a moment, unsure whether the ball was caught or gone. Once it was confirmed, Conrad -- so jubilated after capping a seven-run, ninth-inning comeback for the Braves -- sprinted around the bases to a mob at the plate.

Adam Dunn, Reds: June 30, 2006, vs. Indians

Dunn hit 12 career grand slams, but his bases-loaded deep fly on a steamy summer night in Cincinnati in '06 might top them all. Dunn demolished a two-out shot to the right-field bullpen in front of a packed house of 34,930 at Great American Ball Park. It was Dunn's second walk-off homer of that season for the Reds.

Jason Giambi, Yankees: May 17, 2002, vs. Twins

In his first season with the Yankees, Giambi was on a tear, and in a game that went into the wee hours, he came up huge. In the top of the 14th, the Twins broke a tie by plating three against Sterling Hitchcock, putting major doubt into the Yanks' hopes. But against Mike Trombley, Shane Spencer and Derek Jeter each singled and Bernie Williams walked to position Giambi to crush his ninth homer of the year.

Brian Giles, Pirates: July 28, 2001, vs. Astros

The first Pirates grand slam in PNC Park history was one for the ages. Entering the ninth ahead by six, the Astros were forced to turn to All-Star closer Billy Wagner to escape a win that appeared to be foregone. But Wagner hit the first batter he faced, positioning Giles to connect on 1-0 fastball high and in that he lasered out to right.

Chris Hoiles, Orioles: May 17, 1996, vs. Mariners

If the feats included here weren't already rare enough, consider that Hoiles hit his ultimate grand slam in a full count, which likely worked in his favor with the runners going and all the pressure on Mariners reliever Norm Charlton.

Alan Trammell, Tigers: June 21, 1988, vs. Yankees

In one of the many highlights of the Hall of Famer, Trammell rocketed a tap-measure shot into the second deck at Tiger Stadium in what was one of just five grand slams for the 20-year veteran.

Dick Schofield, Angels: Aug. 29, 1986, vs. Tigers

Facing three-time All-Star Willie Hernandez and his wipeout screwball, Schofield said he paced his way to the plate looking to just make contact. He wound up running into one low in the zone that kept carrying into the left-field bleachers.

Phil Bradley, Mariners: April 13, 1985, vs. Twins

In just the fifth game of the '85 season, Bradley -- who went on to earn his only All-Star bid that year -- helped the Mariners to a walk-off win with the second of what would be a career-high 26 deep flies.

Buddy Bell, Rangers: Aug. 31, 1984, vs. Brewers

Bell contributed to one of a career-high seven blown saves in '84 by Brewers pitcher Pete Ladd, who entered the ninth inning that day as Milwaukee's second reliever. After the Rangers loaded the bases with no outs, Mickey Rivers and Gary Ward struck out and flied out, putting Bell in position to bail Texas out.

Bo Diaz, Phillies: April 13, 1983, vs. Mets

In a season that culminated with a National League pennant, the Phillies started the season with one of their most monumental wins early, when the veteran catcher Diaz went deep just after teammate Bill Robinson drew a bases-loaded walk, clearing him for the chance to hit an ultimate slam.

Roger Freed, Cardinals: May 1, 1979, vs. Astros

Freed went on to hang up his cleats in '79, logging just 29 more plate appearances after his ultimate slam on May 1, which he said was "the biggest, most pleasing experience anyone could have in a lifetime. Something like this really makes me feel like a part of the ballclub -- like I'm an asset to the team. You get to feeling like dead weight when you're not contributing in some way."

Ron Lolich, Indians: April 22, 1973, vs. Red Sox

Lolich's big league career didn't last long, parts of just three seasons, and he wasn't necessarily known for his power over his accomplished Minor League career. Lolich, who had entered the game in the seventh as a pinch-hitter, had just four homers in the Majors, but none more dramatic than the one that afternoon at Cleveland Stadium.

Carl Taylor, Cardinals: Aug. 11, 1970, vs. Padres

Taylor narrowly cleared the left-field wall with his 10th and final big league homer, and it came against the pitcher (Padres reliever Ron Herbel), against whome he hit his first career homer. Taylor told The Associated Press after: "It's got to be the biggest thrill I've ever had, because this one won the ballgame. Heck, it's my first grand slam ever, even in Little League."

Tony Taylor, Phillies: Aug. 2, 1970, vs. Giants

A fan favorite in Philly, Taylor might've been one of the more unlikely hitters to join this list, as he was never a power threat. But he remains the only Phillie to hit an ultimate slam, and he did so in the club's final season at Connie Mack Stadium.

Ellis Burton, Cubs: Aug. 31, 1963, vs. Astros

Burton hit just 17 homers during his five seasons, and his ultimate slam came during his best, when he hit 13. Burton's was the only ultimate slam at historic Wrigley Field until Bote's memorable shot.

Danny Kravitz, Pirates: May 11, 1956, vs. Phillies

Playing in his 10th career game to that point, the rookie catcher Kravitz, who had only entered as a pinch-hitter earlier, enjoyed perhaps his most memorable moment when lifting the Pirates to a comeback win over the Phillies that day. Kravitz went on to be Pittsburgh's reserve catcher for parts of five seasons. His ultimate grand slam was also his first career home run.

Del Crandall, Braves: Sept. 11, 1955, vs. Phillies

Crandall was the first on this list to set the urgency bar with two outs. In the second game of a doubleheader, Crandall's Braves trailed, 5-0, entering the ninth after taking Game 1, and proved to be determined to complete the same-day sweep.

Bobby Thomson, Giants: June 15, 1952, vs. Cardinals

Months removed from his historic 'Shot Heard Round The World' homer during the Giants' 1951 World Series title run, Thomson delivered more magic at the Polo Grounds.

Jack Phillips, Pirates: July 8, 1950, vs. Cardinals

As one of just seven on this list to hit an ultimate slam as a pinch-hitter, Phillips entered the game with three career homers to his name, and made the fourth count in a huge way, taking Harry Brecheen deep to left-center. Phillips was then included in the starting lineup the following day and homered again.

Samuel Byrd, Reds: May 23, 1936, vs. Pirates

Byrd hit two home runs in 59 games for the Reds in '36, but his pinch-hit, walk-off grand slam against the Pirates' Cy Blanton with Cincinnati trailing, 3-0, in the bottom of the ninth inning

was the most famous of the 38 he hit over an eight-year Major League career. Until Bote's slam on Sunday night, this had been the last instance of a walk-off grand slam with a team trailing by a 3-0 score. Byrd pinch-hit for reliever Don Brennan, and drove a Blanton offering over the left-field wall to lift the Reds to victory.

Babe Ruth, Yankees: Sept. 24, 1925, vs. White Sox

It's fitting in a way that the Great Bambino paced this list with the first ever, in extra innings and in old Yankee Stadium, where this shot is the only one on this list. Of course, at the time of Ruth's heroics that day, there was no formal moniker for the feat.

“WE DIDN’T LOSE. AND THE PLAYERS DIDN’T BREAK”: HOW MARVIN MILLER SHAPED BASEBALL AND INFLUENCES THE LABOR MOVEMENT.

BABE RUTH, JACKIE ROBINSON AND MARVIN MILLER

Don Fehr is undecided on Marvin Miller’s finest moment leading the [Major League Baseball](#) Players Association. Fehr, now 73 and the leader of the [National Hockey League](#)’s player union, first met Miller in October of 1975, when Fehr was brought in to work on a case known as Messersmith-McNally. That case led to one of the most important changes in the sport’s history: free agency.

But at virtually every step, Miller’s tenure was momentous. From the time the union was formed under his guidance in 1966 until his exit a decade and a half later, the players were climbing, up and up and up. Miller was well versed in negotiations of a national scale from his time at the steelworkers’ union, and in baseball, he found fertile ground. Any gain would be significant where there had been none before, and the owners didn’t have nearly enough smarts to keep up.

But the end of Miller’s tenure in baseball may actually have brought the culmination of his work, or at least, the greatest test of it. By 1981, he and the players had already won free agency. What they had to do now, and continuously afterward, was protect it. Forty years ago this summer, baseball players went on a strike that Miller himself called the most principled he’d ever taken part of, inclusive to the years he spent with the steelworkers.

“I don’t know what his finest moment is. I go back and forth,” Fehr said. “If you ask me a slightly different question — was the effort the players successfully made in 1981, A, extraordinary? The answer is yes. B, did it cement the place of the union going forward? The answer is yes. C, did it give the players an enormous sense of self-confidence and satisfaction that they were able to do what needed to be done in order to preserve the gains that had been made in free agency? Also yes.”

Play stopped for 50 days of the '81 season before the owners backed down. It was yet another victory for the players in Miller's penultimate year of formally leading the union. By the time of his exit in 1982, his success was so thorough that, today, he has grown into myth.

"There's only been three people in the history of the game to change the game," said Brooks Robinson, the legendary third baseman. "And that was Babe Ruth, Jackie Robinson and Marvin Miller."

Yet, when Miller died in 2012, the Hall of Fame left him out in the cold. That was hardly an accident. Miller was a thorn in management's side, and the Hall would not let him forget it. At last, on Wednesday, the Hall is correcting its error, enshrining him.

"Marvin got passed over several times and he just decided, well, it's not going to happen, to hell with it, and said, 'I don't want to be in,'" said Robinson, who worked closely with Miller as a player representative to the union. "Well, I'm happy it happened, and I'm happy some of his family going to be there to represent him."

Unquestionably, Miller founded the most powerful union in all of sports. On Labor Day, it is worth noting, too, that the MLBPA is also sometimes [referred to as the most powerful union anywhere](#).

"Marvin is a major labor history figure in the mid- to latter-part of the 20th century," said Lauren Rich, a lawyer who arrived at the MLBPA shortly after Miller left, and who later worked for the National Labor Relations Board. "And I think when they write labor history, he will be regarded as a major figure post-industrial unions."

From that lens, 1981 was a particularly important year.

"Why was there such a push almost 40 years after he retired to put him into the Hall of Fame? Continually, year after year after year? Why was that? What was there about him which transcended the norm?" Fehr said. "Now, there's a lot of things about the Hall of Fame induction and why it took so long, and whether the owners were punishing him and how inappropriate it was, that I'm not going to go into."

"But I will say two things. First, by the time we got to the late '70s, there was very little coverage of labor unions. It wasn't like the '50s. It wasn't like the '40s. But if you're a sports labor union, you're in the newspaper every time something happens. Every single time. And all the sportswriters are writing about you. Good, bad or indifferent. So there was an enormous amount of coverage. And Marvin was very skilled at dealing with the media."

"Second thing was, in the summer of '81, there were two major labor disputes. The first one was, President Reagan broke the air traffic controllers. And that, in my mind, and I think Marvin's, was a signal to corporate America that it's now OK to go beat up on unions. And that was something that went on for decades. You can argue it's still going on."

“The other major strike was ours. We didn’t lose. And the players didn’t break. And they were unified. And so what happened is, the union became, if you will, a bit of a symbol. And Marvin was the face of the symbol. And I think that symbolism was justified, and I think him being the face of it was justified.”

Inside the sport, Miller’s major victories are well known. But, with the passage of time, what might not be discussed as often is how he achieved that success.

He started with low tones. Miller was “a very quiet gentleman,” as Robinson put it. Rich, a native New Yorker herself, marveled that Miller could grow up in Brooklyn and yet be so soft-spoken.

“But also tough and authoritative at the same time,” said Rich, a labor lawyer for 35 years. “He commanded attention and never raised his voice, but there was authority in how he spoke. Authority and clarity that I don’t know that I’ve ever in my career — and I’ve worked in different organizations in my career — ever heard anybody quite like that.”

In the nearly four decades Fehr knew Miller, he never once heard Miller raise his voice. He could show displeasure, or frustration. “But he was never angry,” Fehr said. “Talking to players, he was so soft-spoken they would strain to hear him. It was remarkable to watch. They would physically move.”

In 1978, Sports Illustrated reporter Melissa Ludtke sued Major League Baseball to have access to the locker room. The commissioner’s office would not permit her entry because she was a woman. Miller and Fehr, who had become the MLBPA’s general counsel the year prior, were at a hearing for an unrelated matter in Philadelphia. So, too, were the top representatives for the league, Ray Grebey and Bary Rona. The four of them sat around a table.

“Marvin, we got a major problem,” Grebey said.

“What’s that?”

“Well, there’s this lawsuit filed, and we think it’s entirely inappropriate to have women in the locker rooms where players are undressed,” Grebey said. “And you know, it would go against all the mores of the country, and we want you to sign an affidavit that would allow us to go to court and get an injunction preventing her from coming into the locker room.”

The affidavit was already prepared.

“Now, Marvin could have said, ‘Are you a fucking idiot?’” Fehr said. “He could have said, ‘This is the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.’ He could have laughed out loud. He could have done any of those things. He didn’t.”

Miller instead listened to Grebey, and slowly signaled his disapproval. Players, Miller noted, would prefer that no one was in the locker room while dressing, so perhaps the solution would be to set up an interview room outside of it? Grebey was upset by that suggestion, saying it would destroy press access to players.

“Oh,” said Miller, who knew full well what the reaction would be.

Miller then turned to Fehr and suggested that Fehr ask his wife Stephanie whether she felt keeping women out of the locker room would be a good idea. Miller said he also would reach out to his wife, Terry, too, and then they would get back to Grebey.

“I can hardly keep a fucking straight face,” Fehr said. “Marvin kept a complete straight face. ... And Ray said something like, ‘There’s a court hearing.’ Marvin looked at him and said, ‘Yeah, I understand.’ Whole conversation took eight or nine minutes, was never a raised voice. Was never laughter. There was never contempt. Yet, I think the point got across.”

But the most fundamental skill Miller had may have been that of a teacher. Miller always told the truth, Fehr said, which created trust in his listeners. He also excelled at distilling complex topics, which labor law is full of.

Rich arrived in the 1980s, once Fehr had taken over as the MLBPA’s director, so she only saw Miller in action on a few occasions. At important junctures, Miller would speak to players, and he continued to advise Fehr and the other staff. Even in these limited engagements, Rich was struck.

“What I thought was his amazing talent,” Rich said, “was how he could explain — not simplistically, but clearly — what the complexity was involved in a particular issue that we were engaged in with the clubs. And the players were rapt. You hear that commercial, ‘When E.F. Hutton speaks...’ That’s how players paid attention to him.”

Fehr used Miller’s choices in explaining free agency to players as an example.

“What you do, with baseball players back then,” Fehr said, “is essentially say: ‘Look. I was working for the steelworkers. You guys came to me while I was working for the steelworkers, and said, would you like to work for the players?’

“‘I could have quit the steelworkers and gone to look for a job. I could have looked for a job elsewhere while I was working for them and not tell them. And why would I do that? I would do that to try and get a better deal. Now, everyone in the U.S. economy, with the exception of professional athletes and people in the military, can do that. Everyone. Everyone takes it for granted. So in sports, we have to create a special term called free agency. Which is the concept that you can go look for a job and accept an offer if someone wants to make you one.’

“And the ability to distill the concept down, to something which was both completely explanatory and completely true, but completely avoided jargon, resonated with the players.”

Robinson retired after the 1977 season, just as free agency was beginning. He would never cash in the way his successors did, making a peak salary of \$127,000. Yet, he believed in the players’ cause, and in Miller.

“He was very convincing,” Robinson said. “I went to several meetings with player representatives, and what he presented sounded like the real deal. Players don’t pay much attention to what’s going on, even when Marvin got on board. I mean, it takes a lot of convincing to get everyone thinking in the right direction.

“There’s so many of us that felt like, ‘Hey, we’re getting the short end of this stick. The [Orioles](#) owners are making a lot more money and not sharing it with us.’ And that’s kind of what he told us.”

The owners would demonize Miller sometimes as a communist, with at least [an instance](#) or two of antisemitic sentiment sprinkled in. His success was dependent on upsetting the apple cart, a status quo that had gratuitously served the interest of one side, the clubs’ owners.

“The owners didn’t want to hear any part of it,” Robinson said.

When Miller began working with the players in 1966, the union consisted of just a filing cabinet and four or five thousand dollars, Fehr said.

“He had a very long, successful union background at a period of time in which unions were, as a general rule, much more prominent and respected than anybody in today’s generation would comprehend,” Fehr said. “Task No. 1 was to say, ‘OK guys, you need to understand what the facts are. You don’t know who makes how much money. You don’t know what your value would be if you could bargain with another team. You don’t have a say on the schedule. ... You’re still paying for your own retirement plan out of your pocket. The minimum salary basically hasn’t moved in 20 years, and here’s the inflation numbers.’”

The second step was to ask what, if anything, the players intended to do about those newly ascertained facts. The inability for players to move between teams, owed to the reserve clause and the antitrust exemption, left the sport in a different position compared to others. Teams weren’t competing with one another for a player’s services, and without that competition, pay was suppressed.

“Back then, the owners would refuse to tell players what other players made,” Fehr said. “And there was this ongoing joke with the [Dodgers](#), Marvin used to tell me, that none of the Dodgers wanted to tell him how much they were making, because all of the regulars had been told they were making more than everybody else was, so they couldn’t tell anyone.”

The recourse was collective bargaining, where the players could set minimum standards for salaries and other benefits, but could also individually agree to terms that exceed the minimums. In bargaining, owners also had to, by law, provide transparency.

“So his task was to go to the players and say, ‘All right, you have a union, that gives you certain rights and certain things you can do, and it compels the owners to do certain things,” Fehr said. “They have to give you information. They can’t just say, ‘No, screw you.’ Back then, the owners would refuse to tell players what other players made.

“But you have to get organized. You have to figure out how to do it. You have to figure out what you want.”

A third step, which Miller and the players achieved through that bargaining process in 1970, was dispute resolution: They needed a process to resolve disputes quickly and a neutral party who would judge them. Going on strike constantly, or tying up the courts with lawsuits that could take years, was impractical.

“The players would see the results of these things,” Fehr said. “So what Marvin was doing was slowly, patiently, deliberately, quietly saying the world doesn’t actually work the way you think it does. And it can work in ways which will be much more beneficial to you if you are willing to take advantage of those things. In other words, Marvin was teaching them.”

The right to a neutral arbitrator was one of several steps on a road map to free agency. Curt Flood’s 1972 court challenge of baseball’s reserve system brought great public attention to the issue.

“In my mind, free agency became inevitable not with Messersmith-McNally. And certainly not with Curt Flood. Curt lost,” Fehr said. “It became inevitable with Catfish Hunter.”

Miller was not alone in his work at the MLBPA. Prior to Fehr’s full-time hiring in that role in 1977, the union’s general counsel was Dick Moss. Miller, after all, was not a lawyer, and that left Moss to execute the legal strategies behind Miller’s directives. Moss dotted the I’s in the Hunter case, which came in 1974 — one year before Messersmith-McNally.

“He analyzed what was a breach of contract by the [Oakland Athletics](#),” Fehr said. “And said on the basis of the form contract the owners insist players sign, we can claim a breach, and then we can argue that the exclusive rights that Oakland has are gone.”

The players won the case, and Hunter, a star pitcher, was all of a sudden a free agent. A bidding war broke out for his services.

“What that did is demonstrate the magnitude of the restraint that the old system had imposed,” Fehr said. “And therefore what Marvin then did with that is he went to the players and said, here is an example of what free agency means. This is not hypothetical anymore. It

isn't a guess. This is what it means. And that resonated with players in a fashion which is difficult to describe. It hit them to their core."

When Rich started working in baseball in the 1980s, revenues were a few hundred million across all teams.

"Fifteen years later, we're talking several billion dollars," she said. "And we're talking about a media explosion as well. Marvin understood that to make the games more exciting, gives the media context greater value. As a result of making the games more exciting — by making it possible for teams to get better players so that they could compete — baseball revenues exploded and the interest in sports exploded.

"Marvin is a giant figure in the sport because as much as the clubs tried to resist free agency, because of the impact it would have on their pockets, he made them so rich."

When Rich was hired at the Players Association, Miller partook in the interview process, although he was no longer technically in charge. Fehr was in the room, as was another union lawyer, Gene Orza.

"We all stood up when Marvin walked in," Rich said. "I remember once hearing a story when Gene genuflected when Marvin walked in a room. And that was not tongue in cheek. We all had immense, immense respect for what Marvin did. The players should. Today's player should."

In support of her belief that Miller was not only a major figure in sports, but labor overall, Rich referred to a 1969 Supreme Court case that helped unionization efforts across the country known as *Gissel Packing*.

"That Supreme Court case was responsible for unionization all over, in many, many situations where employers just hotly resisted, even down south in the clothing and textile industries," Rich said. "To me, *Messersmith* resulted in an even bigger transfer of wealth from management to union than that case. And that's big in labor history."

Like Fehr, Rich pointed back to 1981, and the decline of unions that began with Reagan. While the broader labor movement was under attack, sports unions "still maintained great, great leverage to be able to obtain what they wanted at the bargaining table, because in other labor confrontations, employees could be replaced."

"Ronald Reagan in 1981 replaced the PATCO strikers, the air traffic controllers, and that was a huge blow to organized labor," Rich said. "Because then what happens is, everybody sees, 'I can replace people.' And so that became the labor tactic du jour, of management representatives in a labor negotiation: 'If Reagan can replace the PATCO air traffic controllers, then I can replace

my workers in a strike.’ Before that, it was against religion in the United States to do that, to replace striking workers.”

Baseball players, history has shown, might actually be harder to replace than the people who guide the movement of airplanes. MLB owners tried to replace players when they were out on strike in 1995, but failed.

“You can’t really attract fans or TV media with second-string stars playing the game,” Rich said. “What sports labor unions have shown the labor union movement is that when you have leverage, you can achieve your ends. And if you have unity, then you have leverage. But, of course, it’s very difficult to maintain unity where your workers can be replaced.

