

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

10.23.2022

Good morning baseball fans,

Sipping coffee this morning and thinking about last night's Yankees-Astros game 3. Brutal for Yankee fans. Astros pitching has been impressive.

This morning enjoy Peter Gammons on building this dominant Astros pitching staff, the future of ash baseball bats, debating the structure of the playoffs, two history lessons--Joe Posnanski takes us back to the 1986 Mets and Joe Sheehan on post season scheduling back to the first World Series, lots of random and miscellaneous stuff and of course, trivia.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE

Pitchers don't often win the MVP award. 12 times since 1956. How many can you name?

- 1956 NL righthanded starter
- 1963 NL lefthanded starter
- 1968 AL and NL righthanded starters
- 1971 AL lefthanded starter
- 1981 AL righthanded reliever
- 1984 AL lefthanded reliever
- 1986 AL righthanded starter
- 1992 AL righthanded reliever
- 2011 AL righthanded starter
- 2014 NL lefthanded starter
- 2021 AL righthanded starter

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

A subscriber caught an error from last week:

2008 Phillies

1980 Phillies

1929 A's

Financial crises and Philadelphia (not Phillies) World Series wins.

Be careful what you root for.

Through Saturday we are 34 games into the playoffs and 25 of them have been decided by three or fewer runs, 10 of them by two runs and ten by one run.

Astros now 6-0 in the post season (the only team since 1969 expansion to go undefeated in the post season was the 1976 Reds [def. Phillies 3-0 in NLCS, def. Yankees 4-0 in World Series]). Longer road now with more rounds of playoffs. They may not go 11-0 but they sure look tough. Phillies look like they are having a lot of fun.

Justin Verlander set a major league record with the eighth double-digit strikeout game of his postseason career in game 1 vs. Yankees and passed **Clayton Kershaw** (213) to become the all-time leader in strikeouts in the playoffs with 219.

Those were the first of six consecutive strikeouts for Verlander, which tied a postseason record. It's the second time he's tied the mark after also fanning six in a row in Game 3 of the 2013 ALCS while pitching for Detroit. First time ever 6 straight Yankees have struck out in a post season game.

New York whiffed 17 times in all to only two for the Astros — the largest difference ever in a postseason game. Astros pitchers generated 27 swinging strikes—led by 17 from Verlander—compared to just 11 from five different Yankees arms.

Verlander allowed three hits and one run in his 32nd career postseason start, 11th in a series opener. It was his first playoff win since 2019.

At 39 years & 241 days old, Justin Verlander is the 2nd-oldest pitcher in postseason history with a 10-strikeout game. Oldest was **Nolan Ryan** (1986 NLCS Game 5, also for Houston, at 39 years, 256 days old).

Padres closer **Josh Hader** hit 100 mph on the radar during a 1-2-3 ninth inning to close out Game 2 of the National League Championship Series against the Phillies on Wednesday at Petco Park.

It marked the sixth time this postseason that the left-hander has thrown a pitch with a velocity of 100 mph or greater. Prior to this postseason, Hader had hit 100 mph or greater with his

fastball exactly ... zero times. He's always thrown hard -- in the high 90s -- but remarkably, he's upped that velo to triple digits this October after making some mechanical tweaks.

The result? Eight consecutive strikeouts for Hader over three games -- NL Division Series Games 3 and 4 against the Dodgers and NLCS Game 2 against the Phillies -- which according to OptaSTATS is a postseason record.

Before this postseason, Josh Hader had never touched 100 mph in a game. (He'd hit 99.9, yes, but never triple digits.) Now? He's done it six times, including once on Wednesday, with five of the six either going for strikes or getting fouled off. That underscores a terrifying point: As difficult as it already was to face Hader, it's gotten even more difficult, because he's been throwing harder than ever. Historically, his fastball averaged 95 or 96 mph. In 2022, the average has gone up to 97.4 mph—and that's based on just the regular season. His October triple-digit flamethrowing comes only on top of that.

For the first time in recorded history, in 2022 major league pitchers threw fastballs with less than half their pitches, 48.6%. Just six years ago it was 56.3%. More than 68,000 fastballs went poof!

Teammates who have homered in the same postseason game the most times in AL/NL history-- **Carlos Correa and George Springer**, Astros (8 times).

Derek Jeter and Jimmy Rollins (3 leadoff HRs each) have hit the most leadoff home runs in postseason history.

On the day he turned 30 this week, **Bryce Harper** had 285 career regular-season home runs and 42.5 Wins Above Replacement (as calculated by Baseball Reference). So is that good? Every eligible player who has reached those figures by that age ended up with a plaque in Cooperstown, with the exception of **Alex Rodriguez**.

Had the Phillies not beaten the Cards, Harper would have joined **Mike Trout and Frank Robinson** as the only players to put up those numbers and not win at least one playoff series while in his 20's. (Robinson won a World Series at age 31 with the 1966 Orioles).

Harper homered in three postseason games in a row. In the history of the Phillies, only **Gary "Sarge" Mathews** ever did that. Harper smoked an extra-base hit in six straight postseason games. No Phillie who ever lived has done that. And only five other players for *any* team have

ever had a streak that long in a single postseason: **George Springer**, **Carlos Beltrán**, **Devon White**, **Giancarlo Stanton** and **Daniel Murphy**.

Pretty cool to see **Aaron Nola** pitch to his brother **Austin** in game 2 – first time in MLB history brother pitched to brother in the post season. Austin grounded out to 3B in the second.

While Round 1 went to Aaron in the second inning, Austin got his revenge with a run-scoring single on an 0-2 count in the fifth. The hit cut the Padres' deficit to 4-3 before Austin scored on Juan Soto's game-tying double. San Diego would go on to win, 8-5, on Wednesday and even the NLCS at one game apiece.

In two previous games between the Nolas, Austin collected one hit in six plate appearances, with a walk and two strikeouts. That lone hit -- an RBI single on June 24 -- was the decisive knock in a 1-0 San Diego victory. It made Austin the first player in the Modern Era (since 1900) to log a game-winning hit off his brother that was the sole RBI of the game.

Gerrit Cole is one of three active pitchers with 10 or more postseason wins, joining **Justin Verlander** (14) and **Clayton Kershaw** (13). Cole has struck out 127 batters, the most by any pitcher through 16 postseason games.

In just 4 games, **Harrison Bader** is the third Yankees center fielder with at least 3 home runs in a single postseason. The other two are **Bernie Williams** (1996, 2001, '04) and **Mickey Mantle** (1956 and '60)

Bader's solo homer off **Justin Verlander** in Game 1 was his fourth this postseason, and he's tied with **Bryce Harper** for the most homers of all MLB players this postseason. Bader is the only player in Yankees history with four homers in his first six postseason games with the team.

The Yankees homered in an MLB-record 23 straight postseason games and hit 44 homers over that span. That record streak was broken in game 2 in Houston.

Aaron Judge has four home runs in deciding games of postseason series, a record. The disparate group of **Yogi Berra**, **Didi Gregorius**, **Troy O'Leary**, **Bill "Moose" Skowron**, and **Giancarlo Stanton** have three.

The Yankees led MLB by scoring 51% of their runs on homers; the Astros were fifth at 46%. Each team makes you hit the homer to beat them, too: The Yankees allowed 45% of their runs on homers, the Astros 40%. (MLB average was 39.8%).

I didn't remember the 2000 World Series winning Yankees went 5-15 over their last 20 regular season games. That's the worst 20 game finish by a post season team since 1969.