“What the MLBPA, in particular, may show other unions in sports is there was a tradition of player unity all the way through, started by Marvin. And to Don’s credit, it was really continued through our era. And the players held firm against management, really no matter what. And so, I think that’s the lesson. I think it’s a lesson any union can learn.”

Around baseball, there are some who would suggest that today’s MLBPA remains too reverential to Miller.

Fay Vincent, a former commissioner, has great respect for Miller, and even dedicated a book to him. But in a wide-ranging conversation last year, Vincent recounted one of his old arguments with Miller, about whether players should prioritize protecting the overall good of the game, whatever that might mean.

“Do you think you have any obligation to the future of baseball?” Vincent asked Miller.

“No,” Miller said. “That’s not my job, that’s your job.”

“I would remind Marvin — and it was a terrible thing to say to him, but he understood, and he let me get away with it — I said, ‘Marvin, you came out of the steelworkers’ union. You spent your livelihood trying to destroy the steel business. And guess what? The steel business is gone. Are you happy about that, was that a good decision for a union leader?’ It was a bad decision. You weren’t the head of the union, but you are the head of the baseball union. If you let baseball make serious mistakes and hurt the trade, the brand, the trade, the business, how is the union going to benefit from that?”

Miller wrote in his autobiography that he should be fired if owners start singing his praises because a union was not to be “a social club,” but “a restraint on what an employer can otherwise do.” So naturally, Vincent’s argument never swayed him.

“I think the world is still trying to get in touch with Marvin to see what Marvin would do,” Vincent continued in 2020. “It’s like the old story, about the guys who ran Disney were still trying to call Walt Disney to see: ‘What would Walt do now? We got a big problem.’ Well, Walt’s not available, and neither is Marvin Miller.”

One union official, Orza, countered that Vincent never understood the job of a union. But it is not uncommon to hear management sympathizers in the industry express something similar: That the game would be better off if the players did not invoke the union of yore, or if the players moved on to a different economic system, a salary cap or something like it.

That the players, to this day, still hold on tightly to Miller’s ghost.

“I don’t know that that’s true,” Fehr said, “but I sure as shit hope it is. Because the same things that Marvin advocated for — in my experience in baseball for 33 years, and in hockey for 10 — are still in players’ interest.”

Prior to the pandemic, industry revenues in baseball were north of \$10 billion annually.

“I never believed that this was going to happen,” Robinson said. “And I don’t think any of us did, all us players. We had no idea it’s going to be like it was today. But you know, I’d just tell the players not to forget Marvin. He was the fella who started all of this, for everyone.”

Marvin Miller Belongs in Cooperstown

Today’s well-paid baseball stars should tip their caps to the late union boss.

By Fay Vincent

Marvin Miller, who led the Major League Baseball Players Association from 1966 to 1982, is being inducted this week into the baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. Not long before he died in 2012, Marvin called to tell me he was seriously ill and wanted his friends to know he was at peace with what lay ahead. He was unique. So was that call.

He repeated his request that I and his supporters not continue to press for his election to the Hall of Fame. He was frustrated by the number of times he had been overlooked and emphasized his belief he was being punished by factions he’d battled for years. I assured him his election would happen eventually. He is now being recognized for having built the MLBPA into one of the most powerful and successful unions in the country.

Marvin’s achievements include free agency for the players, medical and pension benefits that are the finest possible under federal limits, and a union that has been led nobly by his successors. Not surprisingly, he was detested by many team owners, but the modern business of baseball stands witness to the talents and determination of the little man from Brooklyn. He came to

baseball from the United Steelworkers to preach to the players that they were essential to the game and could achieve their financial goals if they stuck together and followed his advice. I suspect even he was surprised by his success.

Marvin was a true believer in collective bargaining. I asked him whether he could imagine a time when the owners and the union would work together so closely it would eliminate the need for strikes and lockouts. He was adamant that shared power would never work. Only by their collective efforts could the players succeed. Marvin wasn't a lawyer—he'd studied economics—but he was an astute legal strategist.

His attempt in 1972 to get the Supreme Court to declare Curt Flood a free agent resulted in a rare defeat. Marvin pivoted in 1975 and won free agency for his players via arbitration. In response, the owners flouted the collective bargaining agreement after a bitter strike in 1981, and for several years conspired not to sign any free agents. The union, then led by Donald Fehr, challenged that "collusion" and in 1990 won an arbitration award of \$280 million plus interest. That, in turn, led to the 1994 shutdown—long after Marvin had retired—when the owners made an intense, ill-considered, and failed attempt to break the union. Since then, there has been an uneasy truce on the baseball labor front and no work stoppages.

Marvin's victory in the free agency arbitration case had a cosmic effect on all professional sports and gave the players the freedom to obtain today's enormous salaries. In 2020, before the Covid-shortened the season, the average MLB player salary was more than \$4 million. Perhaps on the day of his induction, they will tip their caps to him.

The current collective bargaining agreement between the owners and the players union expires on Dec. 21. The two sides seem determined to fight, and recently filed more allegations against one another in arbitration. Yet all of baseball should honor Marvin Miller on his election to the Hall of Fame. I hope he receives the praise he earned. He would want nothing more.

Published in the Wall Street Journal. Mr. Vincent was commissioner of baseball, 1989-92.

JAYSON STARK OF THE ATHLETIC

Weird and Wild, September History Watch Edition — Shohei Ohtani, Juan Soto, the Orioles and more

Did you hear the one about the guy who didn't touch third base or home – but still hit a home run? ... Or what about an actual big-league at-bat that lasted 204,702 minutes? ... Or how 'bout the third baseman who caught a pop-up 270 feet from that base he's supposed to be hanging out at?

It all happened, in real life, in the Weird and Wild sport of baseball. I promise. But it's September. So history is beckoning. And since we love it when history beckons, we begin with the ...

1. September History Watch

Wait. We only have a little more than three weeks to the finish line? Well, you know what that means. It means there is baseball history, out there to be made. And here at Weird and Wild World HQ, we keep track of that history so you don't have to. Why the heck not!

THE SHOH GOES ON

I'm pretty sure it's now illegal in like 37 states to write a column like this and not kick it off with another [Shohei Ohtani](#) gem. So here goes.

WHAT'S ON THE LINE: This dude has already made more history than we can even keep up with. So it almost goes without typing that he's the first member of the 40-Homer, 20-Steal Club who also pitched (even once) that year. But how about the 20-20 Club? Our friends at STATS Perform found just one other player, since SB became official in 1886, who had 20 homer, 20 steals and *any* innings pitched in the same year. And, um, it's been a while!

2021 Shohei Ohtani, LAA: 43 HR, 23 SB, 112.0 IP

1899 Buck Freeman, WAS: 25 HR, 21 SB, 7.0 IP

But that's not even the History Watch part. Ohtani needs seven more homers to reach 50. And if he does, he'd be only the second player ever to join the 50-Homer, 15-Steal, Also Pitched Club.

WHO ELSE IS ON THAT LIST: I'm guessing you saw this coming, but...

2021 Shohei Ohtani, LAA: 43 HR, 23 SB, 112.0 IP

1921 Babe Ruth, NYY: 59 HR, 17 SB, 9.0 IP

In truth, Ohtani and the Babe are already the only members of the 40-15-Pitched and 30-15-Pitched Clubs. But we need some kind of Ohtani suspense here!

OOOO BROTHER

WHAT'S ON THE LINE: When the [Orioles](#) went a terrifying 4-24 in August – and got outscored by 100 runs – I thought they were in line to become just the fifth team in the 162-game schedule era to get outscored by 300 runs in a season. But they're now down to a minus-274 pace. So forget that. But they're still on pace to lose 110 games. And if they do, that would make three “full” seasons in a row in which they've lost at least 108 games. That's not good!

WHO ELSE IS ON THAT LIST: Only three other teams have ever lost 108-plus in at least two full seasons in a row. But if the Orioles do lose 108 or more, there's bad news: They would be the only non-expansion team ever to spin off three in a row. And since this is Year 122 of the Browns/Orioles franchise, it's hard to lump them in with those Casey Stengel Mets!

1962-65 Mets, 4*
1915-16 A's, 2
1941-42 [Phillies](#), 2
(*expansion team)

GRANDAL'S CANYON

WHAT'S ON THE LINE: Now that [Yasmani Grandal](#) has decided it would be fun to start mixing in some actual hits with all his walks on the South Side of Chicago, his numbers aren't quite as incomprehensible as they used to be. So rather than focus on his weird (and still unprecedented) slash line (.230/.417/.526), let's focus on this:

He has more walks (69) than hits (49) ... *and* more RBIs (54) than hits ... *and* as many walks as strikeouts (69 each). And if you're like me, you're asking: Who does that? Of course I spent way too much time trying to answer that question. So you're welcome.

WHO ELSE IS ON THAT LIST: I confined this search to everyone with at least as many walks as Grandal has this year, because I had to draw that line somewhere. There were some close calls (Jason Giambi and – who knew! – Wes Westrum). But just one other player has ever had a full season with more walks than hits, more RBIs than hits and at least as many walks as strikeouts. And no, it *wasn't* Barry Bonds:

2021 Yasmani Grandal, CWS: 68 BB, 68 K, 49 hits, 54 RBIs
1995 Mark McGwire, OAK: 88 BB, 77 K, 87 hits, 90 RBIs
(Source – Lee Sinins' *Complete Baseball Encyclopedia*)

HAPPY GALLO-WEEN

WHAT'S ON THE LINE: Let's ignore the part of [Joey Gallo](#)'s season in which he's gone 17-for-128 (.133) as a Yankee, with 64 strikeouts, and focus on this part: He's leading the American League in walks *and* strikeouts – *and*, if the [Yankees](#) feel compelled to keep playing him, he's on pace to rack up 347 plate appearances this year in which the ball will never leave the batter's box. Needless to say, almost nobody has ever had a season like that!

WHO ELSE IS ON THAT LIST: You'll only find four men on this Weird and Wild leaderboard: Led their league in walks and whiffs, and also piled up at least 300 no-contact plate appearances. Barring something way beyond our comprehension, Gallo is almost a lock to join them. And he'd be the first to do it while playing for two teams!

<u>Hitter</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>No Contact</u>	<u>SO</u>	<u>BB</u>	<u>HBP</u>
Aaron Judge	2017	340	208	127	5
Adam Dunn	2012	328	222	105	1
Jack Cust	2008	310	197	111	0
Jim Thome	1999	302	171	127	4
Joey Gallo	2021	300	187	104	6

(Source: Lee Sinins' Complete Baseball Encyclopedia)

JUAN OF A KIND

WHAT'S ON THE LINE: It was just last week, in my [What We Learned in August](#) column, that we covered Juan Soto's latest connection with Ted Williams – as potentially the only two players in history to win two On Base Percentage titles by age 22. But it looks as if that won't be Soto's only connection with Ted (and a few other legends) by the time this season is over – because not only is the [Nationals'](#) on-base machine leading his league in walks. He's on pace to draw *42 more walks* than the next-walkingest hitter ([Bryce Harper](#)). Incredible.

WHO ELSE IS ON THAT LIST: We now present everyone in the live-ball era who has led his league in walks by a margin of 40-plus. You've heard of these folks! Notice that the last guy not named Bonds to do it pulled this off *almost 50 years ago*.

Barry Bonds (2001-02-04): +61-63-105
 Babe Ruth (1920-21-23-24) +53-42-72-40
 Ted Williams (1946) +43
 Eddie Mathews (1963) +43
 Eddie Yost (1959) +40

FIVE MORE CLASSICS!

AUSTIN ADAMS: Adams is a relief pitcher for the [Padres](#) – yet he leads the National League in hit batters. With 20! So who's the last relief pitcher to lead his league in HBPs? That would be Frank Smith (with seven) – in 1952!

TREA TURNER: Turner started this season with the Nationals. He'll finish it with the [Dodgers](#). He's leading his league in batting average. So if he keeps this up, he'd be the third hitter since 1900 to win a batting title while switching teams in the same league. The others: Harry (The Hat) Walker in 1947 and Dale Alexander in 1932. So it's been a while.

VLAD AND SEMIEN: Vlad Guerrero Jr. has mashed 41 homers. The guy who plays next to him in the [Blue Jays](#) infield, [Marcus Semien](#), has hit 38. How's that for production from the right side of an infield? How many teams have gotten 40 homers apiece from their first baseman *and* second baseman in the same season? That would be none. Closest call: 2002 Yankees (Jason Giambi 41, Alfonso Soriano 39). And yes, we counted homers as a DH.

JOSÉ ABREU: A tip of the cap to Salvy Pérez, who has a shot to become the first catcher ever to lead the American League in RBIs. But tied with him is Abreu, who led the AL last year and the year before that. And what if he makes it three RBI titles in a row? He'd join this group: AL – Babe Ruth (1919-21) and Cecil Fielder (1990-92). NL – Rogers Hornsby (1920-22) and George Foster (1976-78). Excellent company!

STARLING MARTE: Have we ever seen anything like this? Marte spent more than half the season with the [Marlins](#). So he's still fourth in the NL in stolen bases (22), six weeks after changing leagues. He has spent the last month and a half with the A's. And he's now tied for fifth in the AL in steals (22), too. So he's in line to become the first man ever to finish in the top five *in both leagues*.

But here's the Weirdest and Wildest part: He leads the major leagues in stolen bases – *but doesn't lead either league*. And how many players in AL/NL history have ever pulled that off? Yessir. That would be zero. Which this column greatly appreciates.

2. Suspended Animation Dept.

Do you believe in time travel? Hey, the Weird and Wild column obviously does. And it's even a real thing, thanks to the miracle of the suspended-game rule, which last week brought us the dramatic finish of a Marlins-Mets game that started on April 11 and finished 142 days later. Not surprisingly, the Weirdness and Wildness that broke out because of that 20-week intermission managed to catch our attention!

JAVY BÁEZ WEIRDNESS: Scored the only run for the [Cubs](#) on April 11. But now history will record that he also scored the winning run for the Mets on April 11. Hard to do!

And since that run for the Cubs was scored via a solo homer, it meant the record books will claim that Báez also drove in a run for the Cubs and Mets *on the same day*. If you're buying that, we thank the Elias Sports Bureau for confirming that the only other man ever to score a run – and collect RBIs – for two teams on the same day, since RBIs became official in 1920, was Cliff Johnson. Who did it for the Cubs and [Indians](#), on May 28, 1980.

Oh, and one more thing. Báez also had a four-game hitting streak for the Cubs in April. But his game-tying hit for the Mets in August gave him a five-game hitting streak for the Cubs in April. Or something like that.

THE LONGEST AT-BAT IN HISTORY: So you thought [Joey Votto](#) could string together the longest at-bats in baseball, huh? OK, Joey. Top this!

Back in April, Jesús Aguilar had just run the count to 2-0 against [Marcus Stroman](#) when this suspended game was frozen in time. By the time Aguilar stepped in to finish this at-bat, it was *a mere 204,742 minutes later!* And yep, that would be a record. We know that because no suspended game had ever taken 142 days to finish before this one.

That wasn't all the Weirdness or Wildness, though. That's because when Aguilar dug in for that 2-0 pitch, there was a different pitcher on the mound ([Taijuan Walker](#)), a different runner on first base ([Jorge Alfaro](#) pinch-running for [Corey Dickerson](#)) and even a different umpire behind the plate (D.J. Reyburn for the first two pitches, Tim Timmons for the last three). Because...

Baseball!

COREY DICKERSON WILDNESS: Speaking of Corey Dickerson ... he singled to lead off this game but then had to be pinch-run for before he made it around the bases ... because of the slight technicality that *he was playing for the Blue Jays by then* ... which made him, according to Doug (Kernels) Kern, the first player in Marlins history to lead off a game with a hit but then get pinch-run for on the same journey around the bases ...

But also, he got a hit for the Blue Jays on the day all that was going on ... but (officially) *not* on the same day he got that hit for the Marlins ... because yikes, we've even confused ourselves at this point!

STARTING PITCHER WEIRDNESS: The box scores will always tell us that the two starting pitchers in this game were Stroman (Mets) and [John Curtiss](#) (Marlins). Except ... Stroman's start was washed away after two hitters ... and Curtiss' start not only will go down as zero hitters faced ... but it wasn't only rain that kept him from facing any more ...

He also was traded to the Brewers in July ... then hurt his elbow ... and just had Tommy John Surgery ... so he couldn't possibly have been less available to continue ... But either way, according to Doug Kern, all that made this the first game where neither starting pitcher faced more than two batters since Gene Mauch and Al Dark engaged in a whole bunch of managerial lineup subterfuge before (and during) a bizarre Phillies-Giants game on June 29, 1961.

YEAH, OF COURSE THERE'S MORE: In still more suspended-animation goofiness...

- [Heath Hembree](#) signed as a free agent with the [Reds](#) this spring – but wound up making his debut for the Mets on April 11 before he debuted with the Reds (April 23) – even though he didn't become a Met until Aug. 20, when he was claimed off waivers – from the Reds. Got that?

- [Chance Sisco](#) played the first two months of this season with the Orioles – but the record will now show he scored his first run of the year for the Mets on April 11, despite the fact that that was 17 real-life weeks before he made his Mets debut.
- [Dylan Floro](#) didn't become the Marlins' closer until August, but the suspended-game gods still found a way for him to blow his first save in April.
- And we have witnesses who saw [Alex Jackson](#) wearing a [Braves](#) uniform on April 11... But that won't stop baseball's official records from claiming that somehow, he scored two runs against the Mets *for* the Marlins on April 11 and another run *against* the Marlins for the Braves on April 12. Which doesn't seem possible. Except...

Baseball!

3. This Week in Useless Info

THE GREATEST SHOH-MAN, CHAPTER ONE – Yes, the Ohtani notes keep on coming because they never stop. How about this: Ohtani versus the Yankees ... Five career hits ... five homers ... *and no other hits*. (He hit four of those this year, if you're scoring at home.)

Thanks to [baseball-reference.com](#)'s Katie Sharp, I can report that only one other player in the expansion era has had that many career hits against any team, all of them homers. And it was (who else?) Hee-Seop Choi, against the [Twins](#) (6 hits, 6 homers, 0 anything else).

Here, from the Elias Sports Bureau, is your handy dandy list of everybody in the last 50 years who stole home and made at least one start as a pitcher:

Shohei Ohtani ([Angels](#)) – Aug. 31, 2021
 Darren Dreifort (Dodgers) – June 12, 2001
 Kevin Ritz ([Rockies](#)) – June 5, 1997
 Rick Sutcliffe (Cubs) – July 29, 1988
 Pascual Pérez (Braves) – Sept. 7, 1984

THE GREATEST SHOH-MAN, CHAPTER THREE – One more! Last Friday, Ohtani threw his first regular-season pitch at 100 miles per hour or faster since April 4. Which led me to dig through the Baseball Savant Statcast annals because I had to know this:

In between pitches he *threw* at 100 miles per hour, I found 115 fair balls he *hit* at 100 mph or faster. Shohei Ohtani, man. He's the gift that keeps on giving to these Weird and Wild columns.

YEAH, BUT HOW WAS THE DEEP DISH? – The [Pirates](#) just went on a six-game road trip to play both Chicago teams – and lost all six games! My friends at STATS report they're only the third team in the modern era to embark on a trip that long to play multiple teams in the same city – and go 0-for-the-trip!

Pirates	8/31/2021—9/5/2021	White Sox & Cubs	0-6
Phillies	9/10/1942—9/16/1942	Dodgers & Giants	0-6
Boston Doves	10/1/1908—10/7/1908	Dodgers & Yankees	0-6

(Source: *STATS Perform*)

HEARD IT THIRD HAND – Loyal reader (and Nationals fan) Susan Vavrick checked in with this one, and I’m glad she did. The Nationals may have traded [Brad Hand](#) in July, but every time she looked up in D.C., there he was anyway.

That’s because Hand wound up pitching in Nats Park three times in 45 days – *for three different teams*. Nationals in July. Blue Jays in August. Mets in September. And what other pitcher has ever done that, in any park? Right you are, Susan. That answer is: Nobody!

The previous record for any pitcher in the modern era, according to STATS? That was 60 days, by the nomadic Octavio Dotel. He visited Coors Field for the Pirates, Dodgers and Rockies between July 28 and Sept. 25, 2010. And hey, lucky him!

BRAVES’ NEW WORLD – Did any GM have a better trade deadline than Alex Anthopoulos? And I’m not asking that because he just visited us on our Starkville podcast. Although if you’d like to listen, [that can be arranged](#).

No, I’m asking because the Braves traded for [Adam Duvall](#) and [Jorge Soler](#) in the hours before the deadline. And now Duvall has 10 homers, and Soler has nine. So according to STATS, that leaves the Braves one Soler long ball away from joining only two other teams that ever traded for two players in July who both went on to hit at least 10 home runs for their new team that season. Fun names!

1988 [Mariners](#): Jay Buhner (10)/ Darnell Coles (10)
 2008 Dodgers: Manny Ramírez (17)/ Casey Blake (10)

MILLER TIME – Wouldn’t it be great if we still lived in a world where we named our ballparks and then those names didn’t change every 15 minutes? Correct answer: Yes! I got to thinking about that Monday, because [Brad Miller](#) hit two home runs Monday for the Phillies in Milwaukee.

So what’s so Weird and Wild about that? Only that he would have been the first Miller with a multi-homer game at Miller Park – except it’s now “American Family Field!” Why even?

BO KNOWS THE 20-20 CLUB – [Bo Bichette](#) just joined the 20-Homer, 20-Steal Club. Back in the ’90s, his father, Dante, also hung out in that club a couple of times, including a 1996 entry into

30-30 Club territory. So here's the big question: How many other fathers and sons have ever done that 20-20 thing?