Roughly 60 percent of all Arizona Fall Leaguers have reached the Majors, including Hall of Famers **Roy Halladay, Derek Jeter and Mike Piazza** and current stars such as **Vladimir Guerrero Jr., Bryce Harper, Max Scherzer and Mike Trout**. The league has produced 333 All-Stars, 21 MVPs, seven Cy Young Award winners and 33 Rookies of the Year.

Think **Manny Machado** was worth 10 years/\$300 million? Machado, who has been considered a contender for the N.L.'s Most Valuable Player Award all season, batted .298 (fourth in the N.L.) with 32 homers and 102 R.B.I. in 2022. He also scored 100 runs and his .898 on-base plus slugging percentage was third in the league.

But equally important as his numbers is his presence. Since his arrival in San Diego, he has played in 519 of a possible 546 games — 95 percent. Discounting his rookie season in 2012 and the pandemic-shortened season in 2020, he has played in at least 150 games in eight of his nine other seasons. And since the start of the 2015 season, he has played in 1,156 games. The only player in the majors who has posted in more is St. Louis' **Paul Goldschmidt** (1,158), another contender for this year's N.L. M.V.P.

This is Machado's fifth postseason, but only his second L.C.S. During his brief stay in Los Angeles in 2018, the Dodgers slipped past Milwaukee but lost to Boston in the World Series. I'm guessing the Padres are pretty happy with their investment.

The Yankees struck out in 30 of their 65 at-bats across the first two games of the American League Championship Series. Their pitching staff can't claim the same success: The Astros have taken 59 at-bats and struck out just eight times in total.

The Yankees swung-and-missed 31 times in Thursday night's 3-2 loss, in which they struck out 13 times as a team. They whiffed 27 times in Wednesday's 4-2 loss, during which they racked up a whopping 17 strikeouts in the loss.

Fast forward to Saturday. 5-0 loss, 1 hit into the 9th. 11 more strikeouts. Astros great pitching or Yankees non-existent hitting? Yankees become first post season team ever to have a 3 game span with 12 hits or less, 40+ strikeouts and 3 losses. New York has 4 runs scored in 3 games, batting .128 as a team (12 for 94). Astros pitchers 27 innings pitched, 12 hits, 2 earned runs, 41 K's.

Don Lenhardt had three official at-bats with the bases loaded in 1952 ... and homered on all three of them.

Lenhardt was — even in his own words — a mostly forgettable utility outfielder in the early 1950s. He became a scout after he retired and was beloved throughout the game. In 1952, he hit only .239 with 11 homers, but he was something with the base loaded. The first time he came up with the bases loaded, on April 19, he hit an inside-the-park grand slam for Boston. Less than two months later, on June 2, he hit a walk-off grand slam for the Red Sox. The very next day, Boston traded him to Detroit as part of a sweeping, eight-player deal. Less than one week later, on Ladies Day in Boston, he hit a grand slam AGAINST the Red Sox.

ALL HITTERS are better with the bases loaded.

This year, batters hit .243 and slugged .395.
With the bases loaded, they hit .269 and slugged .447.

Last year, batters hit .244 and slugged .411.
With the bases loaded, they hit .278 and slugged .472.

In 2004, batters hit .264 and slugged .422.
With the bases loaded, they hit .285 and slugged .447.

In 1978, batters hit .257 and slugged .376.
With the bases loaded, they hit .271 and slugged .414

In 1955, batters hit .259 and slugged .394.
With the bases loaded, they hit .283 and slugged .423.

Batters are better with the bases loaded. I'm sure you can come up with a million reasons for it, probably starting with the simple fact that with the bases loaded, pitchers have to challenge hitters or else walk in a run. The art of hitting and pitching tends to come down to which player can gain a subtle advantage ... by getting ahead in the count, by having a deep understanding of their opponent's tendencies and weaknesses, by doing something a little bit surprising like swinging first-pitch or throwing a change-up on a fastball count, etc.

Having the bases loaded naturally gives the hitter a subtle advantage.

Kyle Schwarber homered off **Yu Darvish** in game one in San Diego. The NL HR champ hit a bomb into the upper deck at PETCO Field. In the first two series, he went 1-for-20 with eight strikeouts. His main contribution to the team had been getting hit by a couple of pitches. Then his homer left the ball park at 119.7 mph to help power a 2-0 win. There have been only a handful of balls hit 119.7 mph since Statcast™ started keeping track, and none of them had been hit in the postseason. Estimated distance was 488 feet, making it the second-longest home run hit since Statcast™ started keeping track. It was the longest home run ever hit in San Diego. Only the Yankees' **Giancarlo Stanton**, the Angels' **Shohei Ohtani** and the Pirates' **Oneil Cruz** hit a ball at least 119 mph in 2022.

The Dodgers started their series with the Padres 3-for-6 with runners in scoring position and finish it in a 2-for-29 slump. They would hit .227/.302/.402 and score 12 runs total, and that's why they're done.

Dodgers are first team to win 110 wins and not win their first playoff series. LA now has a 111-win season, two 106-win seasons and a 104-win season since 2017 with only a covid-shortened title to show for it.

Can we talk for a moment about the SIZE of relievers these days? Looking back at the sizes of some of the effective relievers in our youth. **Tippy Martinez** was 5-foot-10. **Mike Marshall** was 5-foot-10. **Dan Quisenberry** weighed 170 pounds. **Tug McGraw** weighed 170 pounds. **Rollie Fingers** weighed 190 pounds, and 35 of those was his mustache. Even the biggest and most intimidating guys — **Bruce Sutter**, **Goose Gossage**, **Jim Kern**, **Moon Man Minton** — didn't break 200 pounds.

Now? Look at just the San Diego Padres bullpen. **Tim Hill** is 6-foot-4, **Josh Hader** is 6-foot-3, **Steven Wilson** is 6-foot-3, **Luis Garcia** breaks the scale at 240, **Robert Suarez** is 210 pounds of pure muscle; it's just a different world.

LETS GO TO THE BULLPEN

As most of you know, the 1991 World Series went 7 games with the Twins winning a thriller over the Braves.

A subscriber wrote to say game 6 of that Series reminded him of Seattle manager Scott Servais bringing in soft throwing Robbie Ray against the Astros as discussed last week.

Bobby Cox pulled hard throwing **Alejandro Pena** for **Charlie Liebrandt**. Enter **Kirby Puckett**, exit baseball.

The 1991 World Series was the franchise's first appearance in the Fall Classic since 1958, when it still played in Milwaukee. This was the most exciting series Atlanta played in—and, for Braves fans, perhaps the most heartbreaking. Atlanta held all the momentum entering Game 6. Lefty starter Liebrandt was outpitched by **Jack Morris** in game 1, taking the loss. The Twins took the first two games at home before the Braves swept the next three in Atlanta. Now, it was back to Minnesota, with the Braves' having two chances to win it all.

Then, Kirby Puckett happened. His first-inning triple gave the Twins the early lead, and he scored their second run two batters later on **Shane Mack**'s RBI single. He made an incredible leaping grab at the wall to rob **Ron Gant** of an extra-base hit in the top of the third. After Terry Pendleton, that year's NL MVP, hit a two-run blast in the fifth to tie the game, Puckett promptly helped Minnesota retake the lead with a sacrifice fly in the bottom of the inning. Atlanta tied it up again in the seventh, and the game went to extras.

Mike Stanton threw scoreless 7th and 8th in relief of Braves starter Steve Avery. Alejandro Pena gave up no hits, strike out 2 in scoreless 9th and 10th innings. But Cox went to Liebrandt.

Leading off the 11th, Puckett ripped a walk-off home run to set up an all-time classic Game 7.

The first pitch of the inning was a change-up, which Puckett took for strike one. The next one was a similar high and outside fastball, which Puckett took for ball one; pitch three was another fastball for ball two. The fourth pitch, and last pitch of the game, was a weak, high change-up that failed to break. Puckett made solid contact and sprinted for first, as was his usual practice. Only after he saw first base coach **Wayne Terwilliger** throw up his hands in victory did Puckett

realize he had hit a home run. Leibrandt was called upon to enter the game in a highly unfamiliar role – as a reliever late in the extra-inning game, and very late at night. Cox endured some criticism for the move because the Braves still had several relievers at their disposal including left-hander Kent Mercker and right-handers Jim Clancy and Mark Wohlers, but the move made sense on another level, because Leibrandt was the only pitcher left on their roster who had previous World Series experience, and although Leibrandt had been subpar in his Game 1 start, the three hitters scheduled to bat for the Twins in the 11th had been a combined 0 for 6 against Leibrandt in that game, including two strikeouts of Puckett.

Puckett is the only player to have a go-ahead RBI in three plate appearances in a single World Series game.

Cox abruptly removed him from the World Series rotation after his Game 1 start, then put him in a difficult position Saturday in Leibrandt's first relief appearance since 1989. Cox said Sunday he would still bring in Leibrandt to pitch to Puckett.

Game 7 of course was one of the great games of all time.

The 1991 Fall Classic, which for the first time in history included a pair of teams that both had finished last in their division the previous season, was knotted at three games apiece when Game 7 took place on the night of Sunday, Oct. 27, in front a crowd of 55,118 at the Hubert H. Humphrey Metrodome.

In what turned out to be a classic pitchers' duel between a pair of right-handed stars, the starters were the 36-year-old Morris, the winningest pitcher in the 1980s, and the Braves' **John Smoltz**, a 24-year-old future Hall of Famer.

Smoltz grew up in Michigan idolizing Morris, then pitching with the Tigers.

Both Morris and Smoltz were pitching on three days' rest, having also faced each other in Game 4, the Braves winning 3-2 when **Mark Lemke**, who had tripled with one out in the bottom of the ninth inning, scored two batters later on pinch-hitter **Jerry Willard's** sacrifice fly.

In Game 7, Smoltz would end up tossing 7 1/3 scoreless innings, giving up six hits and one walk while striking out four. Relieved by Mike Stanton, who went 2/3 innings scoreless, Alejandro Pena would next enter the game for Atlanta and throw a scoreless ninth inning.

The deciding game's lone run came in the bottom of the 10th inning with Pena still on the mound. Twins leftfielder **Dan Gladden** led off with a broken-bat double to short left-center, a sacrifice bunt by **Chuck Knoblauch** moved Gladden to third, and intentional walks to Kirby Puckett and **Kent Hrbek** loaded the bases.

Minnesota's **Gene Larkin**, pinch-hitting for **Jarvis Brown**, who had pinch-run for DH **Chili Davis** in the ninth, ended the Series with a first-pitch single to deep left-center field over a drawn in outfield that scored a clapping Gladden, with thousands of white Homer Hankies waving in the high-decibel Metrodome crowd.

Morris, he lived up to his reputation as one of the game's great big-game pitchers. He pitched a complete-game shutout, going all 10 innings while giving up seven hits and two walks while striking out eight. Of his 126 total pitches, 79 were strikes.

"Somebody had to go home a loser but nobody was a loser," said Morris, who improved to 4-0 lifetime in the World Series and 8-1 in the Postseason.

Morris is the only pitcher to pitch at least 10 scoreless innings on three days' rest in a game that clinched the World Series for his team. He's one of only three pitchers to throw a 10-inning shutout in a World Series game. The others are **Christy Mathewson** (1913 Giants against Athletics) and **Clem Labine** (1956 Dodgers against the Yankees).

The World Series MVP Award went to Morris, who started three games, finished with a 2-0 record and a 1.17 ERA in 23 total innings in helping the Twins win their second World Series title in five years.

Three games in the 1991 World Series – in which all seven games were won by the home team - were settled in extra innings and four times a game was won with the final swing. It was also the first 1-0 seventh game since the Yankees beat San Francisco in 1962.

HOLDING OUT FOR A MANAGEMENT POSITION

One-sixth of MLB's managerial jobs were vacant going into the post season, with the Blue Jays, Marlins, Rangers, Royals and White Sox searching for their next skipper. Texas and Toronto hired leaders during the LCS.

Bruce Bochy signed a 3 year deal to lead the Texas Rangers. Over 25 years at the helm of Major League teams, Bochy has managed 4,032 big-league games between the Padres and Giants and won three World Series titles in San Francisco (2010, 2012, 2014). He most recently led the Giants during the 2019 season. He is one of 12 managers in history with 2,000 victories and one of just nine to manage three World Series champions. But Bochy's greatest accomplishment might be that he's managed a quarter-century without ever getting fired.

Bochy's career managerial record is 2,003-2,029, and he has a .497 win percentage. Prior to transitioning into a coaching role, Bochy was a catcher who played nine total Major League seasons with the Astros, Mets and Padres.

Last season, the Rangers finished with a 68-94 record. The team has not reached the postseason since 2016.

The Blue Jays gave interim manager **John Schneider** a 3 year deal. Schneider has been a part of the Blue Jays organization since he was drafted in 2002. He spent six years as a minor-league catcher. When he retired in 2008, he became a coach for the team's rookie-level Gulf Coast League affiliate, working his way up through the minor leagues as a manager. Along the way, he managed players such as Vladimir Guerrero Jr., Bo Bichette, Danny Jansen and Jordan Romano. He joined the major-league coaching staff in 2019, and after Charlie Montoyo was fired July 13, Schneider was promoted from bench coach to interim manager.

Over the 74 games remaining in the regular season following Montoyo's dismissal, Schneider led the Blue Jays to a 46-28 record and into the postseason for the first time since 2020. Toronto fell to the Seattle Mariners in the American League Wild Card Series, but Schneider's regular-season win percentage of .622 is the highest ever by a Toronto manager, with a minimum of 10 games managed, in his first season leading the team.

Dusty Baker has 2093 wins as a manager. Of the previous 11 managers to reach 2,000, 10 of them are in the Hall of Fame. The only one who isn't is **Bruce Bochy** (2,003 wins), who's not yet eligible for induction.

Baker had 1981 hits 242 HRs in 19 year career .278 hitter as a player.

He has been a manager 25 years (Giants, Cubs, Res, Nationals, Astros).

He took over a struggling Giants team in 1993 and they won 90-plus games five different times and also won a pennant.

He took over an abysmal Cubs team in 2003 and immediately they went to the National League Championship Series.

He took over a going-nowhere Reds team in 2007 — a team that had not been in the postseason in more than a decade — and they made the playoffs three out of four seasons before he was fired.

In 2016, he took over a talented Washington National team that had lost its way and they won 95 and 97 games before he was fired again.

Finally, in 2020, he took over a Houston Astros team that had been crushed by a cheating scandal, and they reached the ALCS his first year, the World Series his second and are now looking like the best team left in the playoffs.

There are only 16 managers in baseball history who are 300 games over .500 for their careers — and of the 300, only half of them have coached in the expansion era:

1. **Bobby Cox**, 503 games over
2. **Walter Alston**, 427 games over
3. **Earl Weaver**, 420 games over
4. **Tony La Russa**, 387 games over
5. **Sparky Anderson**, 360 games over
6. **Joe Torre**, 329 games over
7. **Dusty Baker**, 303 games over
8. **Davey Johnson**, 301 games over

Terry Francona could join this group next year — he's 288 games over 500.