Well, before this year, that answer was one: Bobby (nine times) and Barry (10 times) Bonds. In the entire history of baseball. But then this year, it's happened twice, because of course it has.

Want to guess who beat the Bichettes to the Father/Son 20-20 Club: [Fernando Tatis](#) and Fernando Jr.. Who knew!

SAVED BY THE, AW, WHOEVER! – I'm not sure how many [Rays](#) fans could pick [Dietrich Enns](#) out of a lineup, but he just helped them make their latest, greatest slice of bullpen history. How? By becoming their *13th different pitcher* to record a save this year. And that's a sentence never previously written down about any team. But also...

The Rays are now closing in on *two dozen pitchers* who have saved a game for them just since Opening Day 2020. And here's how Weird and Wild that is:

RAYS IN 2020-21: 22 pitchers with a save – out of 128 wins (most wins in AL)

YANKEES FROM 1997-2006 (first 10 years with [Mariano Rivera](#) closing): 23 pitchers with a save – out of 987 wins (also, most wins in AL)!

4. This Week in Strange But Trueness

'I DON'T KNOW' IS ON THIRD – Somewhere, in a minor-league galaxy far, far from Petco Park, baseball is experimenting with anti-shift rules that basically say: *No infielders hanging out in the outfield!* Why do I think that after what happened to the [Astros'](#) [Kyle Tucker](#) on Sunday in San Diego, he'd be heavily in favor of that rule?

So think about this. Tucker hit a fly ball into the right-field corner. It came down 277 feet from home plate. And it was caught in the air – by the third baseman! Just your basic P-5 here in the year 2021.

But if you're familiar with Manny Machado Strange But True Moments in Shifting, you know it wasn't even the first time he'd done that. Joey Gallo could tell you all about it.

So I had two questions: First off, did this break Manny's own record for Most Feet from A Fielder's Normal Position While Catching a Fly Ball? And that answer, according to Sports Info Solution's Alex Vigderman, was: No! The Gallo fly ball last year beat this one, 307 feet to 270.

And then there's the even more important second question: Why the heck do we even keep score anymore?

SILENCE OF THE SLAMS – So many slams this week. Where do we even start?

THAT WRIGLEY TRIFECTA: Last Sunday, the Cubs and Pirates did something never before seen at Wrigley Field, which isn't something you can say much. But also, they did something never before seen at any field: Hit *three* go-ahead grand slams in the same game.

Now here's the Strange But True part: Combined previous slams by the three men who hit those grand slams – [Bryan Reynolds](#), [Matt Duffy](#) and [Frank Schwindel](#)? *That would be zero!*

WALK THIS WAY – That same day, John Kruk's favorite Brewer, [Daniel Vogelbach](#), did [this really cool thing](#).

So what was it about that blast that got the Brewers TV booth so worked up? Well, the Crew was down by three runs at the time – until Vogelbach launched a pinch-hit walk-off slam. So this was just the sixth ultimate slam by a pinch-hitter in the last 70 years! The others were hit by ... [David Bote](#) (2018 Cubs), [Brian Bogusevic](#) (2011 Astros), Brooks Conrad (2010 Braves), Roger Freed (1979 [Cardinals](#)) and Carl Taylor (1970 Cardinals). But ...

DON'T WALK THIS WAY – On the other hand, you know who served up that walk-off Vogelbach slam? That would be the Cardinals' [Alex Reyes](#). And why was that so Strange But True? Well, Reyes only faced one hitter that day. And it didn't go well! In fact, it turned out that what Reyes did was even more rare than what Vogelbach did.

Faced one hitter, gave up walk-off grand slam, live-ball era

Alex Reyes	9/5/2021	Daniel Vogelbach (pinch hitter)
Francisco Cordero	5/20/2010	Brooks Conrad (pinch hitter)
Cecilio Guante	6/21/1988	Alan Trammell

GOPHER BROKE – There are many, many innovative ways a team can go about winning a baseball game. But I don't advise this one:

In their Aug. 27 game with the [Diamondbacks](#), the Phillies gave up two-run homers in the ninth *and* 10th innings ... and somehow or other ... *they still won* (7-6, in 11 surreal innings).

Not to suggest it had been a while since any team followed that script and won anyway, but the last time it happened was more than six decades ago: Aug. 6, 1960. Pirates serve up two-run bombs to Dale Long (ninth) and Orlando Cepeda (10th) but beat the [Giants](#), 8-7, with no help from Zombie Runners. Thanks to loyal reader David Salituro for digging through the Stathead files to unearth that one.

THE BAD NEWS BOSOX – There are also many, many innovative ways a team can blow a 7-1 lead at home with its most unhittable pitcher on the mound. But I don't recommend [this one](#), either.

That was Nelson Cruz, circling the bases at Fenway on Labor Day, to complete a grand-slam, inside-the-park something or other. But here, according to Elias, is what makes that wacky orbit of the bases so Strange But True:

You've just witnessed the only play in the expansion era – all six decades of it – in which four runs were scored on any play that can't be described as what we like to call "a hit!" It was scored E-8 and E-4. So what you can call it is: *a Little League slam!*

WISDOM TRUTH – Strange But True fact I promise I am not making up:

- Cubs with back-to-back multi-homer games on the other side of Chicago: [Patrick Wisdom](#) (two weekends ago at Guaranteed Rate Field).
- [White Sox](#) who have done that in that park the last 10 seasons combined: *None!*

ZERO PARK THIRTY – And now one more Strange But True thing that happened in that same series...

- Runs scored by the White Sox in those three games – 30.
- Runs scored by the White Sox in one of those three games – zero!
- Score of the other two games: 17-3 and 13-1.

If you're thinking that's a pretty Weird and Wild way to score 30 runs in three games, excellent thought! And thanks to baseball-reference's amazing Kenny Jackelen, we can now present just how rare that was, to have a team score 30 runs in a three-game series, but do it with two games of double digits and one game of zero digits. Here are the only four other times that's happened:

July 3-5, 1998: [Red Sox vs. White Sox](#) – 15-2 win, 0-3 shutout, 15-14 win.

Aug. 23-26, 1902: [Baltimore Orioles \(not this franchise!\) vs White Sox](#) – 14-8 win, 21-6 win, 0-10 shutout.

Aug. 18-21, 1894: [Brooklyn Grooms vs St. Louis Browns](#) (not the franchise that became the Orioles!) – 0-4 shutout, 20-4 win, 20-11 win.

Aug. 13-15, 1889: [St. Louis Browns vs Columbus Solons](#) (late, great American Association) – 13-3 win, 0-13 shutout, 19-11 win.

Moral of the story: It's kinda unusual!

TOUCH 'EM ALL (OR NOT) – Last Friday, in a Reno-Tacoma Triple-A game, Reno's [Henry Ramos](#) smoked a ball that went over the fence. And after that, I don't even know how to describe what went on next.

Let's just say that it involved way too much trash talking, helmet heaving, haymaker throwing and Henry Ramos not getting around to touching third base or home plate.

Here is a link to YouTube video of the fight breaking out as the team in the field objected to the HR trot.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWPFyu_MW2c&t=43s

THE NEW HOUSE ON 9th STREET – Finally, once upon a time, when life was kinda normal, there wasn't anything unusual about a guy hitting a game-winning home run in the ninth inning. But then, last Saturday, [Francisco Lindor](#) did [this](#).

OK, what's the big deal? Oh, only that it was a game-winning two-run *leadoff* home run ... and that was only half of the Strange But True part...

Because it was also the first game-winning *extra-inning* home run ever hit *in the ninth inning* ... after the Mets had just finished blowing all nine runs of a 9-0 lead ... but they still won ... because Mets ... and because Zombie Runners ... and because seven-inning doubleheader games ... but mostly, because ...

Baseball! (In 2021!)

THERE'S SOME NASTY STUFF AND STUFF+ BREWING IN MILWAUKEE

(a little geeky but this is how scouting and analytics look at pitching in 2021—by Enos Sarris of The Athletic)

"They're different in Milwaukee," an opposing pitching development executive told me recently. "They value interesting shapes over there."

Watch a [Brewers](#) game and you're likely to feel like you're being shot out of a cannon at some point, pitching-wise. That this is likely the [third-best pitching staff in baseball](#) doesn't quite capture the feeling of watching pitchers like [Brandon Woodruff](#), [Corbin Burnes](#), [Freddy Peralta](#), [Devin Williams](#) and [Josh Hader](#). And it's not just that they might be [the best team at developing](#)

[velocity, either](#). Woodruff's fastball, Burnes' cutter, Peralta's fastball, Williams' changeup, and Hader's fastball are some of the more unique pitches in baseball.

This is a team with great stuff. Or even Stuff+.

Stuff+ is a metric developed by Max Bay that tries to look at just the physical properties of a pitch — aspects like the release point, extension, velocity, spin, and movement — to judge how good it is. And if you look at baseball through the prism of this statistic, the Brewers are world-class. Here are the top ten teams by staff Stuff+, along with their Location+ numbers (which judge pitches solely by the value of their location at the plate) for a sense of what their command looks like.

Top Teams by Stuff+

Team	Location	Stuff
White Sox	101.1	111.6
Yankees	106	111.5
Dodgers	103.1	110.9
Brewers	102.0	109.0
Rays	1005.1	107.6

This doesn't really quite tell the whole story, though. They may have a particular lock on certain pitch types. Here is a look at Stuff+ vs Location+ by pitch type by team staff.

Holy four-seam fastballs, cutters, and changeups! The Brewers really stand out in those pitch types; notice how close to the top (Stuff+ is the y-axis) they are on those pitches.

This still doesn't quite get at how exciting this pitching staff is. One of the reasons that the Brewers seem to [outperform their projections as a team](#) is that they have a really great 'A' team. In other words, their best relievers, the ones that come out when the team is winning,

are elite. That's why, according to STATS Perform, the Brewers are 178-45 in games that Josh Hader has pitched in (fifth in the modern era, minimum 200 appearances!). He's the stopper, and he's one of the reasons they win all the winnable games.

None of this happens by accident. This sort of excellence is something you get when you invest heavily in the data and tech of pitching, as the Brewers very obviously did when they [remade their spring facility in 2018](#).

Now consider these superlatives for the current Brewers staff. They currently sport:

- The best cutter by Stuff+ in baseball (Corbin Burnes)
- The best changeup by Stuff+ in baseball (Devin Williams)
- The pitcher with the second-best Stuff+ in baseball ([Jake Cousins](#))
- The starter with the second-best Stuff+ among starters (Corbin Burnes)
- The 11th-best four-seam fastball Stuff+ in baseball (Josh Hader)
- A surprise 16th-best four-seam fastball Stuff+ in baseball ([Brent Suter](#))
- The fourth-best curveball Stuff+ among starters (Corbin Burnes)
- A new entry with the 11th-best curveball Stuff+ among starters (Freddy Peralta)
- The eighth-best sinker Stuff+ in baseball (Jake Cousins)
- The eighth- and eleventh-best slider Stuff+ in baseball (Jake Cousins and Corbin Burnes)

You can see how you could put together three straight games with mostly just these names and absolutely *dominate* a short series. Good luck with this.

And it's not like they are all stuff, no command, either.

Brandon Woodruff is the only pitcher with a 110+ Stuff+ and Location+ on his four-seam fastball, and overall, he has the fourth-best Location+ among starters — a real flamethrower with precision. Corbin Burnes not only has the best cutter by Stuff+, but the second-best Cutter by Location+ ([Josh Fleming](#) is first in Location+, but uh, not first in Stuff+). He also has top-10 Location+ on his sinker, which is of course why his arsenal really came together when he turfed the four-seam and went to a sinker/cutter combo as his primary pitches. There's evidence that command matters more than stuff for sliders, so despite a low slider Stuff+ for newcomer [Aaron Ashby](#) (90.4), his command on the pitch (106.9 Location+) suggests that it's still a good pitch for him.

Back to the quote that started this thread: What is the evidence that the Brewers are out in front when it comes to pitching acquisition and development? Jake Cousins (and his slider) is a one-man, one-pitch example.

If you look at the slider just through the lens of raw movement, it doesn't pop. Here's his vertical and horizontal movement, with a league heat map behind it. You see that his slider (black) shows on the white part of the heat map, not the red, so it doesn't look that good, especially since the league-average slider (gray) is not that far from it, and also in the white. It

has almost *too much* drop, because the sliders with more horizontal and (often) less drop do better.

But it is a good pitch. It's the eighth-best slider in the game by Stuff+. He does have a funky fastball, basically a great sinker with tons of drop, so let's instead judge the pitch by vertical and horizontal movement *differential*, or the difference between his slider and fastball movement.

Ah now we're in the red. But that doesn't look like a pitch that's top ten, it looks like a fine pitch. We recently added axis delta into Stuff+, which is the difference between the movement predicted by spin axis and actual movement. It's a stat meant to capture [seam-shifted wake](#), or what happens when a particular grip and release point interact to create movement that is unexpected for the batter.

Apparently, Cousins has a seam-shifted wake slider. And once you add up all of these different aspects of the slider, the pitch does really well.

But we're looking at it from the perspective of the pitcher. And you could argue it's not that fast, it's merely fine, it's a good slider. But when you try to take the stance of the hitter, and consider what the pitch looks like when it's spinning out of the hand vs what it actually does in the air — basically what it looks like against his sinker — you get a different story.

The Brewers know what they want, and they have a better understanding of how to achieve it than most teams do. What we're seeing now with this high-stuff staff, as players like Burnes,

Peralta, and Cousins enter their pitching primes at just the right time, is reaping the rewards of that approach.

SEPTEMBER 5, 2021

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

Between division leaders and wild card contenders, 17 teams entered Friday's action within five games of a playoff spot. Should be fun down the stretch.

Miguel Rojas of the Marlins and Jonathan Villar of the Mets both crushed first-pitch leadoff homers in the 1st inning this week. First time in MLB since at least the 1980's.

Only three pitcher-catcher combos have made more starts together than Adam Wainwright and Yadier Molina (they reached 300 Friday). Ahead of them are Mickey Lolich and Bill Freehan (324 starts); Warren Spahn and Del Crandall (316); Red Faber and Ray Schalk (306).

When Mel Ott entered the Hall of Fame in 1951 with another slugger, they combined for 1,045 career home runs. Jimmie Foxx (534 homers to Ott's 511)

Phillies have beaten the Nationals 7 times this year after trailing by at least 3 runs—crazy.

Robbie Ray of the Blue Jays set a record on Monday for most Ks (1,241) through 1,000 career IP. He passed Yu Darvish (1,222)

Oldest pitcher to win a Cy Young Award--Roger Clemens, who was 42 when he won the 2004 NL Cy Young for the Astros (he passed Gaylord Perry who won in 1978 at age 40 for San Diego).

Gerrit Cole, who grew up about 15 miles from Angel Stadium, whiffed 15 Angels this week--the last Yankees pitcher to strike out 15 batters in a game was Masahiro Tanaka (9/29/2017). Cole has struck out at least 10 batters in nine starts this year, tying David Cone (1998) for the most by a Yankees pitcher in a season. Cole has won each of his four starts since returning from the COVID-19 injured list, allowing two earned runs in 24 2/3 innings (0.73 ERA).

[Adrian Houser](#) took the mound Saturday at American Family Field and caught the edge of the zone one of his signature sinkers for a called strike one against Tommy Edman. It was the start of things to come.

Houser filled up the strike zone in a [4-0 win](#) over the Cardinals, dealing a three-hit shutout for the Brewers' first nine-inning complete game since Jimmy Nelson went the distance against the Reds on Father's Day in 2017, and their first shutout since Kyle Lohse blanked the Reds in September 2014.

For those counting at home, that's 1,011 regular-season games between shutouts for a Brewers pitcher -- the longest drought for any team in Major League history.

JAYSON STARK STUFF FROM THE ATHLETIC

Dodgers-Giants -- Did you know there hasn't been a season in which both these teams won 95+ games since 1962? And this year, they could both win 100.

Yankees-Red Sox wild card game? Cole vs. Sale. It would be only the fifth time in over a century that these two teams' seasons came down to one winner-take-all game against each other: 2004 ALCS Game 7 (Idiot's comeback finale) ... 2003 ALCS Game 7 (Aaron Bleeping Boone Game) ... 1978 Game 163 (Bucky Bleeping Dent Game) ... and 1949 Game 155 (Vic Raschi over Ellis Kinder).

Rays Amaze. They just finished a run of nine consecutive saves by nine different relievers ... They're on pace to win 100 games even though they still have no starting pitchers who have won 10 games ... And remember that spectacular pitching staff they rolled out there last October? They only have two pitchers left on their active roster who even threw *three* innings in the World Series. (And they're [Ryan Yarbrough](#) and [Pete Fairbanks](#)!)

Ugly Times for the Mets. **Record in August:** 9-19 (5th-worst in baseball)

Where they started August: 1st place, + 4 ½ games

Where they ended August: 3rd place, – 5 ½ games

So why would we use the word “historic” to describe that? Here's why:

THE RECORD: It was the worst August record in the division-play era by any team that started the month with a lead of 4+ games!

THE CLIFF DIVE: Lost 10 games in the division standings! That's the most by *any* team in the division-play era that entered August in first place. Former record: 9, by [Wily Mo Pena](#)'s 2006 Red Sox (went from one up to eight back).

But we don't need to confine this to the annals of August collapses only. According to the Elias Sports Bureau, the Mets just became the second team ever to start *any* month with a lead of 4-plus games in their division and then finish that month at least five games behind. The other: Leo Durocher's legendary 1969 [Cubs](#), who plummeted to eight back that September – and have spent half a century rooting for some team to join them.

Shohei Ohtani has as many HRs as Juan Soto and Mookie Betts combined, has stolen 22 bases and is striking out 10.89 batters per 9 innings pitched.

he leads the league in slugging (at .618) ... Send him to the mound, and he's a mere 16 percentage points away from also leading the league *in lowest slugging percentage allowed* (.330) by pitchers with 100+ innings ... And how different are those two numbers? Let's sum it up this way (h/t Andrew Simon, of [MLB.com](#), for first computing this):

If Shohei Ohtani gave up a home run to the next 31 hitters he faced, the hitters he's pitched to still wouldn't have *as high a slugging percentage as he has*. And let's repeat: *He's a real person!*

For 16 years in a row – yes, 16 – the strikeout rate per nine innings across baseball was larger than it was the year before. Then came the spider tack clamp down. Strikeout rate has dropped from 24.2% of at bats to 22.6%. MLB batting average has gone from .237 to .247 and slugging pct. Is up from .396 to .419.

Salvator Perez, Royals catcher has played 132 of 133 games. He has caught 103 games and DH 29. The AL record for most games played in a season, by a guy who was *primarily a catcher*, is 158, by Gene Tenace, nearly half a century ago (1975). Tenace played first base in 68 of those games.

Juan Soto and on base percentage. Here are the only players to lead their league in OBP in their age-22 season or younger: Stan Musial, Ty Cobb, Ted Williams, Mel Ott, Arky Vaughan, Shoeless [Joe Jackson](#) and [Bryce Harper](#). Exalted group. And guess what? Everyone in it who is eligible for the Hall of Fame is (yep) in the Hall of Fame. Just sayin'.

But now we get to the “again” part. Only one player before Soto has ever done this twice in his age-22 season or younger. Guess who? Of course, that would be Ted Williams (in 1940 and '41).

Bryce Harper. Age 28. He already has cranked 258 home runs. And thanks to a season in which he leads the whole sport in OPS, he has built his lifetime OPS up to .910.

We'll stop right there, without looking at a single other line on his bound-for-Cooperstown résumé. Why? Because just those numbers alone paint a portrait of a player who can already set his GPS for upstate New York.

Here's everybody in history who had at least 250 homers and a career OPS as good as Harper's through their age-28 season:

Hall of Famers: Ken Griffey Jr., Mickey Mantle, Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, Frank Robinson, Jimmie Foxx, Mel Ott, Ralph Kiner

Still active: [Mike Trout](#), [Albert Pujols](#), [Miguel Cabrera](#)

Not on the ballot yet: A-Rod, [Prince Fielder](#)

In his first year in Philadelphia, he hit 35 homers, drove in 114 runs and posted a .882 OPS, even with his batting average at .260. Last season, his OPS climbed to .962 in the abbreviated campaign. All told, only three NL players have a better OPS than Harper since 2019: Washington's Juan Soto, Tatis and 2020 MVP Freddie Freeman.

He went to the postseason four times with the Nationals between 2012 and 2017. All four times, the Nationals lost in the first round. Harper hit .211 in those 19 games. The Nationals won the World Series the year after Harper. But the Phillies scored themselves a MVP candidate.

Wander Franco has reached base in 33 straight games. Other modern-era players 20 or younger who *have* had an on-base streak of 30 games or more:

Frank Robinson, 1956: 43*

Mickey Mantle, 1951-52: 36*

Arky Vaughan, 1932: 33*

Mel Ott, 1929: 33*

Mel Ott, 1928-29: 30*

*(*Hall of Famer)*

AND JOE POSNANSKI FROM THE ATHLETIC

1987. That was the last time the two most valuable players — Chicago's Andre Dawson and Toronto's George Bell — both played for teams that did not make the playoffs.

it was actually quite shocking for Dawson to win the award for a losing team — that had not happened in almost 30 years when another Cub, Ernie Banks, won the 1959 MVP award for a 74-80 team.

But it could happen this year.

As far as I can tell, [Angels](#) phenomenon [Shohei Ohtani](#) is an absolute lock for MVP.