Dave Roberts surely will join this group next year — he's 272 games over .500 and has the highest winning percentage ever for an MLB manager at .632.*

There are three Negro leagues managers — **Bullet Rogan, **Vic Harris** and **Rube Foster** — who are credited with a higher winning percentage than Roberts. Rogan and Foster are in the Hall of Fame, though not as managers. If you want to talk about managers who deserve Hall of Fame consideration, you should start with Vic Harris, who had a .663 winning percentage and managed the Homestead Grays to eight pennants.*

Bruce Bochy's overall record as a manager is 2003-2029 — 26 games under .500. He had a losing record in his 12 years with the San Diego Padres, which tracks with what you probably expected. But he also had a just-barely losing record with the Giants, which might not be what you expected. His teams won 90 games just twice in his 13 years with San Francisco, and they made the playoffs four times.

Winning three World Series in those four playoff appearances certainly helps a managerial resume.*

**His teams also made the playoffs four times with the Padres, but they did not win a World Series. They won the pennant in 1998 but bombed out of the playoffs the other three times.*

Terry Francona has two World Series rings and more accomplishments than will fit on his Hall of Fame plaque. This season was among his best work.

The Guardians, with the fourth-lowest payroll in the majors, won their division by 11 games and came within a win of advancing to the ALCS.

Cleveland had 17 players make their major league debuts and they accounted for 27 percent of the team's plate appearances. No team had ever won a division title using so many rookies.

That group included left fielder **Stephen Kwan** and right fielder **Oscar Gonzalez**. Kwan had a .773 OPS and stole 19 bases over 147 games. Gonzalez had a .788 OPS in 91 games then had two walk off hits in the postseason.

Cleveland was second in the American League in stolen bases (119) and sacrifices (22) and 14th in home runs (127). Its team defense also ranked in the top five across most metrics.

The next trick will be winning decisive games. The Guardians are 1-8 in winner-take-all postseason games with eight losses in a row dating to Game 7 of the 1997 World Series. The lone victory was in Game 5 of the 1997 Division Series when **Manny Ramirez** drove in two runs to beat the pre-dynasty Yankees.

Paths criss-crossed--**Tony La Russa** of the White Sox (second all-time in wins) vs. **Dusty Baker** of the Astros (12th). Where to begin? Sept. 30, 1971. Fifty years ago, La Russa and Baker were Braves teammates who played in the same game that one and only time. Each had two hits. La Russa never took another major league at bat.

Fifteen years later, La Russa was hired to manage Oakland, where Baker was playing his last season, which means La Russa and Baker were on the same team when each took their last at bat.

Baker joined the Giants as a coach. La Russa's A's beat Baker's Giants in the 1989 World Series. Baker became Giants manager. Baker's Giants beat La Russa's Cardinals in the 2002 NLCS.

VERLANDER AND 300 WINS

Peter Abraham, Boston Globe

Baseball has not had a 300-game winner since **Randy Johnson** in 2009. It's fair to wonder if he'll be the last.

Starters averaged only 5.21 innings this season. Getting into the seventh inning, the expectation at the turn of the century, has backtracked to getting through the order twice. If that's five innings, great. If not, that's OK.

Managers more often than not start games planning to go to the bullpen in the sixth. The idea of a starter deserving to go deeper if he is pitching well is negated by wanting to use relievers to create better matchups.

Save us, **Justin Verlander**.

The Houston Astros ace turns 40 in February and has no plans to stop pitching any time soon. He has 244 victories and counting.

Verlander has made \$317.5 million in his career and should be a first-ballot Hall of Famer. But the expectation is he will decline his \$25 million option for next season and see what free agency holds.

He will not lack for opportunities after going 18-4 with a 1.75 earned run average. Verlander was hit hard in Game 1 of the Division Series by Seattle, allowing six runs over four innings. But he came back and held the Yankees to one run in six innings in Game 1 of the ALCS.

Verlander is the only pitcher you can imagine getting to 300 victories at this point. **Zack Greinke**, who could retire, is next with 223. From there you drop all the way down to 38-year-old **Max Scherzer** with 201.

An additional 56 victories would require at least another four years. But Verlander gave the Astros 28 starts and 175 innings this season and he believes that's a baseline for the future given that his arm is healthy after essentially missing all of the 2020-21 seasons recovering from Tommy John surgery.

STOP BLAMING THE UMPIRES FOR EVERYTHING

Matt Martell, Sports Illustrated

Bad calls live on forever. Some of the most infamous examples:

- [Don Denkinger](#) in Game 6 of the 1985 World Series.
- **A.J. Pierzynski's** reaching on a [dropped third strike that wasn't](#) in ALCS Game 2 in 2005.
- **Kent Hrbek's** [pulling Ron Gant off first base](#) and tagging him out in Game 2 of the '91 World Series.

- **Derek Jeter's** game-tying homer in Game 1 of the '96 ALCS because of [Jeffrey Maier's fan interference that wasn't called](#). Editor's Note—Maier would go on to set the career hits record at Wesleyan.
- **Liván Hernández's** 15 strikeout performance, [thanks to a load of generous calls](#), in Game 5 of the '97 NLCS.

These five bad officiating moments have three things in common:

1. Nobody disputes that the calls were incorrect.
2. They happened in the postseason.
3. The team that benefited from them went on to win the World Series.

This brings us to what happened in the ninth inning of last night's 4–2 [Phillies](#) win over the [Padres](#) in [Game 3 of the NLCS](#). With nobody out and a runner on first, San Diego left fielder **Jurickson Profar** was at the plate representing the tying run, facing closer **Seranthony Domínguez**, going for the two-inning save. Profar worked the count full, fouled off a changeup and then stepped in for Domínguez's seventh pitch of the plate appearance, a 98.7-mph heater running in toward his back knee cap. Within milliseconds, Profar triggered his hands to start his swing, recognized it was out of the zone, abruptly halted his swing, realized the fastball was bearing in on him and popped his hips back to avoid it. In the process, his bat head cocked forward just a bit more, enough to appear as though it had broken the inexact plane between swing and no swing. Home plate umpire Ted Barrett appealed to third base ump Todd Tichenor, who quickly punched out Profar. Livid, Profar dropped a few f-bombs at Tichenor and was ejected.

Immediately, one of the main talking points of the game became Tichenor's call. It took Kevin Burkhardt less than 10 seconds after introducing **Frank Thomas, David Ortiz and Alex Rodriguez** on the FS1 postgame show to mention the Profar check swing. "And that was a really questionable check swing call on Jurickson Profar. That was dicey, but that changed the momentum..."

Rodriguez took it from there, talking a bit about Rob Thomson's managing before bringing it back to Tichenor: "But how wonderful is baseball, the razor thin difference between **Rob Thomson** being a genius (as he looks today), or a goat, all comes down to Todd Tichenor's very, very controversial call."

Notice that neither Burkhardt or ARod said that Tichenor made the wrong call; instead, Burkhardt labeled it "questionable" and "dicey," while ARod meandered from praising baseball to chalking the whole game up to a "very, very controversial call." It sounds like they disagree with it, but they don't say that outright. Maybe that's because the call wasn't clearly wrong. Heck, it might have even been right.

Later on, Rodriguez said his biggest complaint was that Tichenor was too quick to punch out Profar, that the umpire didn't wait to process what had happened. That's a fair critique.

Umpires are taught to wait a beat before making a call. But that doesn't mean Tichenor got it wrong.

The thing is, it really didn't matter whether the call was correct. If the call had gone the other way, and the Padres had come back and won, that ruling would've been one of the main topics of discussion afterward. Really, except for ARod's parenthetical assessment of Thomson, you could take the same two statements from above, from Burkhardt and ARod, and plug them into the postgame show after a hypothetical San Diego win and they would work just as well.