From June 25 to Aug. 31, they went 39-18, and that included two nine-game winning streaks. But they still couldn't catch the [Giants](#). Today [they finally did](#), with a 4-3 win over the Braves. In the game, [Max Scherzer](#) pitched six innings, gave up three hits and struck out nine without walking a batter.

Scherzer has made six starts for the Dodgers ... and the Dodgers have won all six games. His ERA with L.A. is 1.29 and he has a 50-to-5 strikeout to walk ratio. The guy, at age 36, leads the NL in WHIP and fewest hits per nine innings.

Scherzer got a huge deal but he delivered for Washington-- Scherzer won two Cy Youngs, finished top 5 another three times, led the Nationals to a World Series title.

How good is Wander Franco in Tampa? Over the last three weeks or so, Franco is hitting .347/.410/.587. He has basically become the best player on the team at age 20 — and this was a team that won the AL last year and was one of the favorites to win it all this year.

The Dodgers and the Giants won every NL pennant from 1951 to 1957. In '62, they tied for the pennant and the Giants won a three-game playoff. In 2004, the Dodgers went into the final series of the season with the Giants up three games, promptly lost the first game and were down 3-0 in the ninth inning of the second game when they made an epic comeback that ended with Steve Finley's walk-off grand slam.

In the 2010s, the Dodgers were consistently the better team — winning the division every single year between 2013 and 2019 — but it was the Giants who won three World Series.

And now, here we are again, the Giants and Dodgers tied for the division lead and about the play their last series of the season in San Francisco.

LARRY WALKER AND COOPERSTOWN

DENVER -- [Larry Walker](#) spent 17 seasons in the Major Leagues. It has been 36 years since he signed with the Expos. Come Wednesday in Cooperstown, Walker will officially become the first former Rockies player to be inducted into the Hall of Fame, alongside Derek Jeter and Ted Simmons. Former MLB Players Association executive director Marvin Miller will also be posthumously inducted.

It took the full 10 years of eligibility on the Baseball Writers' Association of America ballot, but Walker crossed the 75 percent threshold for election by six votes last year.

Walker hit 383 home runs, stole 230 bases and posted a .965 OPS (141 OPS+) over his 17-year MLB career, which began with the Expos and ended with the Cardinals. In the 10 years he spent with the Rockies, he won five of his seven Gold Glove Awards in right field, and also became the first -- and to this day only -- Rockies player to win the National League MVP Award, in 1997.

Walker won three batting titles (1998, '99 and 2001) and produced 72.7 wins above replacement during his career per Baseball Reference -- ranked 88th in baseball history -- despite missing significant time due to injury. According to Jay Jaffe's JAWS system of averaging a player's peak-seven-year WAR with his overall career WAR, Walker ranks as the 10th-best right fielder of all time.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE IN FIRST PLACE ON SEPTEMBER 1 (SEE ALSO THE PIECE ON EVERY TEAM'S BEST SEPTEMBER RUN AT THE EDN OF THIS ISSUE).

Since 1996 -- the first full season with at least one Wild Card in each league after the '95 campaign was limited to 144 games due to the players' strike that began in 1994 -- 114 of 144 eventual division champions held at least a share of their division lead entering Sept. 1. That's 79 percent of division winners.

There has not been a season since 1996 where none of the division leaders entering September went on to win their divisions that year. In other words, history tells us that most of the six current leaders -- the Rays, White Sox, Astros, Braves, Brewers and Giants -- will win the division. But not necessarily all of them.

What about leading the Wild Card? In the multiple Wild Card era (since 2012), there has been just one season when each team in Wild Card position entering September found itself still in the Wild Card Game when the season ended. That was in 2017, when the Yankees, Twins, D-backs and Rockies did so.

For those with comebacks on the mind, the Elias Sports Bureau tells us that the largest division lead entering September for a team that did not win that division is 7 1/2 games by the 1995 Angels, who missed out on the playoffs entirely when the Yankees won that year's Wild Card and the Mariners won the division.

Largest division lead Entering September, did not win division (Since 1969)

1995 Angels: 7 1/2
1978 Red Sox: 6 1/2
2006 Tigers: 4 1/2
1969 Cubs: 4 1/2

For the Wild Card, the largest lead entering September for a team to not win that spot was 8 1/2, by the 2011 Braves, according to Elias. The Cardinals came back from that deficit to win the Wild Card -- and ended up winning it all, too.

What about eventual World Series winners? Since 1996, 15 of the 24 World Series winners, again, excluding 2020, led their divisions entering September. But the most recent World Series winner in a full season, the 2019 Nationals, did not lead their division entering the month nor at the end of it, instead making it as a Wild Card.

History worth noting

The main focus here is on the current division leaders, plus the Wild Card leaders in the Yankees, Red Sox, Dodgers, Reds and Padres. But one team not currently in postseason position is worth noting. The Mets entered August with a four-game division lead and now sit 5 1/2 games behind the NL East-leading Braves.

That's the second-largest division deficit exiting a calendar month for a team that led by four or more games entering it, according to Elias. Only the 1969 Cubs had a larger deficit at the end of a calendar month they entered with such a lead, doing so in September, losing the NL East to the

Mets, ultimately trailing by eight games. History, and that black cat, have a way of returning, even years later.

CASTELLNOS

Reds right fielder [Nick Castellanos](#) became part of a page in that history.

The tone of the 12-2 Reds rout over the Cardinals in Game 2 of their seven-inning doubleheader on Wednesday -- after they fell, [5-4, in Game 1](#) -- was established early when Castellanos slugged two home runs with six RBIs through two at-bats in the first two innings.

Castellanos is batting .392 with five homers and 12 RBIs this season vs. St. Louis. He slugged a homer against them on Opening Day and was hit by a pitch in the season's second game. Later the same day -- April 3 -- he [flexed over pitcher Jake Woodford](#) after scoring on a wild pitch to spark a benches-clearing scuffle. The incident resulted in a two-game suspension for Castellanos.

THE KIDS ARE ALRIGHT

[Michigan's 5-2 victory over Ohio in the Little League World Series](#) on Sunday afternoon averaged 2.77 million viewers on ABC.

In TV audience numbers, the LLWS championship game and four other Little League games on ABC and ESPN last week bested "Sunday Night Baseball" that averaged 1.34 million viewers for the New York Yankees and Oakland Athletics, per Nielsen data from Showbuzz Daily.

Taylor North Little League — which won Michigan's first LLWS title since Hamtramck won it in 1959 — also won the advertiser-coveted 18-49 audience demographic with an average of 571,000 tuning in. The Yankees-Athletics game got 441,000 in that key demo.

MORE WANDER

As of Friday, Among players 20 years old or younger, Franco's 33-game streak is now tied for the third longest in AL/NL history with the Pirates' Arky Vaughan (July 12-Aug. 10, 1932) and the New York Giants' Mel Ott (Aug. 24-Oct. 6, 1929), both Hall of Famers. He trails only another pair of Hall of Famers in that department: Mickey Mantle (36 games, from 1951-52) and Frank Robinson (43 in 1956).

Regardless of age, Franco's streak is the longest by a rookie shortstop since Hanley Ramirez reached in 36 straight games for the Marlins in 2006. It is also the longest active on-base streak in the Majors, the longest by a rookie in club history and the longest single-season streak by a Rays player since Johnny Damon reached in 39 consecutive games from May 3-June 14, 2011. Franco has not struck out in his last 34 plate appearances, and he has only two strikeouts in his last 75 plate appearances.

MORE WANDER

Among players age 20 or younger, Franco's streak is the sixth longest in American League/National League history and the second longest in AL history. On Sunday, he broke a tie with the 28-game run Mantle put together from June 14-July 10, 1952. Mantle is the only AL player to own a longer streak before turning 21, as he reached safely in 36 straight games from Sept. 5, 1951-May 4, 1952.

Franco's streak is the longest by any player under the age of 21 since Robinson's 43-game on-base stretch from May 26-July 7, 1956. Between Franco and Robinson's record are Ott (separate streaks of 30 and 33 from 1928-29), Vaughan (a 33-gamer in '32) and Mantle ('36). Yes, every player on the list Franco has joined is a Hall of Famer.

When Franco's streak reached 24 games, the longest by a player his age since Ken Griffey Jr. in 1990

Two days after an early exit caused by a headache, rookie shortstop [Wander Franco](#) returned to the Rays' lineup on Saturday afternoon at Tropicana Field and immediately extended his historic on-base streak to 34 games with an RBI single to center field.

HOW 'BOUT THOSE RAYS

The Rays, who went 22-6 in May, are the first team since the 2002 "Moneyball" A's to have two calendar months with at least 21 wins in the same season. Those two months rank among the three best in club history, by winning percentage, and they're on pace to break the franchise record of 97 wins set during their breakthrough 2008 season.

This stretch has boosted the Rays' record to 84-48 overall, a franchise-record 36 games over .500 and tied with the Giants for the best mark in the Majors heading into the final full month of the season.

The Rays have won 13 of their last 14 games and 24 of their last 30. Their eight-game lead in the AL East over the second-place Yankees is the largest in team history, and they'll roll into September having led the division for 32 straight days while owning the AL's best record for 26 days in a row.

SOTO

Juan Soto of the Nationals Soto walked 30.3% of the time he stepped to the plate in a month where [no other qualified hitter](#) managed to walk even 20% of the time. It's that if you go through the last century of baseball, [back to](#) the start of the Live Ball Era in 1920, and you look for all months with at least 100 plate appearances

Barry Bonds 11 times

Jack Clark, John Mayberry, Babe Ruth, Frank Thomas, Joey Votto and Ted Williams 1 each.

And now Juan Soto.

He's the only qualified hitter this year with [more walks than strikeouts](#), and aside from Soto himself last year, [only one player 22 or younger](#) has pulled off that trick in the last three decades: Albert Pujols. Only three players in MLB history have had 100+ walks in a season age 22 or younger—Ted Williams, Mel Ott, Juan Soto. All time career walk rate—Soto is currently 7th with Ruth, Bonds and William ahead of him.

ON BASE PCT. TITLES

Ted Williams 12

Barry Bonds 10

Babe Ruth 10

Rogers Hornsby 9

Ty Cobb 7

Joey Votto 7

LOOKING BACK ON YANKEES WINNING STREAK

Prior to Thursday's victory, the Yankees hadn't won 12 or more in a row since a 13-game winning streak from Sept. 1-12, 1961.

2. The Yankees have had two streaks end at 11 straight wins since 1961. The first was from Sept. 16-26, 1964. The other was from Aug. 31-Sept. 10, 1985.

3. Prior to the Yankees reaching a dozen straight victories on Thursday, 23 other teams had winning streaks of 12 or more since the Yanks' 13-game streak in 1961.

The Yankees' longest losing streak between 12-game win streaks from 1961-2021 was nine, which New York reached twice -- from Oct. 1, 1972-April 9, 1973; and Sept. 13-21, 1982.

5. The longest win streak in Yankees history is 19, which they achieved from June 29-July 17, 1947.

6. The American League record for consecutive victories belongs to the 2017 Indians (22), and the National League record belongs to the 1916 New York Giants (26). The Yankees have three more games at Oakland before a three-game series at Angel Stadium next week. They then return to Yankee Stadium for three against the Orioles and then four against the Blue Jays.

7. During this 12-game win streak, the Yankees have beaten the White Sox, Angels, Red Sox, Twins, Braves and A's.

8. The Yankees have won 12 or more consecutive games 11 times (1905, '06, '26, '39, '41, '47, '53, '54, '60, '61 and 2021). Eight of those teams reached the World Series.

The last time the club had a streak of 12 or more wins came on Sept. 12, 1961. This was New York's lineup that day in a 4-3 win over the White Sox at Comiskey Park for their 13th consecutive victory:

1. Bobby Richardson 2B
2. Tony Kubek SS
3. Roger Maris RF
4. Mickey Mantle CF
5. Elston Howard C
6. Bill Skowron 1B
7. Hector Lopez LF
8. Clete Boyer 3B
9. Ralph Terry P

10. The Yankees had 11 seasons with 100 wins or more between streaks of 12 or more consecutive wins, including the 114-48 team that won the World Series in 1998. The others came in '63, '77, '78, '80, 2002-04, '09, '18-19. Three of those teams won the World Series (1977-78, and 2009).

11. The longest win streak for the 1927 Yankees -- also known as the "Murderer's Row" Yankees featuring Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Tony Lazzeri, Earle Combs, Mark Koenig and Bob Meusel -- was nine, from June 13-June 23.

12. The longest streak for the 1998 team that won 114 games was 10, from June 30-July 12.

the Yankees saved their season with a 21-8 record in August, which included a 13-game winning streak. But that still hasn't been good enough to catch the Rays, the defending A.L. champions. So, for now, the Yankees are in the driver's seat for the top A.L. wild-card spot thanks to strong pitching led by Gerrit Cole (2.73 earned run average and 215 strikeouts) and a stout lineup led by outfielder Aaron Judge (30 home runs and a .934 on-base plus slugging percentage).

JERRY KOOSMAN

Koosman's No. 36 jersey. It was a fitting honor. Koosman is the best left-handed pitcher in franchise history. He recorded a 3.09 ERA across 12 seasons. He paired with Tom Seaver to carry the Miracle Mets to the 1969 World Series championship — and then helped deliver another pennant in 1973.

Koosman became just the third Mets player to have his number retired, joining Seaver and Mike Piazza, both Hall of Famers. (The team has also retired the jerseys of managers Gil Hodges and Casey Stengel.)

Koosman, 78, last pitched for the Mets in 1978. His final major-league season came with the [Phillies](#) in 1985.

He debuted with the club in 1967 and became a regular in 1968, finishing second in National League Rookie of the Year voting to Johnny Bench. In 1969 he became a workhorse, logging a 2.28 ERA in 32 starts, pitching his best down the stretch as the Mets came alive in the second half and defeated the [Baltimore Orioles](#) in five games in the World Series.

Koosman went 222-209 in his career, 3.36 ERA, 3839 innings over 19 seasons, 33 shutouts, 2556 strikeouts against 1198 walks. He won 21 games for the 1976 Mets, 20 for the 1979 Twins. He was second in NL Cy Young race in '76 behind Randy Jones of the Padres (and just ahead of Steve Carlton and Don Sutton).

He was 4-0 in 5 post season series

OH CANADA

Justin Morneau won the MVP award in 2006, while with the Minnesota Twins. He hit .321/.375/.559 with a career-best 34 home runs and was worth 4.3 bWAR. He was the first Canadian to win the honour in the AL, with Walker having won the NL MVP in 1997.

Matt Stairs played for the Expos, A's, Royals, Nationals, Phillies, Blue Jays, Pirates, Red Sox, Rangers, Padres, Cubs, Tigers and Brewers.

Over 14 years and seven teams, Paul Quantrill appeared in 841 games. More than ferguson Jenkins

During his 14 seasons in the majors Ten times. Russell Martin made the postseason four times with the Dodgers (2006, 2008, 2009, 2019.) He also made the playoffs twice with the Yankees (2011, 2012), the Pirates (2013, 2014) and the Blue Jays (2015, 2016).

The 1994 players' strike put an end to a promising Montreal Expos season. The '94 Expos were a league-best 74-40 (.649) and were on a pace to win 106 games.

(excluding the Nationals) Five no-hitters have been thrown between both organizations. Four for the Expos (Dennis Martinez, 1991; Charlie Lea, 1981; and Bill Stoneman, 1972, 1969) and one for the Blue Jays (Dave Stieb, 1990)

When the Blue Jays won the 1992 World Series, it was the first time a non-American team had won. Who was named World Series MVP? Pat Borders was named the World Series MVP after he hit .450/.500/.750 with four extra-base hits in the six-game series.

Jason Bay played for the Padres, Pirates, Mets, Red Sox and Mariners, but never the Blue Jays.

No Canadian pitcher has more strikeouts than Fergie Jenkins. Who is second on the list?

Your Answer: Ryan Dempster

Explanation: Ryan Dempster pitched 16 years in the majors, for five different teams, racking up 2,075 strikeouts.

Joey Votto collected his 2,000th hit.

He became the second Canadian ever to record 2,000 hits over his MLB career, behind only Hall of Famer Larry Walker. Votto also became the second MLB player to record his 2,000th hit, 300th home run and 1,000th RBI in the same season.

How many Canadian pitchers have thrown a no-hitter in MLB history? Two. In 1945, Dick Fowler, of the Philadelphia Athletics, threw the first no-hitter by a Canadian. In 2018, James Paxton, then with the Seattle Mariners, threw the second, blanking the Blue Jays at home in Toronto.

Twenty-eight Canadian-born players have suited up for the Blue Jays. Currently, the Blue Jays have two Canadian-born players on their roster, closer Jordan Romano, from Markham, Ont., and Vladimir Guerrero Jr., who was born in Montreal.

Matt Stairs, from Saint John, Canada, owns the all-time record for most pinch-hit home runs with 23. 7 with the Phillies

No Canadian pitcher has more strikeouts than Fergie Jenkins' 3,192. But, over his 19 seasons, Jenkins only once led the National League in strikeouts. Jenkins led the NL in strikeouts in 1969, with 273. Two years later, in 1971, he became the first Canadian to win the Cy Young Award, with a 24-13 record, 2.77 ERA, 30 complete games and 263 strikeouts.

HISTORIC NIGHT

Three Rivers Stadium on Sept. 1, 1971

Pirates beat Phillies 10-7

Pirates lineup:

Rennie Stennett 2B

Gene Clines CF

Roberto Clemente RF
Willie Stargell LF
Manny Sanguillén C
Dave Cash 3B
Al Oliver 1B
Jackie Hernández SS
Dock Ellis P

It is believed to be the first all-minority starting nine in AL/NL history. Five of those players -- Clines, Stargell, Cash, Oliver and Ellis -- were African American. Clemente hailed from Puerto Rico, Sanguillén and Stennett from Panamá, and Hernández from Cuba.

WEEKLY OHTANI HIGHLIGHTS.

There's seemingly nothing [Shohei Ohtani](#) can't do on a baseball field, The two-way star stole home for the first time in his four-year career in a 6-4 win over the Yankees.

With runners at first and third, [Phil Gosselin](#) stole second and Ohtani successfully stole home as part of a double steal.

t was the second stolen base of the game for Ohtani, who is the favorite for the American League MVP award heading into September. Ohtani leads the Majors with 42 homers and also has 22 stolen bases. He's only the fourth player in AL history with at least 42 homers and 22 stolen bases in a season, joining Jose Canseco (1988, '91, '98), Alex Rodriguez ('98, 2007) and Ken Griffey Jr. ('99). And he's also 8-1 with a 3.00 ERA and 127 strikeouts in 105 innings over 19 starts on the mound. First pitcher to pitch a win and steal home in over 20 years.

Friday he a career-high 117 pitches over seven strong innings and reaching as high as 100 mph on the radar gun in a [3-2 win](#) over the Rangers on Friday. Then on Saturday he crushed a three-run homer in the sixth inning of the Angels' [4-1 victory](#) over the Rangers at Angel Stadium. Ohtani leads the Majors with 43 blasts, three ahead of Kansas City's Salvador Perez. No Angels player has ever outright led the Majors in home runs in a season (Reggie Jackson tied for first in HRs in 1982 with 39), and the club record is 47 by Troy Glaus in 2000.

SURPRISING POWER IN SAN FRANCISCO

The 2021 Giants are the biggest surprise of the season, and [there's absolutely no shortage of reasons fueling their rise](#). But for our money, the most entertaining aspect of their season is this: [They're leading the Majors in home runs](#), which no San Francisco team has ever done.

They didn't do it while winning three rings in five seasons a decade ago. They didn't do it while Barry Bonds was smashing records two decades ago. They didn't do it while Willie Mays and Willie McCovey were starring six decades ago.

Yet they're doing it now, without a Bonds, or Mays, or McCovey, without a slugging superstar at all; [71 players](#) have as many or more home runs as Mike Yastrzemski, leading the team with 21. (The Giants actually haven't had a 30-homer hitter since Bonds last did it in 2004; there have been [436](#) 30-homer seasons across the Majors since then.) Instead, they're doing it with depth. When Austin Slater homered to lead off Thursday's game, it made him the 10th different Giant with double-digit homers, [the most in baseball](#) this year, and the [most in Giants history](#).

But most interestingly, they're doing it in a ballpark that has long been considered to be absolute death to hitters, Oracle Park, which over the many names it has had since opening in 2000 has been thought of as a pitcher's dream. It's where pitchers go to get well. It's where batters don't want to be traded to.

Unless, of course ... that's no longer true. It might not be.

something fascinating has happened over the last two seasons. The Giants offense has hit much better at home, to the point that they are [the second-best home hitting team in baseball](#). Meanwhile, they haven't hit much better at all on the road, where they are merely [the 16th-best road hitting team](#). It's hard to see that and just think "the roster is deeper and improved," though it is certainly that too.

Considering that 2020 was a 60-game season, and we're not all the way through 2021 yet, it might be tempting to regard this as a fluke, to want to wait to see what happens over the next year or two. But: We know that the team made [considerable changes to the physical dimensions of the ballpark](#) during the 2019-'20 offseason, designed to help boost offense. So maybe there's something to this.

It's not just looking at Giants hitters and their OPS, really. Statcast provides far more detailed [park factors](#), which are a good way to show how different ballparks behave by comparing the performance of the same players at the park and away from the park. (So you don't just get "Yankee Stadium is a great home run park because Aaron Judge plays there," for example.) Generally, you want to look at these over multiple years, especially when you have things like 2020 offering a full home slate of just 30 games.