We all spend way too much time and energy dissecting the close calls that umpires make, and it's not just a postseason phenomenon. Fire up Twitter on a random Tuesday night in June and you're bound to see people furious over pitches that are just outside the superimposed box on the broadcast. We blame umpires for everything that goes wrong. That's part of the game, and really, that's part of the fun. Booing umpires is just as much a ballpark tradition as singing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" during the seventh inning stretch.

This becomes a problem, though, when we start attributing the outcomes of games to the calls umpires make. Tichenor's call was not the "razor thin difference" in the game. Sure, the Padres would've had momentum—which is very much a real thing in baseball, even though we can't quantify it—but they still would've had to score two runs to tie the game with the bottom of their order up against a closer throwing the ball well. If the Phillies advance to the World Series, it won't be because of an umpire's "very, very controversial call" in Game 3. Rather, it will be because [Jean Segura can somehow flip pitches](#) nowhere near the strike zone into the outfield for run-scoring knocks, because **Bryce Harper** is one of the best hitters alive and because their pitchers kept a good San Diego lineup in check.

PLAYOFF DOMINANCE

Going back to 2015, when Houston snapped a nine-season playoff drought, it has defeated New York in a postseason series three straight times, if you include the 2015 AL Wild Card Game. Another victory this time around would push that streak into truly rare territory.

Since the Divisional Era began in 1969, when the playoffs expanded beyond the World Series, there have been 17 instances of one team winning at least three consecutive postseason series matchups against another team (including Wild Card Games), according to the Elias Sports Bureau. In just 11 of those cases have those three straight series victories come in the span of no more than 10 seasons. If the Astros advance to the World Series, they would become only the second team with at least four consecutive series wins against an opponent over a 10-year span.

Here is a look at the longest postseason series winning streaks by one team against a single opponent in the Divisional Era.

Yankees vs. Twins (6 series)

2003 ALDS, '04 ALDS, '09 ALDS, '10 ALDS, '17 ALWC, '19 ALDS

It's not just that the Yankees have won these series -- it's that they have dominated them. The Bronx Bombers are 16-2 in postseason games against the Twins, with a plus-53 run differential, winning 13 straight since Game 2 of the 2004 ALDS. That's a big reason why Minnesota has dropped each of its past nine series overall, as well as an astonishing 18 playoff *games* in a row.

Yankees vs. A's (4 series)

1981 ALCS, 2000 ALDS, '01 ALDS, '18 ALWC

Of course, the Twins aren't the Yankees' only October victims. Those A's losses in 2000 and '01 were particularly excruciating, both coming in five games. In '01, a 102-win Oakland club won Games 1 and 2 at Yankee Stadium, only to drop three in a row, including by a 1-0 score in Game 3.

Red Sox vs. Angels (4 series)

1986 ALCS, 2004 ALDS, '07 ALDS, '08 ALDS

The Angels held a 3-1 advantage in that 1986 ALCS and led Game 5 by a 5-2 score entering the ninth inning before the Red Sox rallied. The other three series, which came in a five-year span, were much more one-sided, with the Halos winning just one total game. They did get their revenge in 2009, however, sweeping Boston in a three-game ALDS.

Yankees vs. Guardians (3 series)

2017 ALDS, '20 ALWC, '22 ALDS

Cleveland won two of the first three playoff series between these teams, before New York turned the tables. It hasn't been a cakewalk, however. The Yankees needed to go to a winner-take-all fifth game to emerge from the ALDS victorious in both 2017 and '22.

Red Sox vs. Yankees (3 series)

2004 ALCS, '18 ALDS, '21 ALWC

The Yankees beat the Red Sox in their first two postseason matchups, in 1999 and 2003. It looked like they would do it again, in '04, but Boston pulled off what remains the only successful comeback from a 3-0 deficit in postseason history. Since Game 4 of that series, the Sox have won eight of nine playoff games against their archrivals.

Dodgers vs. Braves (3 series)

2013 NLDS, '18 NLDS, '20 NLCS

It's worth remembering that past results do not guarantee future ones. For a while there, it seemed like Atlanta just couldn't get past Los Angeles in October. But the Braves flipped the script in 2021, beating the Dodgers in six games in the NLCS on their way to a World Series title.

Astros vs. Yankees (3 series)

2015 ALWC, '17 ALCS, '19 ALCS

This is, of course, pending the final result of the 2022 ALCS. With Houston having played in the NL until 2013, these franchises didn't meet in the playoffs until recently, but in that limited time frame, the Astros have won each matchup.

Cardinals vs. Braves (3 series)

2000 NLDS, 2012 NLWC, 2019 NLDS

It looked as if Atlanta would win that 2019 NLDS, taking a 2-1 lead in the series and a 4-3 lead late in Game 4. But **Yadier Molina** led St. Louis to a comeback win, while a 10-run first-inning outburst made Game 5 anticlimactic.

Giants vs. Cardinals (3 series)

2002 NLCS, '12 NLCS, '14 NLCS

In both of their past two championship runs, the Giants had to go through the Cardinals to reach the World Series. In 2012, they rallied from a 3-1 series deficit to do so. The '14 NLCS lasted only five games, but those were decided by a total of only 10 runs, including a Giants extra-inning win in Game 3.

Tigers vs. A's (3 series)

2006 ALCS, '12 ALDS, '13 ALDS

If the Yankees have been the A's No. 1 playoff nemesis in recent history, the Tigers aren't too far behind. The two teams played highly competitive, back-to-back ALDS in 2012-13, with both lasting the maximum five games. Unfortunately for the A's, both winner-take-all contests pitted them against **Justin Verlander**, who threw a combined 17 scoreless innings with 21 strikeouts.

Tigers vs. Yankees (3 series)

2006 ALDS, '11 ALDS, '12 ALCS

The Yankees can sympathize with Oakland's plight of facing Verlander in October. They've done it in recent years against the Astros, and before that, it was against the Tigers. JV faced New York in all three of these series. In both 2011 and '12, he authored a victorious outing of at least eight innings.

Phillies vs. Dodgers (3 series)

1983 NLCS, 2008 NLCS, '09 NLCS

The Dodgers beat the Phillies in the NLCS in both 1978 and '78, but Philly got revenge five years later. The teams didn't see each other again in the postseason for another 25 years, before back-to-back, five-game NLCS matchups sent Philly to the World Series. More than a decade later, that **Matt Stairs** home run might still be going.

Cardinals vs. Padres (3 series)

1996 NLDS, 2005 NLDS, '06 NLDS

From 1999-2019, the Padres made the playoffs twice, faced the Cardinals in the NLDS both times and lost six of seven games. But when San Diego finally returned to October in 2020, it overcame a Game 1 loss to beat St. Louis in the NL Wild Card Series.

Braves vs. Astros (3 series)

1997 NLDS, '99 NLDS, 2001 NLDS

The Killer B's-led Astros won the NL Central four times between 1997-2001 but lost in the NLDS each time, while dropping 12 of 14 games. Three of their four series losses during that frustrating stretch were to the Braves. However, Houston fought back to win two other NLDS battles with Atlanta in 2004-05.

Yankees vs. Rangers (3 series)

1996 ALDS, '98 ALDS, '99 ALDS

The Senators/Rangers franchise, established in 1961, did not make the playoffs until 1996. It then did so in three of the next four seasons -- only to lose to the Yankees in the ALDS each time, while winning just one total game. Rangers fans would finally get some measure of payback in 2010, when their club knocked off New York in the ALCS to capture its first pennant.

Yankees vs. Royals (3 series)

1976 ALCS, '77 ALCS, '78 ALCS

These franchises have met in the postseason four times, and each matchup came in the ALCS between 1976-80. The Yankees won the first three -- taking win-or-go-home Game 5s in both of the first two -- before the Royals ended that streak with a three-game sweep in '80.