Oracle's ranking mostly tracks with what you'd expect. From [2017-'19](#), it was tied with Miami for the toughest place to hit in baseball. From [2018-'20](#), it was the third-hardest place to hit, and from 2019-'21, it's [fifth-hardest](#). If that seems like "no meaningful changes, what are you

talking about?" you're right. But because of all the changes they made to the ballpark, before 2020, maybe multi-year isn't the way to go. If we look at [single-year park factors](#), we get this:

2019: 30th-best hitter's park

2020: 7th-best hitter's park (tied)

2021: 13th-best hitter's park (tied)

There's obviously a lot more noise in single-year numbers, especially for a pair of incomplete seasons, and yet, those rankings, combined with that OPS chart, combined with what we know about the park changes, well, it's all hard to ignore. But: why?

What really changed at Oracle?

As written at the time, [this is what they did to the park](#):

The Giants announced new dimensions for Oracle Park's outfield on Thursday as part of their plan to revamp the park for the 2020 season, which includes relocating the bullpens from foul territory to their new home behind the center-field wall.

Left-center field will move from 404 feet to 399 feet, center field will move from 399 feet to 391 feet, and "Triples Alley" in right-center field will move from 421 feet to 415 feet. The new center-field wall will be seven feet high instead of eight.

The 391-foot distance to center field now makes it the [second-shortest center field](#) in baseball. But that's not the entirety of it, either. Despite the initial announcement that the center-field wall would drop from eight feet to seven, [it was raised up to 10 feet](#) just before Opening Day in 2020. Hold that thought for a second.

Now, whenever a team changes the height or distance of walls, the immediate thought is: *home runs*. That's sometimes overstated; after all, hitting a ball 415 feet is still 98.6% of the distance of hitting it 421 feet. It's still hard, just slightly less hard. But we did see more dingers in San Francisco, anyway.

From 2017-'19, Oracle saw the [30th-most](#) (i.e., fewest) homers, by a full 66 behind Miami. In 2020-'21, that number rose to [17th](#). We're counting all homers hit in the park, both by and against the Giants, so it's not just about the improved offense, and if "17th" isn't some launching pad, well, it's not 30th, either.

That tracks with the Statcast park factor for home runs, which saw this particular ballpark go from "absolutely wretched," as it ranked 30th in [2011](#) and [2017](#), to pick two years at random, all the way up to "average-ish." It's not Cincinnati, or anything. But it's not as impossible as it once was.

For example, this home run from Belt on Tuesday night almost certainly would not have been out of the park prior to 2020, according to Statcast tracking.

There are, all told, about three dozen homers that the new dimensions of the park created over the last two seasons.

But it's not *all* about home runs, either. Park factors rarely are.

For example, there's foul ball territory. Part of the park renovations included [adding an extra row of seats](#) where the bullpens had been down the lines, cutting down on about four feet of foul territory on both sides. Less foul territory means fewer foul outs, and that's played out in the numbers. This change only happened prior to 2021, not '20, and this year, no park has had fewer foul outs than Oracle has. From 2017-'20, there were seven parks that had fewer.

So that's helpful to hitters, and, we'll argue perhaps counterintuitively, that the extra wall height in center might be too. Sure, it helps to have walls that are 1% closer than they used to be. But the best thing you can do to hit a home run is to hit the ball as hard as you can. You'd think raising the height of a wall would be bad for hitters. We'll argue that it's actually been huge for them.

It might just be easier to make hard contact now

Let's go back to the last-second decision to raise that center-field wall before Opening Day last year. "The Giants have the only bullpens in the Major Leagues that partially overlap into the batter's eye, which has given some club officials mild indigestion," [wrote the Athletic](#) on July 22, 2020, after the first exhibition game at the newly configured park. Six days later, the wall was three feet higher than it had been, which was "[supposed to improve visibility for hitters.](#)"

It wasn't just the wall, either. There was another change, as well.

"We made an adjustment to the scoreboard, removing the lower screen," [said president of baseball operations Farhan Zaidi to NBC last October](#), "which our guys felt really helped the backdrop for them from a hitting standpoint."

In [2017-'19](#), Oracle had the 17th-best hard-hit rate. In [2020-'21](#), the park has the fifth-best hard hit rate. Again, that's not just about "improved lineup," because it's including what the pitching staff does, too; either way, the 2020-'21 Giants batters have the [sixth-best](#) home hard-hit rate but the [22nd-best](#) road hard-hit rate.

What's nice about measuring hard-hit rate -- simply how often a batted ball is hit with 95 mph or more of exit velocity -- is it's entirely about the moment of batted ball contact. It doesn't have anything to do with how the ball carries, or how far the fences are, or any of the other things you typically associate with a park factor. When the center-field fence was raised to increase visibility, it seems like it might have done exactly that.

"It's not as much the ballpark playing well, it's our guys hitting well," outfielder Alex Dickerson [told KNBR in June](#). "I've been saying that the last two years. You guys have been making up a bunch of stuff about putting a tarp up and it's traveling better. We're hitting the ball much harder."

He is, mostly, right, though of course he'd prefer to give credit to the good work of his teammates than an external factor.

But that part has come up a lot, that the ball is carrying differently. Is it?

It's an extremely difficult thing to account for, especially in a place like San Francisco where the weather isn't exactly consistent from day to night, nor the park itself from year to year. We know that in 2019, they [more than tripled](#) the size of the scoreboard in center field. We also know that starting in 2020, the right-field archways were blocked off, which may or may not have changed the wind patterns.

There's certainly plenty of anecdotal evidence, anyway. "It affects the carry to right-center and center," [said Mike Krukow on KNBR](#). "So now we have a much more home run friendly ballpark than we've ever seen."

Krukow's opinion carries weight; he pitched for the team when it called Candlestick home from 1983-'89, and he's been a full-time broadcaster for the club since 1994. But it might also be hard, with the eyeball test, to separate "the ball is carrying better" from "the ball is being hit harder."

The numbers say: Yes. Kind of. Go back to the Statcast park factors one more time, and you can see [how well a ball carries](#) in a particular park compared to other parks, in terms of "extra feet." (All on an apples-to-apples basis, in the sense that no one cares how far a grounder carries. It's comparing pulled balls hit in a particular blast-zone window of exit velocity and launch angle.)

From 2016-'20, Oracle Park rated poorly each year, costing hitters between 4 and 8 feet per season compared to other parks. It was 25th in 2016, 30th in 2017, 23rd in 2018, 29th in 2019, and 30th again in 2020.

It's [tied for 13th in 2021](#), and the number has gone from last year's "minus-7.3 feet of carry" to this year's "0," which means ... average. It's average. The ball used to carry horribly in Oracle, worse than anywhere. Now it's average carry. That doesn't happen by accident (though we saw much less difference between lefty and righty hitters than we expected when we split them).

That's both expected -- look at Krukow's comments -- and a little surprising that it's only showing up that way *this year*, not *last year*. Then again, last year started in the final week of July, missing the cold part of the early season, and had just 30 home dates. Maybe park factors over one-third of a season aren't the most reliable.

It's not, to be clear, that this is suddenly the world's greatest home run hitting park. It's not. On Wednesday, [Wade Jr. hit a blast to right-center](#) that garnered him a double, yet it would have been a home run in the other 29 Major League parks.

That's still going to happen, and we can't express enough that the biggest part of the Giants leading the Majors in homers is the incredible job they've done acquiring and coaching a deep group of hitters. But they're also, for once, not being held back by their home park as much. The Giants had the sport's all-time record holder in Bonds, and they never led the Majors in homers. They don't have anything of the sort in 2021, and they're on track to do it. It helps, apparently, to have your home park not be an opponent.

CATCHERS MOST HRS IN A SEASON, CAREER

1) 45 -- Johnny Bench, 1970 Reds

38 hit as a catcher

Bench has a strong case as the greatest catcher of all time, and his 1970 campaign shows why. At just 22 years old, Bench set a home run record that has stood for a half-century and did the same with RBIs (148). He also remains the only catcher to lead the AL or NL in big flies, a feat he accomplished again two seasons later.

2) 43 -- Javy Lopez, 2003 Braves

42 hit as a catcher

Nobody has gone deep more times in a season while actually playing catcher. (Lopez also hit one homer that season as a pinch-hitter). But while Lopez was a power threat throughout his career, this season came a little out of nowhere after he averaged just 16 homers from 1999-2002.

3-T) 41 -- Todd Hundley, 1996 Mets

41 hit as a catcher

Most would assume that the 1990s Mets catcher with the most home runs in a season would be Mike Piazza. Most would be wrong. It was Hundley who set that mark in his breakout 1996 campaign after hitting a total of 50 homers in 491 games over his first six seasons. Two years later, the Mets would acquire Piazza and then trade Hundley.

3-T) 41 -- Roy Campanella, 1953 Dodgers

40 hit as a catcher

Campanella starred in the Negro Leagues before signing with the Dodgers and becoming a three-time NL MVP Award winner. The second of those came in 1953, when Campy finished third in the NL in homers and first in RBIs (142) while starting 131 games behind the plate.

5-T) 40 -- Mike Piazza, 1997 Dodgers and '99 Mets

40 hit as a catcher in both seasons

The Hall of Famer was never better than in 1997, his last full season in L.A., when he hit .362/.431/.638 and led the Majors with a 185 [OPS+](#), which also is far and away the best figure ever produced by a qualifying AL/NL catcher. Despite that, Piazza was dealt to the Marlins and then the Mets in May 1998, moves that did nothing to slow down his mashing.

5-T) 40 -- Bench, 1972 Reds

34 hit as a catcher

Once again, Bench led the Majors in homers and RBIs -- also in intentional walks (23) -- while setting a career high in OPS+ (166). He won his second NL MVP Award and the fifth of 10 Gold Glove Awards.

8-T) 38 -- Salvador Perez, 2021 Royals

26 hit as a catcher

Perez has done a significant portion of his damage at DH, as the Royals have sought to keep his bat in the lineup while giving his 31-year-old knees a break. Perez caught more games (761) than all but one player (Yadier Molina) from 2013-18, but missing the '19 campaign with an elbow injury that required Tommy John surgery might have been a blessing in disguise. Perez's bat returned refreshed in 2020, and he carried that into '21, smashing his previous career high of 27 long balls.

8-T) 38 -- Piazza, 2000 Mets

35 hit as a catcher

This was another sensational season for Piazza, who hit .312/.398/.614, notched his third career top-three MVP finish and led the Mets to the World Series. Piazza added four postseason homers in 2000, including two in a huge NLCS performance against St. Louis.

10-T) 37 -- Carlton Fisk, 1985 White Sox

33 hit as a catcher

This season is truly difficult to fathom. By this point, Fisk was 37 years old, had caught nearly 1,500 MLB games and had never exceeded 26 homers. He far surpassed that total in 1985 and is one of only 14 players -- at any position -- to go deep that many times at such an advanced age.

10-T) 37 -- Gabby Hartnett, 1930 Cubs

36 hit as a catcher

A Hall of Famer who spent 19 of his 20 seasons (1922-41) with the Cubs, Hartnett produced arguably his best year in 1930, when he slashed .339/.404/.630.

Most home runs in a career

Only seven players who have spent the majority of their careers behind the plate have finished with 300-plus homers. Here they are:

1) 427 -- Piazza

396 hit as a catcher

Both of those numbers are records. Piazza notched nine seasons with 30-plus dingers along the way, more than double what any other catcher has produced.

2) 389 -- Bench

327 hit as a catcher

Bench matched his power at the plate with his skill behind it to such an extent that he sailed into the Hall of Fame with 96.4% of the vote on his first ballot in 1989.

3) 376 -- Fisk

351 hit as a catcher

While he had the big 1985 season, Fisk's placement here is more than anything a testament to his incredible endurance and longevity. Fisk appeared in 24 MLB seasons and caught more games (2,226) than any player besides Ivan Rodriguez.

4) 358 -- Yogi Berra

305 hit as a catcher

Berra never had a huge power season, topping out at 30 (1952, '56). But he was extremely consistent, reaching the 20-homer mark in 10 straight seasons from 1949-58.

5-T) 324 -- Gary Carter

298 hit as a catcher

Similar to Berra, Carter cracked 300 homers through years of methodical production. The 11-time All-Star averaged 24 big flies per year between 1977-87.

5-T) 324 -- Lance Parrish

299 hit as a catcher

When it comes to great catchers, Parrish flies a bit under the radar, having received only 1.7% of the vote in his only appearance on the Hall of Fame ballot (2001). But the six-time Silver Slugger Award winner popped over 200 homers for the Tigers from 1977-86 before bouncing around over the following nine seasons.

7) 311 -- Ivan Rodriguez

304 hit as a catcher

Nobody has caught more games than Pudge, and only four have gone deep more times while playing the position. Rodriguez only topped 27 homers in a season once (35 in his AL MVP-winning 1999 campaign) but reached double digits 15 times.

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT SEPTEMBER ROSTER EXPANSION 2021

The arrival of the 2021 season's last full month brings playoff clinches, nail-biting finishes in division and Wild Card races and final arguments for major award cases. But perhaps the most notable thing about Sept. 1 on the baseball calendar is roster expansion.

That said, this isn't the roster expansion you might remember from past years. Here's what fans need to know as Major League rosters grow in the month of September.

Roster limits

Under current rules, Major League teams are allowed to carry 26 players on their everyday active rosters. Clubs can add a 27th player on days in which they play a doubleheader. In September, those roster limits expand to 28 (29 on twin bill days). Teams must use every one of those 28 spots and can also carry a five-player taxi squad with them on road trips.

Prior to 2020, Major League rosters could expand to include as many members of the system's 40-man roster as the front office wanted. While the extra help in the heat of a playoff race was certainly welcomed, bloated rosters often led to lengthy games and teams playing with very different roster priorities. Capping the roster at a still-expanded 28 can give Major League clubs that extra boost toward the end of the season while making sure matters don't get too out of hand.

- [26-man roster rules](#)

Who can be called up

This is still not quite a "normal" Major League season while the sport deals with the COVID-19 pandemic, and fans might recall that protocols in early 2021 allowed clubs to promote only Triple-A players directly to the Majors due to their Tier 1 status. As vaccination availability has increased since the spring, this portion of the protocol has been relaxed and amended. Now, players from all levels are allowed to be added to a Major League roster so long as they are vaccinated. If a player is not vaccinated, then they still must be in Triple-A prior to their arrival in the Majors.

New Minor League schedule

One reason why rosters could expand to 30-plus players in the past was that the Minor League regular season traditionally ended on or around Labor Day. Because the Minor League season was pushed back to May this year, that is not the case, with schedules extending through September. Triple-A clubs, in particular, will participate in a postseason tournament called the [Triple-A Final Stretch](#) that concludes Oct. 3, the same day the Major League regular season will also end.

In essence, players won't be sent to the Majors in September just to get work in. They can still do that in the Minors. If they do get the call, it should be to make meaningful contributions down the stretch.

Rookie eligibility

Before 2020, days spent on a Major League roster did not count toward [rookie eligibility](#) if they came in September. In theory, a player could have 44 days on Aug. 31 and still not graduate from rookie status even if he was in the Majors for the duration of September.

That changed in 2020, and the alteration continues to stick in '21. Days spent on the active Major League roster will count toward the 45 needed to graduate from rookie status. So prepare for more prospect graduations in the weeks ahead.

EACH CLUB'S BEST SEPTEMBER CALL UP

AMERICAN LEAGUE EAST

Blue Jays: Roy Halladay

Debut: Sept. 20, 1998 vs. Devil Rays

Halladay's Hall of Fame career began as a September callup. He allowed three runs (two earned) over five innings in his MLB debut against the Devil Rays, but it was the second outing that left a lasting memory. Halladay was one out away from pitching the second no-hitter in franchise history when outfielder Bobby Higginson broke up the bid with a solo home run in the bottom of the ninth. It took a few more years for Halladay to become a mainstay in the rotation, but he ended up becoming one of the Blue Jays' all-time greats.

Orioles: Brooks Robinson

Debut: Sept. 17, 1955 vs. Senators

Robinson made his debut at Memorial Stadium against the Washington Senators, batting sixth and going 2-for-4 with an RBI. Thus started a Hall of Fame career for the 18-time All-Star, who spent his entire career with Baltimore.

Rays: David Price

Debut: Sept. 14, 2008 vs. Yankees

The No. 1 overall pick in the 2007 MLB Draft posted a 2.30 ERA in 109 2/3 Minor League innings that year as a starter, but he became a relief weapon for Tampa Bay in September as it clinched its first AL East title. Price famously closed out Game 7 of the 2008 ALCS against the Red Sox as the Rays won the franchise's first pennant.

Red Sox: Fred Lynn

Debut: Sept. 5, 1974 vs. Brewers

Future Hall of Famer Jim Rice had already come up in mid-August 1974; in early September, the Red Sox called up the other half of what would become known as the Gold Dust Twins. Lynn created excitement right out of the gate, hitting .419 with two doubles, two triples and two homers to go with a 1.188 OPS in 43 at-bats as a September callup. He carried that momentum

into 1975, when he was both the AL Rookie of the Year and AL MVP and helped Boston reach the World Series.

Yankees: Yogi Berra

Debut: Sept. 22, 1946 vs. Athletics

A 21-year-old Berra joined the Yankees for seven games at the end of the 1946 season, going 2-for-4 with a home run and two RBIs in his debut in the first game of a doubleheader victory at Yankee Stadium. Berra played 83 games the next year, winning the first of his record 10 World Series rings as a player. A three-time AL MVP, who earned 18 All-Star selections, Berra hit 358 homers with a lifetime .285 batting average and was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1972.

AL CENTRAL

Indians: Corey Kluber

Debut: Sept. 1, 2011 vs. Athletics

Kluber appeared in three games as a reliever in September 2011, then made a dozen starts in '12. There was little hint of what was to come. The righty became a rotation fixture in 2013, won the first of two AL Cy Young Awards in '14 and became one of the best pitchers in franchise history before being traded after the '19 season.

Royals: Carlos Beltran

Debut: Sept. 14, 1998 vs. Athletics

Beltran got a hit in his first MLB game and went on to hit .276 that first September, impressive enough to earn him Kansas City's starting job in center field in 1999. That's when he showed the world his talent, earning the AL Rookie of the Year Award while hitting .293 with 22 home runs and 108 RBIs. Beltran hit 123 homers in a Royals uniform, and he went on to amass 435 career big flies, 2,725 hits and three Gold Gloves over his 20-year MLB career.

Tigers: Alan Trammell

Debut: Sept. 9, 1977 vs. Red Sox

The Tigers promoted a 19-year-old Trammell from Double-A Montgomery one year after they drafted him out of high school in 1976. Detroit put Trammell at shortstop on a Friday night at Tiger Stadium and paired him with his second baseman at Montgomery, Lou Whitaker, who made his debut the same night. The two ended up playing 1,918 games together, the most by a double-play duo in Major League history.

Twins: Tony Oliva

Debut: Sept. 9, 1962 vs. Tigers

Oliva, one of the best pure hitters of his generation, was a September callup twice before becoming a regular in 1964. The Cuba native played in nine games in September 1962, hitting .444 in nine at-bats. It was more of the same in '63, when Oliva hit .429 in seven at-bats. When he finally received consistent playing time in 1964, he won the first of back-to-back batting titles, hitting .323 en route to AL Rookie of the Year honors. Oliva went on to be an eight-time All-Star and a three-time batting champion in a 15-year career with the Twins. Knee injuries derailed his career, but he's regarded as one of the best players not in the Hall of Fame.

White Sox: Luke Appling**Debut:** Sept. 10, 1930 vs. Red Sox

By the numbers, the best September callup for the White Sox was Craig Wilson, who hit an astounding .468 with three home runs and 10 RBIs over 47 at-bats in 1998. (And Magglio Ordonez got called up on Aug. 29, 1997, missing the cutoff by three days.) But it was Appling who meant the most to the franchise, hitting .308 in 26 September at-bats during the 1930 season at the start of his Hall of Fame career with the White Sox.

AL WEST**Angels: Francisco Rodriguez****Debut:** Sept. 18, 2002 vs. Athletics

A slew of injuries to their bullpen led the Angels to call up the 20-year-old Rodriguez, who struck out 13 over 5 2/3 scoreless innings in five September appearances to earn a spot on the club's postseason roster. K-Rod continued to electrify during the postseason, going 5-1 with a 1.93 ERA to help the Halos secure their first and only World Series title.

Astros: Joe Morgan**Debut:** Sept. 21, 1963 vs. Phillies

The future Hall of Famer and two-time NL MVP with the Reds made his debut two days past his 20th birthday for the Colt .45's in 1963. Morgan appeared in only 18 games the next two seasons before his breakout rookie season in 1965 -- the year the Astrodome opened and the Colt .45's became the Astros. He played 10 years with Houston, hitting .261 with 972 hits, 597 runs and 219 stolen bases.

Athletics: Jose Canseco**Debut:** Sept. 2, 1985 vs. Orioles

Canseco burst onto the scene as a 21-year-old and quickly captured attention, batting .302 with five homers and 13 RBIs in 29 games for the A's, who would promote first-rounder Mark McGwire less than a year later. Canseco swatted 33 homers to earn the AL Rookie of the Year Award in 1986, and McGwire took home the honor the following season. The Bash Brothers combined for 200 home runs from 1988-90, each season ending with an AL pennant for Oakland.

Mariners: Edgar Martinez**Debut:** Sept. 12, 1987 vs. White Sox

Martinez didn't make his MLB debut until his late-season callup as a 24-year-old third baseman. And even then, despite putting up a .372/.413/.581 slash line in 13 games, Seattle didn't give him a full-time shot until three years later. Once established, Martinez wound up becoming one of the greatest Mariners of all time, batting .312/.418/.515 over 18 seasons while earning seven All-Star berths, two AL batting titles and finally induction into Cooperstown.

Rangers: Juan Gonzalez**Debut:** Sept. 1, 1989 vs. Royals

Gonzalez was twice a September callup. The first time was in 1989 after spending a year in Double-A, and he hit just .150 with one home run and seven RBIs. Gonzalez spent the 1990

season at Triple-A and was much better prepared by the time he was called up on Aug. 31. Gonzalez hit .289 with four homers, 12 RBIs and a .522 slugging percentage in 25 games. A two-time MVP with the Rangers, Gonzalez was one of the greatest players in franchise history.

NATIONAL LEAGUE EAST

Braves: Chipper Jones

Debut: Sept. 11, 1993 vs. Padres

Jones' Hall of Fame career began when he debuted as a ninth-inning defensive replacement for shortstop Jeff Blauser during a 13-1 Atlanta win over San Diego at Jack Murphy Stadium. Selected with the first pick in the 1990 MLB Draft, Jones went 2-for-3 with a double as he appeared in eight games (four as a pinch-runner and three as a pinch-hitter) for the '93 Braves, who won 22 of their final 29 games to complete a 104-win season and win the NL West by one game over the Giants.

Marlins: Josh Beckett

Debut: Sept. 4, 2001 vs. Cubs

The second overall pick in the 1999 MLB Draft, Beckett's much-anticipated debut came at age 21 in Miami. He threw six scoreless innings, allowing one hit while striking out five against the Cubs. Two years later, Beckett was the ace of the staff, and he threw a complete-game shutout in Game 5 of the NLCS vs. Chicago. In Game 7, he pitched in relief to help close out that series. Beckett was the 2003 World Series MVP. He spent the first five years of his 14-year MLB career with the Marlins.

Mets: Mookie Wilson

Debut: Sept. 2, 1980 vs. Dodgers

A college standout at South Carolina and a second-round Draft pick in 1977, Wilson stole 160 bases over four Minor League seasons to earn a callup when rosters expanded in '80. Immediately inserted into the leadoff spot for an out-of-contention Mets team, he hit .268 with seven steals. Mookie went on to compile 20.8 [WAR](#) over 10 seasons with New York -- tops all-time among Mets who debuted in September -- doing some of his most memorable work in the '86 World Series.

Nationals: Ryan Zimmerman

Debut: Sept. 1, 2005 vs. Braves

The Nationals made Zimmerman the first Draft pick in team history when they selected him fourth overall in 2005, and he reached the Majors that September. Zimmerman closed out the year with a slash line of .397/.419/.569 in 20 games, and he has been with the Nats ever since (aside from opting out of the 2020 season), playing his entire 16-season career in D.C.

Phillies: Jimmy Rollins

Debut: Sept. 17, 2000 vs. Marlins

The greatest shortstop in Phillies history made his big league debut a memorable one, tripling into the right-field corner at Veterans Stadium against Marlins right-hander Chuck Smith for his

first career hit. "Watch him fly!" Phils broadcaster Harry Kalas said as Rollins raced around the bases. It was the first of Rollins' 2,455 career hits and 115 career triples.

NL CENTRAL

Brewers: Jim Gantner

Debut: Sept. 3, 1976 vs. Tigers

It was four more years before the Wisconsin-born Gantner became a fixture at second base for the Brewers, part of a triumvirate with Hall of Famers Robin Yount and Paul Molitor that stayed together through 1992, when Molitor left via free agency and Gantner retired. Gantner was good but not great, beloved for his solid defense, hard-nosed play and longevity with his home-state team. His No. 17 is not formally retired, but it has not been given to another player since.

Cardinals: Stan Musial

Debut: Sept. 17, 1941 vs. Braves

The slugger whose name would become synonymous with St. Louis baseball debuted in the back end of a mid-September doubleheader, at age 20. Musial played in 12 games that month and hit .426/.449/.574 with a 1.023 OPS (and only one strikeout) in 49 plate appearances. Musial would make the team the following spring, at which point his Hall of Fame career began in earnest.

Cubs: Greg Maddux

Debut: Sept. 2, 1986 vs. Astros

Maddux was a second-round pick in 1984 and appeared in 14 games with the Cubs' Rookie-level Pikeville team that year, going 6-2 with a 2.63 ERA. He spent the '85 season at Class A Peoria, and he made 26 Minor League starts at Double-A and Triple-A in '86 before he was called up. The right-hander notched a win in his first big league start on Sept. 7 against the Reds, and Maddux would eventually pitch 23 seasons, including 10 with the Cubs. The Hall of Famer won four NL Cy Young Awards -- one with the Cubs, three with the Braves.

Pirates: Willie Stargell

Debut: Sept. 16, 1962 vs. Giants

Stargell played only 10 games in September 1962, and his rookie campaign in '63 wasn't particularly memorable. But "Pops" went on to enjoy one of the most distinguished careers in Pirates history. The Hall of Fame slugger brought home two World Series rings, an NL MVP Award, seven All-Star nods and a World Series MVP trophy. Stargell launched 475 career homers and drove in 1,540 RBIs while playing 2,360 games over 21 years -- all of them in a Pittsburgh uniform.

Reds: Joey Votto

Debut: Sept. 4, 2007 vs. Mets

Although Billy Hamilton's September 2013 callup in a pennant race might have been more electric at the time, Votto's debut six years earlier laid the foundation for his career as a franchise player. He batted .321/.360/.548 in 24 games and went on to finish second in the NL Rookie of the Year voting in '08. In 2010, Votto won the NL MVP as he evolved into one of the game's best and most consistent hitters.

NL WEST

D-backs: Miguel Montero

Debut: Sept. 6, 2006 at Marlins

Montero made his debut on the night Aníbal Sánchez threw a no-hitter against the D-backs. He then split time with Chris Snyder over the next couple of seasons before taking over as the starter in 2009. Montero compiled a 121 OPS+ '11 when Arizona won the NL West, and he came back the next year and posted a 123 mark. He was recently named catcher on the team's 20th Anniversary team.

Dodgers: Fernando Valenzuela

Debut: Sept. 15, 1980 vs. Braves

Purchased from his Mexican League team for \$120,000 the previous year, Valenzuela was a starter the entire 1980 Double-A season at San Antonio, and he was promoted to the Dodgers as an extra bullpen arm for the stretch run. He tipped off his future stardom with 17 2/3 scoreless innings in 10 appearances as the Dodgers finished in a first-place tie with the Astros, losing a one-game NL West tiebreaker game when manager Tom Lasorda started Dave Goltz instead of Valenzuela. The following year, Valenzuela was the first to win the Cy Young and the Rookie of the Year in the same year, and the Dodgers won the World Series.

Giants: John Montefusco

Debut: Sept. 3, 1974 vs. Dodgers

"The Count" commanded attention from almost the first moment of his big league debut. Relieving starter Ron Bryant with the bases loaded, nobody out and three runs in for the Dodgers in the first inning, Montefusco allowed only one inherited runner to score and proceeded to perform effectively in long, long relief. He worked nine innings, allowed just one run and hit a two-run homer himself as the Giants triumphed, 9-5, at Dodger Stadium. Later that month, Montefusco shut out the Reds, hit another home run and advanced from first to third on a Johnny Bench passed ball. Montefusco's popularity soared at a time when relatively few people gave a hoot about the woeful Giants. He was pretty much all that Giants fans had to root for from 1975-76, when he went 31-23. Montefusco won the NL Rookie of the Year Award in 1975, made the NL All-Star team in '76 and pitched a no-hitter later that year.

Padres: Khalil Greene

Debut: Sept. 3, 2003 vs. D-backs

Greene was OK in September 2003, posting a .671 OPS in 20 games. But his callup paved the way for a 2004 season in which he finished second to Jason Bay in NL Rookie of the Year voting. Greene then helped the Padres to consecutive division titles in '05 and '06, and a near-miss in '07.

Rockies: Ubaldo Jiménez

Debut: Sept. 22, 2006 vs. Rays

The Rockies generally have their top prospects get their feet wet before the fool's gold days of September. Of the top 12 players in club history in WAR, Jiménez and German Márquez are the only ones who debuted with Colorado in September. In 2010, Jimenez threw a no-hitter, went 19-8 and set what was then a club record with a 2.88 ERA.

FOLLOW-UP ON LAST WEEK'S DISCUSSION OF BILL FREEHAN AND WHETHER HE WAS HOF MATERIAL—A SUBSCRIBER RESPONDS

Regarding your list of catchers in the HOF, possible candidates, and good but not great. Being a curious guy, I looked at (most of) their WAR and AB stats on Baseball Reference. If you divide WAR by AB you get a figure that tells you something about productivity (arguably I should have used games played but I bet it wouldn't make much difference). Of course, it doesn't factor in anything about longevity or the other measures like awards (Bob Boone gets hammered when you take that stuff out of the mix). That said here's what I found:

HOF = Bold Italic

Candidates = Bold Underscore

Good but not Great = Italic

Gibson .01782

Tennace .01066

Bench .00980

Cochrane .00965

Bresnahan .00955

Dickey .00896

Ewing .00893

Carter .00879

Hartnett .00869

Munson .00862

Piazza .00860

Campanella .00842

Mackey .00836

Berra .00789

Fisk .00781

Bailey .00759

Burgess .00747

Haller .00744

Stearns .00734

Porter .00736

Freehan .00733

Rodriguez .00716

Sundberg .00672

Downing .00655

Lombardi .00647

Schalk .00625

Wynegar .00612

Parrish .00589

Simmons .00579

Lollar .00562

Crandall .00559

Sanguillen .00545

Battey .00524

McCarver .00511

Farrell .00510

Howard .00496

Boone .00378

Santop .00147 (Baseball Reference doesn't have enough data to make this meaningful)

I checked Gene Tenace's stats three times! Weird, but it is what it is--that doesn't mean I'd put him in the HOF. There are a couple of guys where shortened careers threw things off: Wynegar is a good example. Also someone like Brian Downing played a lot of games at other positions.

I assume one effect of all this will be you trumpeting the injustice of Munson's exclusion from the HOF (I always tried to convince myself he was better than Fisk--maybe he was). All in all though, it's pretty clear that some of those HOFers were amazingly good.

PETE COMMENT—I RECEIVED A BUNCH OF EMAILS AFTER LAST WEEK'S ITEM ON FREEHAN, SPLIT EXACTLY BETWEEN HE DESERVES TO BE IN AND HE DOESN'T. WHAT DO YOU THINK?

STREAMING THE FUTURE—WHATS BEHIND MLB'S TV BALCOUT AND DIRECT-TO-CONSUMER WOES.

Ahead of Major League Baseball's inaugural Field of Dreams game in Iowa this month, a billboard was taken out decrying the sport's television blackouts.

"Commissioner Manfred: End The MLB Blackouts, Let Iowans Watch Their Favorite Teams," it [read](#), in all capital letters.

Vaguely, in a press conference before the game, Rob Manfred [addressed](#) what has become one of baseball's seemingly permanent conditions: the fact that some people cannot watch the games they want to.

"There's nothing more important to us as a business priority than delivering games to fans," Manfred said. "That's what we're about. The blackout situation is a complicated one. It involves regional broadcasters, distributors, our individual clubs. And we are spending a tremendous amount of time in an effort to get to a better place in terms of where our games are distributed."

Local media rights distribution in baseball is, indeed, highly complicated, and what adds to the intricacy is the sea of change in television distribution outside of baseball.

As Manfred pointed out, three parties are involved besides fans. The clubs are one. The teams sell the rights to broadcast games to a second party, the regional sports network, which is the station that produces the games. (Some teams own part of their RSNs.)

The RSNs then sell carriage to a TV provider, be it a standard cable company like Spectrum, or a satellite company like DirecTV — whichever company you might subscribe to on a monthly basis so that you can watch the RSN. But there's also a relatively new group of providers that are considered "over-the-top" services: the streaming services like YouTube TV, Sling, Hulu and others.

But ultimately, your ability to watch baseball games depends on where you are. This story focuses on the state of media rights inside the U.S., and although blackouts exist in a few frustrating forms, they may not actually be the most pressing issue — or, at least, they are only a part of the whole.

The sport has not yet widely moved to direct-to-consumer options, and that plays into baseball's ability to capture younger fans, who are already [a tough get](#).

"There's not a live event in this world that anybody with an internet connection shouldn't be able to watch," said Greg Bouris, who spent many years as an official at the players' union and now directs the sport management program at Adelphi University. "Whether they want to pay what the cost is, is another question. If Kanye West is performing at the Great Pyramid in Egypt tomorrow, I should be able to get onto my mobile device, somebody's going to be offering it to me, and I'm going to pop down my credit card."

In baseball, the train is barreling down the tracks. The switch many households are making from traditional cable providers to streaming services — cord-cutting — is propelling massive change in media distribution, and it's going to affect the sport one way or another. Industry revenues, the balance of power between big- and small-market teams, the creation and retention of fans, all of it ties into TV.

But first, what do the current conditions look like? And whose interests are they serving?

The easiest way to watch your favorite baseball team is to subscribe to a TV provider that carries the team's regional sports network. But you can only do so if you live somewhere MLB considers to be "in market" for that team.

For those who are "out of market," MLB has long offered a package of games that can be streamed over the internet, called MLB.tv. But in some cases, even if you live far away from the team you wish to watch, you still cannot catch its games through [MLB.tv](#) — because MLB nonetheless considers you to be in market. The billboard in Iowa was referencing the fact that

in that state, the games of the Brewers, Cardinals, Cubs, Royals, Twins and White Sox are all unavailable to [MLB.tv](https://mlb.tv) subscribers because of MLB's territorial rights system.

In Iowa, then, the only way to watch one of those teams — despite the hundreds of miles some residents live from those teams' stadiums — is to subscribe to a TV provider that carries a given team's RSN. For some people, that would mean the burden of switching providers. And for a variety of reasons, not everyone wants to make that leap. MLB considers this type of customer, in Iowa or elsewhere, to be "underserved."

There is another group of fans whom MLB calls "unserved": those who cannot access the telecasts at all. This is the group for whom games are not only blacked out on MLB.tv because they are technically "in market," but the team's RSN is not carried by a local provider, like a cable company.

Iowa is not the only market swimming in blackouts. Las Vegas, too, has six teams blacked out. None of the California teams — the Angels, Athletics, Dodgers, Giants or Padres — are viewable over MLB.tv, and the Diamondbacks are inaccessible as well. Hawaii is in a similar boat, with all the California teams unavailable via [MLB.tv](https://mlb.tv) there too.

MLB declined to provide estimates of how many fans it considers to be underserved or unserved, and the league does not publicize MLB.tv's total subscribers, either. But the league believes the number of people entirely in the dark is small, and smaller than the number of fans who could, theoretically, go through the hassle of switching providers.

But why doesn't MLB just rule that no team is blacked out, in Iowa or Vegas or elsewhere? Who is actually benefiting from this arrangement?

In different ways, and in different scenarios, the answer is: All three parties in the chain.

Take the Iowa scenario. The TV providers — the cable and satellite companies traditionally — pay a lot of money to carry regional sports networks, often several dollars per subscriber, and that cost ultimately gets passed on to the consumer. But if the RSN is available a la carte to everyone in market through someone else's streaming service, then the provider won't be happy paying top dollar to carry the RSN. The cable companies want the allure of baseball games to be part of the reason you subscribe to, say, Comcast's cable package.

"They're paying a premium, and the premium says, you (the RSN) can be offered via us, and you can be offered up via another pay-TV bundle," said Lee Berke, president of LHB Sports, Entertainment & Media and TV industry veteran. "But you can't be offered up on direct to consumer. If you do that, then you don't need to subscribe to my service in order for you to be watched. Therefore, you not only are in breach of your contract, but you need to negotiate that out with me and there's going to be some financial pain that's going to happen."

Of course, these contracts between RSNs and providers do eventually end. But making the games universally available via streaming could mean that local providers decide to balk at renewing an RSN, or want to pay a lot less. And if a distributor actually dropped an RSN because they felt the games were less valuable without local exclusivity, then the net result might not actually be viewers gained, but viewers lost.

The question of exclusivity also directly benefits the teams themselves — some teams, at least.

Take the state of Florida, where the Yankees hold spring training, and where many expat New Yorkers live. Some Florida TV providers actually carry the station that broadcasts Yankees games, the YES Network. So you can, in fact, live in Florida and have the YES Network channel in your cable or satellite or streaming service. But once 7 p.m. rolls around, the Yankees games themselves are not watchable. All that's available on YES in Florida is the station's ancillary programming.

So the only common way to get the Yankees games in Florida would be through [MLB.tv](#) (or through what's called Extra Innings, a similar set-up to [MLB.tv](#) that provides all the out-of-market games, but does so through a pay TV provider, rather than over the internet).

Why can't you subscribe to YES Network in Florida and watch games on it? To protect the two less popular teams in the state: the Miami Marlins and the Tampa Bay Rays.

"In the U.S., when you buy a major league franchise, you buy the Yankees; part of that includes the stadium, the intellectual property, and a variety of things, and that includes a set of rights, and those set of rights are limited on a territorial basis," Berke said. "It happens to be for the Yankees you can go as far as south as Tom's River N.J. You can go into a little bit of Pennsylvania, like Bucks County. You get all of New Jersey, you get obviously New York City and Long Island and you get Westchester and you can go up to Fairfield County in Connecticut. It coexists with the Red Sox in most of Connecticut, but then you can go upstate New York. That's your territory. So you can exploit within that, but in turn, the Major League Baseball franchise (agreement) says, 'You cannot show your games in Florida because the Marlins have that territory in South Florida.'"

Consider what might happen if anyone, anywhere, could freely subscribe to Yankees games on the YES Network on an individual basis: Plenty of people in Florida might simply opt to pay for Yankees games, rather than pay for Rays games. Rightly or wrongly, much of baseball's economic system is built around propping up a 30-team circuit, with protections for the smaller-market owners such as revenue sharing between clubs.

"Television territories that cause these blackouts are integral to the economics of the game," Manfred told [Forbes](#) shortly after becoming commissioner in 2015. "They're a foundation of the very structure of the league."

Some form of change might be inevitable. All of these problems are starting to pale in comparison to another issue: the reach of traditional television. One reason MLB believes its TV framework has, overall, been a success to this point is because of reach. It has set up a system whereby virtually every game is produced and distributed. Yet, a decline in the number of eyeballs on those telecasts is a major threat in marketing.

“The pay-TV universe is shrinking. Fewer and fewer people are subscribing to pay television,” Berke said. “People are watching content on laptops and iPads and phones, via TikTok and a lot of different ways, but they’re not buying it through a pay-TV bundle. And if you want to watch live television, you get YouTube TV or you get Hulu with Live TV or other things. They’re not showing the RSNs.”

When the digital providers like YouTube TV arrived, MLB was encouraged, because it gave people another way to watch in-market games. Instead of subscribing to cable, you could subscribe to an over-the-top service, and watch the team you choose — so long as that service actually carried your local team’s RSN. But the interest among over-the-top providers in RSNs is dwindling. YouTube TV no longer carries the YES Network, for example, after a dispute over price. So if you live in New York and subscribe to YouTube TV as your main form of television, you’re not getting Yankees games through that service, and your only recourse would be to sign up for a different TV service, perhaps through cable or satellite.

But as more and more fans move to services like YouTube TV, or skip traditional TV channels entirely, the burden only grows on MLB to make sure customers outside the standard ecosystem can see games.

“What you’re talking about in terms of territorial embargo — I’m not discounting the frustration they have, but it’s kind of limited in scope geographically,” Berke said. “This is happening nationwide: Pay-TV subscriptions are shrinking. They are down now to less than 77 million homes. They used to be over 100 million homes. They could be going to the 50 million level in the next several years. Meanwhile, you’ve got 30 to 40 million people who are consuming content solely via streaming — cord-cutters and cord-nevers — and they can’t see their RSNs, and that’s a major major problem for attracting your next generation of fans.”

The sport’s [Nielsen ratings](#) are indeed dropping.

What’s the fix? Each individual MLB team has the ability to strike a direct-to-consumer deal, theoretically. Back when Bud Selig was commissioner, all of the MLB teams centralized the digital rights to games: Those rights belonged the commissioner’s office, while traditional broadcast rights belonged to the individual teams. But in 2019, MLB returned the digital rights to the clubs, because the technology had reached a point where there was no meaningful difference between the two forms of rights.

Teams became free to strike deals with over-the-top providers to broadcast their games. The Yankees, for example, scheduled 21 games to be broadcast on Amazon Prime this year.

But all 30 teams are not exactly free to do what they want. They remain at the mercy of contracts they have signed with RSNs — as well as the contracts the RSNs have signed with providers. Many of those deals limit how the teams or the RSNs can sell their digital rights, which leaves two choices. The parties can try to reopen a deal before it expires, or wait until it's up to negotiate more freedom for streaming and direct-to-consumer options. The wait could be years in some cases, and the changes could be costly.

"There's going to be a reckoning," Berke said. "There's going to be a difficult set of negotiations that have to take place."

Most providers, Berke said, are probably willing to negotiate with RSNs to allow for expanded digital streaming of baseball games. But that right will come at a cost to the RSN. "(Providers) know that if they allow an RSN to just go scot-free without a financial penalty for being offered direct to consumer, that their subscribing losses, programming subscribing losses, are only going to increase, so they've got to negotiate that out," Berke said. "I think they are willing to strike deals to make that happen."

In the meantime, there's no wave-of-the-hand solution to create direct-to-consumer choices across the league.

"The blackouts exist because rights are sold exclusively to regional sports networks, and we don't have the right to do it on MLB.tv," Manfred [said recently on WFAN](#). "With less distribution and people in the cable bundle, we see that as a problem, and we're working hard to correct it."

But going direct-to-consumer could be a scary proposition for the teams and, in particular, the RSNs.