Reds vs. Pirates (3 series)

1970 NLCS, '72 NLCS, '75 NLCS

Currently NL Central foes, these two franchises were in different divisions back in the 1970s, and both were powerhouses. They played four NLCS against each other during that decade, with the Big Red Machine rolling past Pittsburgh in each of the first three.

JOE SHEEHAN

The Padres who will take the field tonight are entirely the product of trades and signings rather than player development. Just three of the 26 players on their NLDS roster came from within the system, and of those, two didn't play. The Padres got less than one bWAR this year from players they developed, all from rookie reliever **Steven Wilson**. A.J. Preller, who was a player-development maven with the Rangers, is now a Padres executive in the mold of Jack McKeon or Frank Lane, always churning.

The Phillies get more from their player development program, with **Aaron Nola, Rhys Hoskins, Bryson Stott, and Seranthony Dominguez** playing key roles. Still, when you look at the core of this team you see high-end free agents **Bryce Harper and Zach Wheeler**, plus **J.T. Realmuto**, traded for just before he hit free agency. **Kyle Schwarber and Jean Segura** are imports as well.

These constructions are noticeable because we think of upstarts as being teams that built from within. In this case, the teams that advanced from the NLDS are both far less developmental projects than the teams they vanquished, though both did trade some prospects to get here. The Phillies and Padres are teams out of the 1980s, built through the transaction wire, not the back fields. This is something we should celebrate; baseball's signature off-field problem at the moment is teams that decide they'd rather not try to compete. The Padres and Phillies are here because in recent years they tried like hell to win.

The Padres are the product of trades and signings rather than player development. Just three of the 26 players on their NLDS roster came from within the system.

The first modern World Series, played quite a while before we called it that, didn't have to schedule itself around television or worry about conflicts with the NFL. It predated both those things. With the 1903 pennants in the two major leagues secured, Pirates owner Barney Dreyfuss challenged the American League champions, the Boston Americans (you call them the Red Sox) to a postseason series. The AL and NL were less than a year removed from a hot war over players, as the upstart American League looked to establish itself as a major circuit by raiding the NL for talent. The Americans, encouraged by the two league presidents, accepted the Pirates' challenge.

That series was best-of-nine, scheduled 3-4-2, with two travel days. (Rain would extend the series.) Two years later, after the Giants' John McGraw had declined to play the AL champion in 1904, the leagues themselves arranged the competition and made it mandatory. That series was formatted 1-1-1-2-2; the first two games, in Philadelphia and New York respectively, were played without a travel day between them, as were games three and four. A year later, the all-Chicago affair between the Cubs and White Sox would be played over six consecutive days. In

fact, the next Series to include a day off wouldn't come until 1909, when the Pirates and Tigers squared off in Pittsburgh and Detroit.

World Series schedules would not become formalized for a very long time. In 1921, the Giants and Yankees, sharing a home stadium, alternated "home field" for eight games in the last best-of-nine Series. Even after the Yankees moved into The House That Ruth Built, the two teams alternated home games in the 1923 Series.

Travel distance was rarely a concern. In 1927, the Yankees swept the Pirates in four games over four days. Game Two was in Pittsburgh, Game Three in New York. I don't know what it was like in 1927, but from personal experience I can tell you that's a nine-hour train ride today. Only when World Series stretched to St. Louis and Chicago did the leagues allow for regular travel days, and not always then. The '34 Series between the Tigers and Cardinals was played as seven games in seven days, with a pair of trips between Detroit and St. Louis wedged in there, and the '35 Series between the Tigers and Cubs scheduled similarly.

The 2-3-2 format, with or without off days, became standard by the 1930s, even when teams shared a city. The 1936 and 1937 Series between the Yankees and Giants were played as 2-3-2. The last exceptions were during World War II, when the Series was scheduled 3-4 in 1943 and 1945 to limit wartime travel. (1944 was an all-St. Louis affair.) Scheduled off days for travel, though, would still be rare. From 1947 through 1956, there were none. The expansion of the baseball map, though, would make them necessary. In 1957 and 1958, the Milwaukee Braves won the NL pennant, playing the Yankees both times. In 1959, the Dodgers won their first pennant in Los Angeles. It was in this period that the now-familiar 2-3-2 with two travel days was established as a permanent format. Since 1957, every World Series outside of 2020 has been scheduled this way.

In 1969, the AL and NL expanded to 12 teams apiece, divided into two divisions of six, and created a second postseason round, the League Championship Series. Concerns about cold and wet weather as the baseball calendar stretched into October meant that the best-of-five LCS round was played over five consecutive days for the first couple of years, in a 2-3 format. However, cross-country matchups eventually necessitated the need for travel days in this round as well, though they tended to be dropped in based on the teams involved. The 1973 ALCS, between the Orioles and A's, had a travel day between the Baltimore and Oakland games; the 1973 NLCS, between the Mets and Reds, was played over five straight days.

Two things would take over as drivers for playoff scheduling in the 1970s: Night games and television. The pattern in my childhood was for one LCS to have one off day, and the other to be played without one, running from either Tuesday or Wednesday to Sunday, with the World Series beginning on the following Tuesday. When you're a kid, you think the way things are are the way they always were, and to this day, the World Series beginning on a Tuesday still feels right in a way it starting on other days does not.

We're 80 years into this history of postseason scheduling, and at no point has the issue of postseason baseball being different been part of the conversation. That's because it wasn't. Teams would use their better pitchers more often to win the World Series, but that was the only change of note, and over one or two series, rarely enough to make October seem much different than April through September. When the best starters throw 270-300 innings while pitching every fourth day, and the best relievers throw more than 100 innings and often pitch on three and four straight days, the playoffs look like the regular season, only with more bunting.

The separation began with the playoff expansion of 1994, first played out in 1995. Four teams were added to the mix, and a best-of-five series added to the slate. Off days to stagger the series for maximum television exposure were now part of the mix whether travel was necessary or not. Teams that finished off their opponents quickly got additional days off. The Braves played 14 games in 27 days in 1995 on their way to a championship. The 1998 Yankees played 12 games in 24 days. Parallel to this, as the 1990s progressed, teams were sharply ramping down the use of their best pitchers during the season.

Over the next 20 years, these are the two trends that would create a breach between regular-season and post-season baseball. In the regular season, teams play on about 90% of the available game days, and until the 1990s, they played on about that percentage of postseason game days. They were often scheduled to play on five straight days in the playoffs, even the World Series. Now, teams rarely play playoff games on more than two straight days and can often average a game every other day on their way to a championship. Meanwhile, they're using their best pitchers less and less during the season, making it a shock when the usage changes in October.

We've documented these changes in the Newsletter; the 2011 Cardinals were the first team to use more relief pitching than starting pitching in a playoff series. In 2014, Madison Bumgarner threw more than a third of the Giants' postseason innings, and just shy of a third of their World Series innings. In 2017, Brandon Morrow pitched in all seven games of the World Series. The 2019 Nationals used six pitchers to throw 83% of their October innings on their way to a title. For most of baseball history, October baseball was baseball, just colder, and now it's something apart, something occasionally alien.

For the next week, though, it could look more familiar. As part of the scheduling adjustments that allowed a full 162-game season to be played after the lockout, and fit in the expansion of the first round, MLB has sliced a travel day from the LCS round. The final five games, as necessary, of the ALCS and NLCS will be played on five straight days. The league did the same with the Division Series round, but just one of those four series extended to five games and rain turned the schedule for that one upside down.

This change is entirely about scheduling, but it could have a significant effect on gameplay, especially in the NL, where the Padres and Phillies are guaranteed to play at least three more games. The immediate effect of possibly playing five games in five days is the need for five

starters, or using one on short rest. Teams have been able to eliminate their fifth starter and sometimes even their fourth in recent Octobers. That's not possible now.

The effect on reliever usage could be severe, though that always depends on game script. A well-timed blowout could allow both teams to rest their best relievers and minimize the effect of the schedule on usage. On the other hand, there are precious few low-leverage innings in the playoffs, and you can't punt a game in Philadelphia in October the way you might in Miami in June.

We got a taste of this in 2020, when the need to compress the calendar and the lack of travel over the final three rounds allowed MLB to schedule every postseason series without off days. We saw both the White Sox and A's bullpen a first-round elimination game, using 17 pitchers to get 51 outs. The Padres used nine pitchers to clinch their first-round series over the Cardinals. All four LCS teams that year had to use five starters in that round, and the parade of close games in the ALCS -- all decided by three or fewer runs -- put a lot of high-stress innings on the Rays' bullpen and arguably led to their loss in the World Series. If Nick Anderson is a little less worn out come October 27, maybe the Blake Snell War never happens.

The possibility of playoff baseball being played on a regular season schedule is something I have anticipated since the postseason slate was announced. I'm fascinated to see how the change impacts the next week of ball, and how the four managers work under these conditions.

MATT MARTELL, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

First, there were the questions we had months ago when the expanded postseason was first announced:

- Does it give an unfair advantage to the top two division winners?
- Does it give an unfair advantage to the teams playing all three of their games at home in the wild-card round?

Now, the questions are:

- Do the lower wild-card teams benefit because they were playing in high-stakes games over the last month just to get into the postseason and therefore entered October on a hot streak?
- Do the top two division winners who get first-round byes face an unfair disadvantage because of the long layoff between the end of the regular season and the start of the Division Series?

The best answer to these questions is: We have no way of knowing. Each of the upsets we've seen so far in the postseason can be attributed to specific circumstances that have nothing to do with long layoffs or home field advantage or the length of the series or any of the other conclusions we've reached prematurely.

Let's not forget, upsets have been part of the MLB postseason for years. The Braves won the World Series last year after winning the fewest regular-season games (88) of any playoff team. The 93-win Nationals won the wild-card game, then defeated the 106-win Dodgers and 107-win Astros en route to their World Series title in 2019.

Since the first year that the postseason expanded to include wild-card teams in 1995 and not including the shortened 2020 season ...

- There have been just three seasons in which the top team from each league also played in the World Series (1995, '99, 2013).
- There have been two seasons in which two wild-card teams met in the Fall Classic (2002, '14).
- Five of the World Series winners finished the regular season with at least 100 wins (1998, 2009, '16, '17, '18).
- Four of the World Series winners won fewer than 90 games in the regular season (2000, '06, '14, '21).
- The team with the best record in its league has won the World Series 10 times (1995, '98, '99, 2005, '07, '09, '13, '15, '16, '18).
- The team with the best record in MLB has won the World Series six times (1998, 2007, '09, '13, '16, '18).
- The team with the worst record among the playoff teams has won the World Series five times (2000, '06, '11, '14, '21).
- Seven wild-card teams have won the World Series (1997, 2002, '03, '04, '11, '14, '19).

So yes, the best teams in each league don't benefit from this new format, but they didn't exactly benefit from any of the previous times the postseason expanded, either. That's exactly the point. If we wanted the World Series to be a matchup between the best regular-season team from each league, we'd just go back to the system in place before 1969, when the World Series was the entire postseason. That seems a lot less fun than what we have now: an entire month of playoff baseball.

There is a completely valid question about whether this new format gives the top teams even less of an advantage than the previous wild-card systems did, but right now it's way too soon to tell. Then again, if this does end up being the case, is that necessarily a bad thing?

Unpredictability is one of the things that makes the postseason great, even if fans of certain teams don't like that their reward for regular-season dominance is an early postseason exit. Sports are far more exciting when the outcomes don't feel predetermined.

JOE POSNANSKI

For the first 50 or so years of modern baseball, batters would walk about as often as they struck out. In fact, through the 1956 seasons, batters historically had walked MORE than they struck out. The walk and the strikeout were two sides of a coin; they beautifully represented the eternal battle between pitcher and hitter.

Things began to change in the mid-1950s. Strikeouts, after many years of staying pretty steady, began to rise very quickly, while walks stayed more or less in place. Starting in 1955, MLB set strikeout records every year for 10 consecutive seasons. Part of this was directly due to baseball expansion, but much of it had to do with the way the game had changed — higher mound, bigger strike zone, the proliferation of strikeout pitches such as **Herb Score, Don Drysdale, Toothpick Sam Jones, Bob Gibson, Jim Bunning**, leading to **Sandy Koufax and Sudden Sam McDowell**, which led to **Nolan Ryan and Steve Carlton**, etc. There was probably a change in the batters' attitude toward strikeouts, too.

In any case, every single year since 1951, batters have struck out more often than they have walked, with the ratio growing and growing. You might know that in 2022, strikeouts were a bit down from the last couple of years. But walks were down, too. And the result was that this year, the strikeout-to-walk ratio was 2.75-to-1. That's the highest in modern baseball history.*

**The strikeout-to-hit ratio is probably even more troubling — in 2019, for the first time, batters struck out more often than they got a hit. This year marked the fourth consecutive season of that being true.*

I bring this up because while these baseball playoffs undeniably have been dramatic and surprising — if you like upsets and chaos in your sports, as so many people do, this has been an electrifying postseason — it has been pretty exhausting watching how overmatched hitters are these days. I'll give you a few postseason numbers to grumble about — batters are hitting .213 so far, they're slugging .355, and teams are averaging just 3.7 runs per game.

And, here's the big one: Batters have struck out 493 times and walked just 141. That's a 3.5 strikeout-to-walk ratio. That's pure madness. If this were a boxing match, you'd want the referee to stop the fight.

It has been a slog, plain and simple, especially because it doesn't seem to matter WHO is pitching. They just keep coming out of the bullpen — men with names like Cody and Seranthony and Pierce and Matt — and they all throw 98 and they all have invisible sliders and they all have Bugs Bunny changeups and if one of these pitching beasts doesn't have it on that particular day, then the manager quickly goes to another one. The supply is seemingly limitless. It's like going up against the droid army.

Baseball is, to its credit, attacking some of its most obvious on-the-field problems. There will be a pitch clock next year to make the games go more quickly, something I very much like. There will be a ban on the shift to spark more offense, something I have mixed feelings about, mainly because I don't think it will have the effect that they expect. There will be bigger bases to maybe make the game a little bit safer and maybe encourage teams to run a bit more; we'll see on that one.

And soon, very soon, there will be an attempt to clean up the umpiring and strike zone issues. I am predicting right here that in 2024, there will be a strike zone challenge system in place, much like the challenge system in tennis. That would have been great to have on Sunday night; there were several questionable calls on both sides of the Cleveland-New York game, but the eye-catching one was a seemingly awful strike-three call on Cleveland's **Amed Rosario** in the eighth inning with the Guardians trying to scrape together another comeback. Allowing Rosario to challenge that call is super-easy, it can be done in a matter of seconds, and it would have been so much more satisfying than watching replays of the umpire missing the call.*

And yes, for you Yankees fans, **Giancarlo Stanton could have challenged the very questionable strike calls against him; everybody wins!*

BUT ... the biggest on-field problem of all, I think, is the overwhelming number of strikeouts, and I'm not sure what can be done about them. Nobody foresaw a game featuring *so many pitchers* with electric stuff. Nobody foresaw a game with three, four, five and six of those pitchers going every night.

Nobody foresaw a game where batters would feel like their best (only?) chance was to swing big and hope for the best.