Live sports drives television, and in turn, television has driven the climb of revenues in baseball for years. If you subscribe to cable, and your cable company carries the RSN on basic cable, you're paying for that RSN whether you actually watch it or not. Teams and cable companies and RSNs all benefit from that system. But what happens if the only people paying to watch baseball games are only the people who actually want to watch?

"I think the big fear would be in going to direct to consumer, you're going to get consumption based on actual demand for your product," Bouris said. "So in baseball there's 162 pieces of inventory they have to sell. And if you come out of April or May and you're in last place, that inventory becomes less valuable. There's going to be less demand for it. So depending on what that pay-per-view, direct-to-consumer model looks like, the revenue can vastly ebb and flow if you're putting the power in the hands of the consumer."

It follows that if games were primarily offered on demand, or on a monthly subscriber basis, owners would feel more pressure to field competitive teams, perhaps lessening tanking in the sport.

“If you’re not giving them something to watch, you’re not putting star power out there, there’s going to be less interest in your product,” Bouris said.

But Bouris does not think MLB will eliminate territorial rights and blackouts — at least, not in the near future. The major question is how the teams actually put their streaming rights to use. Do the clubs sell them on their own? To how many platforms? Could you newly get Cubs games from five streaming services or one?

“How does that cannibalize the RSN model?” Bouris said. “It’s a tricky, tricky proposition.”

The commissioner’s office knows that for a very long time, the cable business has been a boon to its own success. MLB has an interest in simultaneously preserving the traditional TV structure, but also moving away from it, for finding some middle ground that allows for increased streaming options but does not greatly accelerate the demise of the cable companies and their ilk. A supplement, rather than a total bloodletting. Because if RSNs suffer, the teams can suffer too, in viewership and revenue.

“The reality is a number of teams have financial interests in these networks. They have ownership stakes. And apart from that, they all have rights fees deals, in some fashion,” Berke said.

And yet, if MLB doesn’t expand its service as viewers increasingly move away from the old pay-TV model, the sport is going to lose fans.

“You need your next generation of fans,” Berke said. “Regardless of the fact that you’re in New York, you become a Yankees fan by exposure. You see the games on TV, you go to the games. If you can’t see the games on TV, then you’re reducing a prime opportunity to create your next generation of fans.

“You don’t want to lose pay TV. It’s still a very large audience. But it’s shrinking, and not only that, it’s aging. And so you want to get to the cord-cutters and cord-nevers that are watching on their phones and iPads. So yes, from a team’s standpoint, you’ve got a vital interest in seeing this happen. Problem is that you’re not the captain of this vessel. Your rights are signed over to these respective RSNs, and they’re the ones that have to create these deals.”

Berke noted that RSNs are in greater peril than the providers. The legacy providers, the Comcasts of the world, are losing subscribers for their television offerings. But many are also seeing growth selling broadband internet: Comcast sells television, but it also sells the internet service you stream Netflix over.

Many RSNs, however, are already in trouble. Sinclair in 2019 paid \$9.6 billion for 21 RSNs, which included the exclusive rights to 14 MLB teams. But providers, including streaming services like YouTube TV and Hulu, don't want to pay the asking price. Sinclair is in a protracted fight with Dish Network, too. And it's MLB's problem, too, if providers like Dish don't want to pay to carry the games on Sinclair's networks.

"At the time they purchased the RSNs, they thought they were getting a bargain," Berke said. "And suddenly that subscriber base was shrinking at a far more substantial rate than before."

Sinclair is considering starting a streaming service that would charge customers more than \$20 per month. But there is industry skepticism that Sinclair, or other RSNs, would be able to make enough money in such a model to make up for the loss of standard subscribers, at least initially. It's much easier for a consumer to jump in and out of an a la carte subscription, and hold it for only part of the year, than it is to stop and restart cable service. The team is playing bad? Just unsubscribe.

New deals between teams and RSNs are already including greater allowances for streaming, including the deals Bally Sports Florida and Bally Sports Wisconsin — both Sinclair RSNs — struck with the Marlins and Brewers, respectively. But club bottom lines are at stake here: If providers are not paying what they once did for RSNs, then in turn, RSNs probably won't pay as much to clubs, and MLB owners won't like that.

If more direct-to-consumer options arise, some RSNs seem positioned to do particularly well. Those are the biggest names: the YES Network, NESN, SportsNetLA. The stations that carry the most prominent teams (and that are also partially owned by the team they carry).

"Unless you're the Yankees or the Red Sox or the Dodgers, where you control your own destiny, where there's limited cord-cutting, those big paydays are over," an executive in the sport said. "It comes back to revenue sharing. So all of these small-market teams are basically trying to figure out how it is that they can make money."

"The whole concept of basic cable, which funded all these RSNs for the most part, it's eroding. Because people are going to streaming. As a result, the economics aren't going to be there."

MLB teams have to share a percentage of local revenue already. But big-market teams aren't going to want to further cut in the small-market teams into digital rights. And conversely, small-market teams are going to demand some sort of protection. The territorial rights that exist today are in part a mechanism for protecting smaller-market teams. A move to direct-to-consumer offerings sets up another edition of baseball's classic fight: the owners amongst themselves.

“They gave them rights without any revenue sharing of stream rights,” another industry source said. “Couldn’t believe they did it.”

MLB is casting a wide net, and has explored creating its own in-market streaming service, sources said. The technology, though MLB.tv, is already there. “It would just be an alternative to local RSNs,” one executive said. “It’s a joke. I mean, the cable companies are dropping MLB Network. They can’t even [keep that](#) on cable TV.”

TV rights and viewership, have been the spigot for MLB. But the pipes are being rearranged. One executive in the sport thinks that, a decade from now, the primary way to watch a baseball game is going to be streaming.

“I think it’s coming in the next 10 years,” they said. “There’s not going to be basic cable. I think there’s going to be a la carte for everything.”

Ostensibly, that could help fans: Increased choices and access points are probably only a boon. But at-home viewing costs could be higher, if the cost of watching a baseball team is no longer split among every cable or satellite subscriber, and is instead paid directly by the person who wants to watch. What’s unclear is whether the owners, in markets of all sizes, could develop a system that eliminates or significantly lessens the territorial rights and blackouts in streaming. The cable TV and territorial rights model has been a building block for so much of the sport, and the owners’ financial windfall.

“The reason sports expanded so much since the TV boom was the fact that you needed more teams around the country to get those more lucrative national (TV) deals,” Bouris said. “You had to fill those media markets. But additionally, it was also an appealing system to generate revenue beyond selling tickets. That made franchises more valuable. That made them more in demand. You could argue that if we went to an a la carte model, you don’t need that many teams. You might make more money if you only had 10 teams and only the best players were on those 10 teams, because it doesn’t matter where you are now.”

INVASION OF THE ROBOT UMPIRES

The minor leagues have been testing the Automated Ball-Strike System. But isn’t yelling and screaming about bad calls half the fun of baseball?

Grown men wearing tights like to yell terrible things at Fred DeJesus. DeJesus is an umpire in the outer constellations of professional baseball, where he’s been spat on and, once, challenged to a postgame fight in a parking lot. He was born in Bushwick, Brooklyn, to Puerto Rican parents, stands five feet three, and is shaped, in his chest protector, like a fire hydrant; he once ejected a player for saying that he suffered from “little-man syndrome.” Two years ago, DeJesus became the first umpire in a regular-season game anywhere to use something called

the Automated Ball-Strike System. Most players refer to it as the “robo-umpire.” Major League Baseball had designed the system and was testing it in the Atlantic League, where DeJesus works. The term “robo-umpire” conjures a little R2-D2 positioned behind the plate, beeping for strikes and booping for balls. But, for aesthetic and practical reasons, M.L.B. wanted human umpires to announce the calls, as if playacting their former roles. So DeJesus had his calls fed to him through an earpiece, connected to a modified missile-tracking system. The contraption looked like a large black pizza box with one glowing green eye; it was mounted above the press box. When the first pitch came in, a recorded voice told DeJesus it was a strike. He announced it, and no one in the ballpark said anything.

The eeriest thing about the robo-umpire is the silence. This summer, I attended some games in Central Islip, New York, home of the Long Island Ducks, to check it out. The pizza-box device is made by a company called TrackMan, founded by two Danish brothers, Klaus and Morten Eldrup-Jørgensen, who created it to train golfers. It is easy to miss. At one of DeJesus’s games, I observed a kind of Turing test. Starting in the fifth inning, a lanky middle-aged guy behind home plate started heckling. “Move the fucking game along!” he said, after DeJesus announced a ball. A few minutes later, after a call he disliked, he yelled, “Look at him! How can he even see over the catcher?” A man in a Mets cap nearby pointed up at the device, explaining that the calls were automated. The heckler appeared confused: “Can he overrule it?”

Mets Hat shook his head. The heckler, looking embarrassed, replied, “He’s called a good game, I gotta say!”

Baseball is a game of waiting and talking. For a hundred and fifty years or so, the strike zone—the imaginary box over home plate, seventeen inches wide, and stretching from the batter’s knees to the middle of his chest—has been the game’s animating force. The argument between manager and umpire is where the important disputes over its boundaries are litigated. The first umpires were volunteers who wore top hats, at whom spectators “hurled curses, bottles and all manner of organic and inorganic debris,” according to a paper by the Society for American Baseball Research. “Organic debris” wasn’t defined, but one wonders. A handful of early umpires were killed.

Rules of engagement evolved in fits and starts. Today, everyone knows that an aggrieved party can kick dirt, but not over the plate, which the umpire maintains with his special brush. You may scream in an umpire’s face, but you must never touch him. Kevin Costner’s character in “Bull Durham” doesn’t get ejected when he says that the ump made “a cocksucking call,” but he does when he calls the man himself “a cocksucker.” That’s a no-no. Lip-readers or hot mikes sometimes reveal these arguments to be admirable examples of candor and of dispute resolution—two stressed-out guys trying their best, with fans or bosses breathing down their necks. More often, arguments are like stock-car wrecks: grotesque, morally indefensible, and the thing a lot of people secretly root for. In 1980, the umpire Bill Haller wore a wire during a dispute with Earl Weaver, the Baltimore Orioles manager at the time:

WEAVER: You’re here and this crew is here just to fuck us! (*Haller ejects Weaver.*) That’s good! That’s great! And you suck!

HALLER: Bah, you shit! (*Haller points his finger at Weaver.*)

WEAVER: Get your finger off of me! (*Weaver slaps Haller's finger away.*)

HALLER: I didn't touch you!

WEAVER: You pushed your finger into me!

HALLER: I did not! Now you're lying!

WEAVER: No you are!

HALLER: You are lying!

WEAVER: You are a big liar!

HALLER: You are a liar, Earl!

WEAVER: You are!

This continued for nearly three minutes.

When the robots came, the arguments basically stopped. After the Ducks game, I met DeJesus outside the ballpark. "There were six calls that I disagreed with," he said, referring to the words that came through his earpiece from the robot. "One pitch was right down the middle. I went to call strike three, and it said, 'Ball,' and I went, 'Ball!' And I looked at both dugouts." No one had come out to argue. He continued, "I miss the battles." In his day job, DeJesus works as a special-education teacher on Staten Island. His commute to Islip can be three hours. The Atlantic League pays him a hundred and sixty dollars a game. His dream is to umpire the College World Series. He trains himself using a virtual-reality headset, and he rewatches footage after every game. He has worked more than six thousand games and called upward of half a million pitches. "When I first heard about A.B.S., I was very angry," he said. Rick White, the Atlantic League's president, told me, "We had some umpires go rogue. A very small percentage of them." They refused to call the pitches that the system called. One unhappy umpire called a game from ten feet or so behind his usual position, as a protest. But the system won DeJesus's respect. It was, he admitted, better than him.

During the first robo-ump season, players complained about some strange calls. M.L.B. tweaked the dimensions of the zone, and this year the consensus has been that A.B.S. is profoundly consistent—and bound for the major leagues. The Ducks manager, the former Mets second baseman Wally Backman, is known for being an enthusiastic arguer; he once threw dozens of bats onto the infield after an ejection. ("Pick that shit up, you dumb motherfuckers!") But he loves the machines. Smoking Marlboro Reds in the grandstand one day, he told me, "It's gonna be in the major leagues in a lot shorter time than people think." M.L.B. has already concluded that the device is near-perfect, precise to within fractions of an inch. "It's going to be more

accurate, it'll reduce controversy in the game, and be good for the game," the M.L.B. commissioner, Rob Manfred, has said. But the question is whether controversy is worth reducing, or whether, like the scratches and grooves on a vinyl LP, it is the sign of a human hand. Joe Torre, the former Yankees manager, who now works in the commissioner's office, has argued publicly against the robots. "It's an imperfect game and has always felt perfect to me," he said.

A human, at least, yells back. When I spoke with Frank Viola, the pitching coach for the High Point Rockers, an Atlantic League team in North Carolina, he said that A.B.S. worked as designed, but that it was also unforgiving and pedantic, almost legalistic. "Manfred is a lawyer," Viola noted. Some pitchers have complained that, compared with a human's, the robot's zone seemed small. Viola was once an excellent big-leaguer himself. When he was pitching, he said, umpires rewarded skill. Throw it where you aimed, and it would be a strike, even if it was an inch or two outside. There was a dialogue between pitcher and umpire. During the first inning of the Rockers' first game using A.B.S., Viola said, "my guy on the mound threw three pitches *right there*. And all the pitches were strikes!" A.B.S. said otherwise. This got Viola frustrated. Which is how he became the first person to get ejected for arguing with the robot.

Machines replaced the film projectionist and the subway attendant, and, chances are, they will eventually replace us all. The umpire can already seem a man out of time, like a milkman or a doctor who makes house calls. Maybe it's the uniforms. The average umpire is male, white, and conservative. (No women have worked the majors outside of spring training; until last year, there were no Black crew chiefs.) Perhaps he smokes Winston Lights. His backup career may have been in law enforcement. A visitor to an umpire-training academy twenty years ago discovered that everyone there was obsessed with "NYPD Blue." Umpires are talented, diligent, and seem to be ethically unimpeachable—there's been only one case of umpire corruption, ever, and that was in 1882. But accuracy fluctuates by era. There are compelling claims that the nineties were anarchy. (Ted Barrett, a Christian minister, and an umpire since 1994, once recalled that, when he started out, the profession was full of boozing and carousing. "How can I put this delicately?" he said. "It was a devil's playground.") In response, in 2001, M.L.B. instituted video evaluations to enforce uniformity. The league says that umpires now call an astounding ninety-seven per cent of pitches correctly.

The evaluations began a season before Michael Lewis started working on his book "Moneyball." Soon, teams, in their thirst for data, began using tracking systems to measure such things as a ball's velocity off the bat and a pitch's spin rate. Fans could access the data online. It was suddenly possible to know every time an umpire erred. In a typical season, one study showed, this happened about thirty-five thousand times—enough to decide a game's winner and loser regularly. Calls for automation grew insistent.

The executive tasked with running the experiment for M.L.B. is Morgan Sword, who's in charge of baseball operations. He's red-headed, thirty-six, and amiable, a boyhood fan of the Mike Piazza Mets. In late spring, I joined him at the baseball headquarters, in midtown, along with Reed MacPhail, who oversees the system's testing and validation. MacPhail played ball, briefly,

at Claremont McKenna College. His batting average was .833. Four of his five hits, he noted, came against CalTech, which hadn't won a game in twenty years.

According to Sword, A.B.S. was part of a larger project to make baseball more exciting. Executives are terrified of losing younger fans and worry that the sport is at risk of becoming the next horse racing or boxing. "We started this process by asking ourselves and our fans, 'What version of baseball do you love the most?' " he said. Everyone wanted more action: more hits, more defense, more baserunning. This style of baseball essentially hasn't existed since the eighties. The "Moneyball" era and the hundred-mile-an-hour fastball, difficult to hit and to control, have flattened the game into strikeouts, walks, and home runs—actions lacking much action.

Sword's team brainstormed potential fixes. "Any rule that we have, we've talked about changing: change the bats, change the balls, change the bases, change the geometry of the field, change the number of players on the field, change the batting order, change the number of innings, the number of balls and strikes," Sword said. "We talked about regulating the height of grass on the infield to speed up ground balls and create more hits. We've never talked about this in any *serious* way, but we talked about allowing fans to throw home-run balls back and keep them in play. That's one that I don't even like."

Sword views A.B.S. "not as a change in itself but as a vehicle. Once you get the technology right, you can load any strike zone you want into that system." A strike zone exists that could create a perfect version of baseball, but it might be a triangle, or a blob, or something shaped like Texas. Sword and MacPhail toyed with ovals and slanted rectangles. "A lot just didn't pass the test of 'If you're playing Wiffle ball in the back yard, could you enforce that strike zone?' " MacPhail said.

Over time, as baseball evolves, A.B.S. can allow the zone to change with it, functioning like an engine's governor. "The human umpires are remarkably accurate, and they're the best in the world at what they do," Sword said. But learning and calling a new strike zone could take years. "On A.B.S., it's literally a matter of, like, changing a setting." M.L.B., in its labor deal with the umpires' union, which declined to comment, agreed to include the union in any plans to use A.B.S. in the major leagues. Such a move would likely meet with resistance from the rank and file. "It is the umpire's decision to make whether it's a ball or strike," Joe West, who earlier this year broke the record for most major-league games umpired (fifty-three hundred and seventy-six), and who formerly served as the union's president, told me. He argued that a disaster scenario would be a pitch in, say, the World Series failing to register on the machine, leading to chaos. (M.L.B. says such a scenario is highly unlikely, and that, in any case, the human umpire could step in to make the call.)

M.L.B. has already concluded that the technology works. Now the organization is measuring outcomes. This year, it rolled out the experiment to a class-A league in Florida. (That league uses a device made by a company called Hawk-Eye, instead of the one from TrackMan; M.L.B. is likely to use Hawk-Eye if the system reaches the major leagues.)

Sword invited me to watch a Ducks game wearing an umpire's TrackMan headset. It was a pleasant summer night. A few kids blew duck whistles. The TrackMan's green eye glowed. The "strike!" call in my ear was peppy, congratulatory. The "ball" sounded faintly disappointed. I followed each pitch on an app, which displayed the ball's location as it crossed the plate. I tried to guess each call. Even from my seat directly behind home plate, I tried to guess each call. Even from my seat directly behind home plate, I barely had a sense of whether a ball was a foot outside or right down the middle. It was pointed out to me that, were I to switch places with the umpire, almost no one would notice.

Before another Ducks game, I visited the umpires' locker room. DeJesus wore a T-shirt that said "*RING EM UP.*" John Dooley, the Atlantic League's supervisor of umpires, was sitting nearby. The umpiring crew was talking about a robo-umped Atlantic League game the previous evening in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

"Wanna know how long it took?" Dooley said. He had a Queens accent so thick it sounded Bostonian. "Five hou-ahs! Sixteen to fourteen. Nine innings."

"Thirty-five walks!" DeJesus said—a horrific amount.

I asked DeJesus if he'd ever called a game with thirty-five walks.

"With TrackMan or without?" he said. "Without, it's called 'pitch management.' A lot of guys call it 'cheating.' If I start to feel that the game is dragging and we're not getting a flow, you're gonna have more strikes called. Not anymore. It used to be, if you have two borderline pitches in a row, one gets called a strike, one gets called a ball. Everybody is equally upset, and everybody's equally happy. For me, it's 'Can we get through this today without everybody killing each other?' "

In the past twenty years, sports have moved away from these kinds of judgment calls, seeking more precision. This may be owing to technological improvement, or to corporatized gambling. ("People are betting a lot of money," Joe Maddon, the Angels' manager, who in 2016 led the Cubs to their first World Series in a hundred and eight years, explained before a recent game. "They truly want the accurate outcome.") Soccer has Video Assistant Referees. Tennis has Hawk-Eye. For almost a decade, baseball has used instant replay on the base paths. This is widely liked, even if the precision can cause its own problems; one umpire told me he had to overturn a call when the video showed a loose string on a fielder's glove grazing a runner's back—technically, this counted as a tag. But these applications deal with something physical: bases, lines, goals. The boundaries of action are precise, delineated like the keys of a piano. The strike zone is a fretless bass. Historically, a certain discretion has been appreciated.

For many years, an umpire's strike zone was like an extension of his personality. Some umpires were literalists, uncompromising. Some preferred expediency; their boundaries were enormous. No matter who was working, when it rained suddenly everything was a strike. West, the record-holding umpire, is a burly man with a Carolina drawl who moonlights as a country

singer and used to pal around with Merle Haggard. He told me one umpire described the old standard for learning the strike zone as “You call them strikes until someone goes, ‘Hey!’ ” Another of his friends liked to say, “The strike zone is like a television set, and every now and then you need Earl Weaver or Billy Martin”—the Yankees’ volatile manager in the seventies and eighties—“to come out and adjust the knob.” Martin once sent an umpire a Christmas card that read “I hope you and your family have a wonderful holiday season.” On the inside, he wrote, “Because you sure had a horseshit summer.” Video evaluation has reined in some quirks, but the strike zone still changes measurably depending on the score, the team batting, and the pitcher’s race. When a pitcher is struggling, the zone becomes as much as fifty per cent bigger. This is known as the “compassionate-umpire effect.”

Of course, compassion toward the pitcher is cruelty toward the hitter. “I don’t know of any other sport in which the umpires would even talk about making up their own rulebook,” Bill James, a writer and a former Red Sox executive, widely considered the godfather of advanced statistics, told me. Joe Sheehan, a sportswriter and one of the earliest and most fervent proponents of the automatic zone, told me, “I get literally angry when I see a pitch three inches off the plate called a strike. Like, No way. The hitter did his job, and this middle manager behind the plate basically reversed what should have happened.” The Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, a textualist, once delivered a treatise called “The Judge as Umpire.” “We do not design our own strike zones,” he said.

In 2019, the robo-ump followed the rulebook strike zone to the letter. Players complained: it was too high, too narrow, and things got weird around the edges. M.L.B. adjusted the parameters in 2021. A three-dimensional zone was jettisoned for a two-dimensional one. The zone was shortened and widened. Now a ball skimming an inch and a half *off* home plate counts as a strike.

This has always been a gray area. Context determined the call. In 1956, the Yankees’ Don Larsen delivered baseball’s most famous pitching performance, a perfect game in the World Series. The game ended on a called strikeout. The umpire was Babe Pinelli—a newsboy at ten, a steelworker at twelve, he’d called thirty-four hundred games in a row without sitting one out. The last pitch of the last at-bat of his last game behind the plate is the only one anybody remembers. Most observers swear that it was noticeably outside. Stephen Jay Gould, in “Triumph and Tragedy in Mudville,” argued that the pitch did miss the zone—and that Pinelli was correct to call strike three. It was close enough for history. “Truth is a circumstance, not a spot,” Gould wrote.

In 2010, Armando Galarraga, a pitcher for the Detroit Tigers, was one out away from his own perfect game. With two outs in the ninth inning, he induced a weak ground ball. The throw beat the runner by a step: an easy call. Inexplicably, the umpire in the field, Jim Joyce, called the runner safe. The perfect game was ruined. On seeing the replay after the game, Joyce was distraught. He cursed in the clubhouse. He spent the night at his mother’s (she lived nearby), chain-smoking. He received death threats. The next day, on the field, Galarraga embraced him and released him from guilt. Joyce cried. They later became friends.

Within a few seasons, M.L.B. instituted instant replay for plays on the base paths. “I lovingly say that I’m the poster boy,” Joyce told me recently. I asked if he felt the same way about A.B.S. What if there had been robo-umps when he was breaking in to the minors? “I would have continued driving a truck for U.P.S.,” he said. “Anybody can go back there and have somebody else tell you what to do. You might as well just watch a video game.” I asked if he thought it best that his bad call couldn’t be overturned, given how it all worked out. “Ask Armando,” he said.

When I did, Galarrraga told me, “The story is so beautiful because of what happened in the end.” He wouldn’t want to change it. He argued that mistakes are part of the game—accepting them with composure or exploiting them to your advantage are skills, just as throwing a good fastball is. He noted that, before he lost his perfect game, he’d had success with his sinkerball, a pitch he threw a couple of inches off the outside edge of the plate. He’d realized that the umpire was consistently calling it a strike. Using A.B.S., he said, would be like driving a car with a navigation system: “When you don’t have the G.P.S., you have to pay way more attention to the directions. You have to be more in the moment. This is the beauty of the game.”

Bill James suggested that enough significant mistakes from umpires could, from a fan’s perspective, make a game seem almost arbitrary. He offered a middle ground: A.B.S. could rule on obvious balls or strikes. But a couple of inches around the border would be a “zone of discretion”—up to a living, breathing umpire to decide.

Alva Noë, a professor of philosophy at Berkeley, completed “Infinite Baseball: Notes from a Philosopher at the Ballpark” just before M.L.B. announced the robo-umps. I e-mailed him, wondering if he’d given the new development any thought. “Hardly a day goes by that I don’t wake up and run through the reasons that this is such a terrible idea,” he replied. He later told me, “This is part of a movement to use algorithms to take the hard choices of living out of life.” A pitcher has a strange job. He wants to throw a pitch that is hittable but that the batter, nevertheless, can’t hit. Noë argued that what the umpire adjudicates is whether the pitcher succeeded. It’s inherently a judgment call. “What we’re seeing in baseball is something that is kind of a core dispute in Western civilization.

It really is about ‘What is objectivity?’ Is objectivity something that is physical? Is it mathematical? Is it knowable?”

But people want answers. Subjectivity, generally, is on the run. We prefer Yelp stars and Big Data dating apps. May a thousand Tomatometers bloom. Recent decades have birthed baseball’s own theory-of-everything statistic, *WAR* (wins above replacement), which does a decent job of ending the barstool argument about which player is the best. The big-money jobs these days are in data analytics; hard numbers make vaccines and launch rockets. If you’re trading baseball players, you’d better know their value. But what you’re measuring matters. Accuracy is not the same thing as enjoyment. We watch baseball to kill time, not to maximize it.

TrackMan was created to quantify and optimize. The company broke into baseball, as a player-analysis tool, in 2008. Soon, it was everywhere. “There was a while there when we were tracking and facilitating a sharing of data from just about every pitch of every play of every professional game in the world,” John Olshan, who runs the company’s baseball business, told me. For the robo-umpires, professional baseball was only a starting point. Olshan predicted that the system would reach all levels of the game, down to Little League. TrackMan sells a portable version of the hardware, intended to help players train. But it can also tell you if a pitch is in the strike zone. He invited me to try it out in a beer league.

The Passaic Bulls, according to their player-manager, Joe Moran, are perhaps the best men’s-league team in New Jersey. “You say our name, people know us,” he told me. Moran is twenty-six, a former construction worker—Local 754. During the pandemic, he lost his job, so he became a *Covid* disinfecter. “One of those guys who comes into a place and fogs it up, with the hazmat suits and all that,” he said. “I honestly think I put more hours into baseball.”

Moran happily agreed to let me use the Bulls as robo-umpire guinea pigs. “There’s a big umpire shortage, so some of the umpires they get us are really bad,” he told me. I’d heard this often. Gil Imber, a former recreational umpire, who runs something called the Umpire Ejection Fantasy League (“Joe West is always a top draftee”), told me that the supply of umpires generally runs opposite to the economy. Strangely, the current unemployment spike hasn’t created new umpires—likely, Imber says, because the pay has stagnated, and the abuse has not.

The game was in Passaic at Third Ward Park: old stone wall in the outfield, commuter trains rumbling fifty feet behind the backstop. The infield grass was prodigious, practically a prairie; Sword and MacPhail would’ve brought in the Weedwackers. Ten feet behind home plate, Will Gilbert, a former minor-league pitcher who works for TrackMan, erected a tripod, atop which he mounted the device, a miniature version of the stadium machine. With its little eye, the setup looked like the Pixar lamp. For the experiment, the umpire, a rookie named Mirquis Erazo, was making the calls, but could appeal close ones to TrackMan during the first half of the game. As a control, the second half would be old-school.

The Bulls walked the first four batters: no close calls. Tensions soon rose. When the Bulls, now trailing, came up to bat, Erazo called a ball inside, and the opposing team hollered. “That was a strike?” Erazo asked Gilbert.

“No, about five inches,” Gilbert said. Not close.

“Thank you!” Erazo said. “The shortstop is already looking at me.”

Erazo settled in. After four innings, the machine was making him look astonishingly good. TrackMan disagreed with him only four times, and two were really close. After one walk, the entire Bulls infield shouted in protest. Erazo gestured toward the machine. The shouting stopped. At one point, Moran ran up to the fence and yelled, “Yo, this guy’s the best umpire in

the league, no question!" TrackMan was a hit. The portable system cost about twenty thousand dollars. By the middle of the game, Moran was talking with Gilbert about buying one.

The tight zone, however, made for a long evening. Sometime past 10 *p.m.*, in the eighth inning, the Bulls first baseman, a twenty-three-year-old pest-control technician named Joe Russo, took off his spikes, packed up his gear, and sat down. He took a dissenting stance toward the robots. "With technology, people just want everything to be perfect," he told me. "That's not reality. I think *perfect* would be weird. Your teams are always winning, work is always just great, there's always money in your pocket, your car never breaks down. What is there to talk about?"

Then he realized he was on deck and scampered off, retying his spikes. When his turn to bat came, the Bulls were up eight runs. The game was in its fourth hour—TrackMan had long ago been turned off. Russo took a fastball, quite high. Erazo called it a strike. The second pitch was a strike, too. On the third, he watched as another fastball came in near his shins. Erazo bellowed, "*Strike three!*" The Bulls dugout hooted. Moran yelled, "We want the robot back!" Russo looked sheepish. "That was a ball!" he said to Erazo. "But I'm not mad at you!"

After the game, I caught up with Erazo in the parking lot. He laughed when I asked about the pitch to Russo. "It was time to go, that's what it was," he said. "It *was* a ball." I told him I agreed. But who at the park could say for sure?

EACH TEAM'S BEST STRETCH-DRIVE RUN. A LOOK BACK ON THE GREATEST LATE SEASON-SURGES IN MLB HISTORY.

When the calendar flips to September, the excitement of the baseball season ratchets up and the margin for error becomes razor thin as teams battle to reach the postseason. There have been many memorable stretch-run performances over the years, and here's a look from all 30 MLB.com beat writers at the best one in each club's history:

Angels, 2002

The Angels went 18-9 in September to secure an American League Wild Card berth and return to the postseason for the first time since 1986. After defeating the Yankees in the AL Division Series and the Twins in the AL Championship Series, the Halos advanced to the World Series and rallied from a 3-2 series deficit to beat the Giants for their first and only championship in franchise history.

Astros, 2004

A star-studded Astros team that included Hall of Famers Craig Biggio and Jeff Bagwell -- along with Roger Clemens, Andy Pettitte, Jeff Kent, Roy Oswalt and Lance Berkman -- underperformed for much of the season and was 56-60 in mid-August. Houston caught fire and went 36-10 down the stretch (20-7 in September), and the Astros secured the National League Wild Card spot on the final day of the season before losing to the Cardinals in seven games in the NL Championship Series.

Athletics, 2012

The A's were five games behind the first-place Rangers with nine to play and won all but one of them, including six in a row to cap the regular season -- the final three against Texas. Oakland erased a 5-1 deficit on the final day of the season to secure sole possession of the AL West lead for the first time all year and claim its first ticket to the playoffs since 2006.

Blue Jays, 2015

The Blue Jays were eight games back of first place when they traded for shortstop Troy Tulowitzki on July 28, 2015. In the coming days, general manager Alex Anthopoulos decided to go all-in by acquiring David Price, Ben Revere and reliever Mark Lowe. By Aug. 12, the deficit in the standings was erased and Toronto took over with a half-game lead. The Blue Jays finished 42-18 over their final 60 games, including an 18-9 record in September to secure the club's first division crown since 1993.

Braves, 1993

Fueled by the acquisition of Fred McGriff, the Braves went from 10 games out on July 22 to 3 1/2 games back by the end of August. They completed a 104-win season by winning 22 of their last 29 games. A win combined with a Giants loss on the regular season's final day gave Atlanta its third consecutive NL West title.

Brewers, 2019

Milwaukee sat just three games above .500 and five games back of the second NL Wild Card -- with two teams between it and the Cubs -- after a loss to Chicago on Sept. 5. Then, reigning MVP Christian Yelich, who was enjoying an even better season in 2019, broke his kneecap and was lost for the season five days later. Still, the Brewers persevered, riding an incredibly hot stretch from its pitching staff (MLB-best 3.01 ERA in September) to win 18 of 20 games -- and 12 of their first 14 after Yelich went down -- to vault into the second Wild Card and book their second straight postseason appearance.

Cardinals, 1964

Trailing the Phillies by 6 1/2 games with 13 games left on their schedule, the Cardinals surged up the NL standings with 10 wins over the season's final two weeks. They swept the Phillies during an eight-game win streak, clinched the NL pennant on the season's final day and went on to beat the Yankees in the World Series. Forty-seven years later, the Cards followed a similar script, erasing an 8 1/2-game deficit over their final 21 games en route to their 11th World Series championship.

Cubs, 2015

The Cubs needed a late-season surge to win a Wild Card berth in manager Joe Maddon's first season. The team was 19-9 in August and went 23-9 in September/October. The Cubs won their last eight games of the season to finish one game behind the Pirates and three behind the division winner, the Cardinals. They weren't able to clinch the berth with a win. The Cubs had a magic number of one on Sept. 25 but lost to the Bucs. They still secured the Wild Card spot that night when the Giants lost to the A's on the West Coast. [Jake Arrieta](#) threw a complete-game shutout in the Wild Card win over the Pirates and the Cubs beat the Cardinals in the NLDS, but they were swept by the Mets in the NLCS.

D-backs, 2011

The D-backs were just five games up on the second-place Giants after losing 6-2 to San Francisco on Sept. 2. But Arizona responded by taking the next two from the Giants, keying a 16-9 September run that would net them the NL West title and the organization's fifth postseason berth. The D-backs faced off against the Brewers in the NLDS and ended up losing in a five-game thriller on [Nyjer Morgan](#)'s walk-off single in the 10th.

Dodgers, 1965

In a season when Tommy Davis broke his ankle, Sandy Koufax threw a perfect game and Juan Marichal took a bat to John Roseboro's head, it's easy to overlook that the Dodgers were 4 1/2 games back on Sept. 16, then reeled off 13 straight wins, with Koufax and Don Drysdale getting seven of them. They clinched the pennant with one game left in the regular season, as Koufax threw a four-hit complete game with 13 strikeouts on two days' rest. Then the Dodgers beat the Twins in the World Series, with Koufax throwing a three-hit shutout with 10 strikeouts in Game 7 on two days' rest.

Giants, 1951

Trailing Brooklyn by 13 games on Aug. 11, New York won 37 of its last 44 games to force a best-of-three playoff against the Dodgers for the NL pennant. The showdown ended with perhaps the most celebrated home run in baseball history: Bobby Thomson's three-run clout in the ninth inning of Game 3 that sent the Giants to the World Series.

Indians, 1948

The Indians went 33-4, including an AL-record [22-game winning streak](#), to finish 2017 as the AL's top seed. The Tribe rattled off 10 in a row to finish the 2013 season, winning a Wild Card spot. The best finish, however, belongs to the 1948 squad. Cleveland went 19-5 down the stretch to earn a one-game playoff against Boston for the AL pennant. The Indians beat the Red Sox, 8-3, and went on to win the World Series against the Boston Braves.

Mariners, 1995

A Seattle franchise that had never made the postseason in its first 18 years put together one of the greatest late-season comebacks in MLB history, making up 11 1/2 games on the Angels in the final 36 games. In a strike-shortened season, the Mariners were 54-55 on Aug. 23, but they finished 25-11 with a "Refuse to Lose" club led by Ken Griffey Jr., Randy Johnson, Edgar Martinez and Jay Buhner, ultimately winning a one-game tiebreaker with the Halos to claim their first AL West title. The Mariners beat the Yankees, 3-2, in a dramatic AL Division Series before losing to the Indians in six games in the ALCS.

Marlins, 2003

Their season seemingly over after falling 10 games under .500 in May, the Marlins completed their improbable climb into the postseason by going 18-8 in September, overtaking the Phillies for the NL Wild Card spot. Driven by manager Jack McKeon, who replaced Jeff Torborg in May, Florida went 42-25 after the All-Star break. Leading the late charge was brash right-hander Josh

Beckett, who posted a 2.08 ERA in five September starts. Beckett went on to become the World Series Most Valuable Player, capping a storybook comeback season.

Mets, 1969

They're called the "Miracle Mets" for a reason. Ten games back in the NL East on Aug. 13, the Mets surged ahead of the Cubs on Sept. 10, punctuating their run with a pair of 1-0 wins in a Sept. 12 doubleheader in Pittsburgh. Pitchers Jerry Koosman and Don Cardwell combined for 17 shutout innings and drove home the only runs in those games for the Mets, who wound up winning the division by eight games -- and eventually the World Series, too.

Nationals, 2014

Washington has had the fortune of owning a large lead in September each time it has won the NL East, but the 2014 Nationals were dominant to cap off the season's final month. The Nats went 19-8 in September, their highest winning percentage of any month that year, en route to clinching the division title on Sept. 16 in Atlanta to secure their spot in the postseason for the second time in team history.

Orioles, 2012

Baltimore went 19-9 in September en route to securing its first playoff berth since 1997. The underdog Orioles put together a season-high six-game win streak from Sept. 16-22 to finish 93-69 and secure an AL Wild Card berth. The O's went on to win the AL Wild Card Game on the road at Texas, before falling in the ALDS in five games to the Yankees.

Padres, 1996

With three weeks remaining in the 1996 season, the Padres trailed the Dodgers in the NL West and the Expos for the Wild Card. They reeled off a 13-6 stretch to finish the year, one that included three walk-off wins and five in extras. Two of those extra-innings victories came during a dramatic final weekend in which San Diego swept Los Angeles at Dodger Stadium to secure its first division title in 12 years. The Padres scored runs in the eighth inning or later to win all three games, with Trevor Hoffman recording the save in each of them.

Phillies, 2007

The Phillies trailed the Mets in the NL East by seven games with 17 to play in September 2007, but they went 13-4 the rest of the way, while the Mets went 5-12. The Phils clinched the division on the final day of the season, capping one of the greatest comebacks in baseball history.

Pirates, 2014

The Pirates reeled off 24 wins in their final 36 games and entered the postseason as the hottest team in baseball. That stretch with the Majors' best winning percentage launched the Bucs from two games above .500 on Aug. 19 into the top NL Wild Card spot at 88-74. But Pittsburgh fell two games shy of the NL Central title and ended the year in frustrating fashion, as Madison Bumgarner pitched a shutout in the NL Wild Card Game at PNC Park.

Rangers, 2015

The Rangers were 50-53 and eight games out on Aug. 1, one day after acquiring Cole Hamels from the Phillies. In his first media session in Texas, Hamels said he believed the Rangers could

come back and win the division. His new teammates took that to heart and did just that by going 18-10 both in August and September, and then clinching the division on Oct. 4 -- the last day of the season -- with Hamels' complete-game victory over the Angels preventing a potential one-game tiebreaker with the Astros.

Rays, 2011

On Sept. 1, 2011, the Rays were third in the AL East standings and nine games out of first place. They proceeded to go on a 17-10 run, while the second-place Red Sox went 7-20. On the final day of the season, Boston lost while Tampa Bay defeated New York, 8-7, on Evan Longoria's walk-off home run to propel the Rays into the playoffs as the AL Wild Card winner.

Red Sox, 2004

It is sometimes forgotten that the fabled 2004 Red Sox -- who broke an 86-year championship drought -- played .500 ball from May 1-July 31. But Theo Epstein shook things up at the non-waiver Trade Deadline when he traded Nomar Garciaparra for Orlando Cabrera and Doug Mientkiewicz while also acquiring Dave Roberts from the Dodgers. From Aug. 7 through the end of the regular season, the Sox went a blistering 40-15. In the postseason, they were 11-3, with all three losses coming at the start of the ALCS against the Yankees.

Reds, 1973

The Reds were 11 games out in the NL West on June 30 before they swept a doubleheader from the Dodgers on July 1. Hal King delivered a pinch-hit home run to win Game 1 and a 10th-inning single by Tony Perez won Game 2. Including those two wins, Cincinnati went 60-26 over the remainder of the season. The Reds entered September three games back, but they went 19-8 in the final month to finish 3 1/2 games in front and make the playoffs.

Rockies, 2007

Colorado won 14 of its last 15 regular-season games, culminating with an unforgettable tiebreaking Game 163 against San Diego in which they won, 9-8, in 13 innings on Matt Holliday's famous (and disputed) slide into home. The Rockies then won seven straight playoff games to advance to the World Series before being swept by the Red Sox in the Fall Classic.

Royals, 2014

The 2014 Royals were a team of streaks as they dipped out of first place in the AL Central and into the race for one of the AL Wild Card spots. A late surge in September when they won five of six helped seal the first Wild Card spot, the clincher coming in Game 160 in Chicago with a 3-1 win over the White Sox as Jeremy Guthrie pitched seven shutout innings and Greg Holland notched his 46th save. Making the club's first playoff appearance in 29 years, Kansas City became the first team to start a postseason 8-0 as the Royals advanced all the way to Game 7 of the World Series before falling to the Giants.

Tigers, 1987

The Tigers had a back-and-forth race with the Blue Jays all summer for the AL East lead, but they fell 3 1/2 games back with eight games to go. Detroit won six of its final eight, but four of those wins were against Toronto, including a three-game series sweep at Tiger Stadium to end

the regular season. Frank Tanana clinched the division with a 1-0 win opposite Jimmy Key on the final day.

Twins, 2009

The Twins trailed the Tigers by 5 1/2 games on Sept. 12, but Minnesota won 16 of its final 20 games to force a one-game tiebreaker against Detroit in the last regular-season game played at the Metrodome. The Twins won in memorable fashion on a walk-off hit from Alexi Casilla in the 12th inning of Game 163 to win the AL Central for the fifth time in eight years.

White Sox, 2005

The White Sox closed September with an 8-2 record, but they won their last five games going into the postseason. That five-game streak included the AL Central division clincher in Detroit and then a three-game sweep in Cleveland to give the team 99 wins and knock the Indians from the playoffs. That Cleveland team had cut a 15-game division deficit on Aug. 1 to 1 1/2 games when this streak began. Factoring in the 11-1 playoff domination resulting in a World Series title, the White Sox finished the season on a 19-3 run.

Yankees, 1978

The defending World Series champions were 14 games behind the Red Sox on July 17 as three big personalities -- owner George Steinbrenner, manager Billy Martin and slugger Reggie Jackson -- clashed repeatedly. Martin resigned one week later, and the Yankees completed a historic comeback under replacement Bob Lemon, going 48-20 (.706) the rest of the way, including the four-game "Boston Massacre" sweep at Fenway Park in early September, during which the Bombers outscored Boston, 42-9. A one-game tiebreaker for the division crown was marked by Bucky Dent's famous home run into the netting over the Green Monster. The Yanks dispatched the Royals in the ALCS and defeated the Dodgers in a six-game Fall Classic.