I don't know how you balance those scales, but they have to find a way. Baseball is all about that balance.

Gammons: Astros built a pitching staff for the long-term by seeking value over flash

Brent Strom, considered by this current generation of pitching coaches to be their gold standard, believes much of the credit for the best major-league pitching staff in 2022 — the Astros — “goes back to Jeff Luhnow.”

Granted, Luhnow, the former Astros general manager deposed following the 2017 sign-stealing scandal, traded three minor leaguers who have not panned out for Justin Verlander, who is now on track for his second Cy Young Award in his three full seasons in Houston. Verlander and Lance McCullers Jr. are the only pitchers who started games for both the 2017 and 2022 Astros teams, and McCullers had started seven when they won their 100th game.

Yet it wasn't just Verlander, or trades, or the first-rounder McCullers who make this pitching staff what it is. No, the credit for that may start with Luhnow, but it trickles down from there, particularly to one scouting director, Oz Ocampo, and his staff, who signed the four Latin American starters who are the backbone of this rotation now and likely for many years to come. And they did it by worrying less about prospect age and velocity, and focusing on other factors that are so important in developing young arms who can actually pitch, not just light up radar guns.

Look at this season's rotation of Verlander, Framber Valdez, Cristian Javier, Luis Garcia and Jose Urquidy, with the seven McCullers starts thrown in. Through the Sept. 25 weekend, they led major-league rotations in innings, quality starts, average game score, innings and pitches per start as well as pitching WAR. They were second behind the Dodgers in wins and ERA. They are the only team with four starters with 140 innings; they have five. Javier's strikeouts per nine innings is bettered only by Shohei Ohtani and Carlos Rodón. Oh yes, and no one in that foursome, all between 25 and 28 years old, is yet arbitration eligible. “I don't think there's ever been anything like what they've done so quickly,” says Strom.

Valdez and Javier were born in the Dominican Republic, three years and four months apart, Urquidy was born in Mexico, Garcia in Venezuela. Valdez, Javier and Urquidy were signed to professional contracts in a 16-day period in March 2015, while Garcia was signed two years later, all by scouting director Ocampo. All four made their major-league debuts between August 2018 and September 2020. Look out to the bullpen any night and add on 26-year-old Albert Abreu, with a 97.5 mph fastball, a slider that holds right-handed batters to a .134 batting

average and a 34.5 percent strikeout rate. That makes for four pitchers between 25 and 28, all pre-arbs, all originally signed for less than the Astros gave 2022 seventh-round draft choice **A.J. Blubaugh** out of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Luhnow is gone now, working in soccer in Mexico. Strom left the Astros after last season, moving on to the Arizona Diamondbacks after a flirtation with retirement. Which brings us to Ocampo, who is back with the Astros in 2022 after a few years away, resuming a relationship with the organization that began a decade earlier. Back then, in 2012, he came to the Astros with a Georgetown degree in political economy and an MBA in value investing and management from Columbia University. He is the son of Filipino immigrants whose father owned a delicatessen in Bergenfield, New Jersey. Yes, as a teenager he sold a lot of lottery tickets and newspapers, which he devoured because of the passion he developed for baseball.

Ocampo had an internship with MLB in 2004, and then was hired by Luhnow and the Cardinals to oversee their startup Dominican Baseball Academy at only 21 years old. After spending two years with MLB in international baseball operations, he joined the Astros after Luhnow's ascendance to general manager before the 2012 season.

Luhnow was schooled in the importance of the four-seam fastball by Strom when they worked together in St. Louis, and brought him to Houston, where he was a prominent figure in the Astros' first five postseason runs. Luhnow's public legacy may always be first as general manager of the 2017 Trash Can Astros, but all four of these Latin American pitchers were signed by Ocampo before Charlie Morton got **Corey Seager** to ground out to Jose Altuve for the final out of the 2017 season. Ocampo chose his graduate school curriculum because he wanted to study investment business, and perhaps have a hand in creating Moneyball part 2. He became the Astros' international scouting director at the starting line of Luhnow's long-term plan.

"The Latin American scouting was important to Jeff because he had lived in Mexico," says Strom. Owner Jim Crane wanted to be invested in that international market, and Ocampo had a significant role. It was at the insistence of Ocampo and scout Chuck Gonzalez that the club pursued its interest in Yordan Alvarez. Gonzalez tried to sign Alvarez when he defected from Cuba in 2016, then only a few months later joined with Ocampo to push for the trade that sent Josh Fields to the Dodgers and brought Alvarez to Houston.

Given Ocampo's Ivy League work in value investing — a study field that has been a career builder for Red Sox owner John Henry and Oakland executive **Billy Beane** — it is interesting that he was able to sign Valdez and Javier for \$10,000 apiece, Garcia for \$20,000 and the foursome for \$140,000. That may have been a matter of finding value in "older" players: Valdez was 21 when he signed, Javier signed a week before his 18th birthday, Garcia joined at 20. When the annual international signing lists are announced, the vast majority of signees are 16.

"There is risk in signing kids at 16 after they have spent two or three years trying to build up velocity," says Ocampo. "We were trying to build a vast program. We were able to give young players a couple of years to grow and develop physically. They were often left feeling slighted

because they felt they were bypassed. Many were actually still high school age in the U.S. We scouted them very hard.”

Strom, who has a residence in Mexico and is bilingual, went to the Dominican twice with Ocampo, working alongside scouts from that country. “We were looking for the basics — delivery, athleticism, physicality, love of the game, willingness to listen to and try suggestions, and spin on the breaking balls.”

They were not ruled by radar guns, and didn’t care so much about prospect ages. They were looking for *pitchers*.

“We were looking for clean deliveries and a feel that they could develop velocity,” says Strom. Astros scouts Román Ocumarez and Leocadio Guevara strongly suggested Javier. Strom and Ocampo liked him. He threw 84-88 mph with a good delivery and curveball. “His fastball was very tough to pick up,” says Ocampo. Javier now throws 94-96. His ERA was 2.77 heading into the last week of September; the average against his slider was .137, the whiff rate 40.3 percent, and he was fourth in the majors in highest strikeout-per-nine-inning rate.

Esteemed Houston mlb.com writer Brian McTaggart has noted that Javier is nicknamed “El Reptil,” — the reptile — for his cold-blooded demeanor and presence on the mound. Manager Dusty Baker says his fastball is “invisible.” When Javier completed the first seven innings of a no-hitter on June 25 in Yankee Stadium, Ocampo told McTaggart that at one point he took out his phone, videotaped a couple of innings and the delivery was virtually identical to what it was when he first signed.

That the bilingual Strom was the pitching coach as each member of the foursome reached the major leagues was essential. Ocampo stressed constant positivity in the development of all Latin pitchers, and Julio Linares and Rick Aponte did yeoman’s work reinforcing that in the minors.

Fast-forward to Sept. 25, where the box score showed six innings before a 46-minute rain delay: one hit, no runs, no walks and eight strikeouts. That made Javier’s four September starts 22 innings, one earned run, 30 strikeouts, eight walks. For the season, that left him 6th in the American League in earned average (2.65) and second in strikeouts per nine innings (11.8). His strikeout rate was 33.1 percent. According to Baseball Savant, his average four-seam velocity for the season was 93 mph. When you’re the third guy in there after Verlander and Valdez, that’s not too shabby.

The Astros head into the postseason with the fewest runs allowed, the lowest starters ERA and best save percentage of any American League team. Pitching will do that. Pitching is also anywhere you find it. And in regard to this Astros team, starting pitching was found on the waiver wire, in the trade market, in the first round of the draft, in the Dominican Republic, in Venezuela and Mexico. Someone make a note of that in the Columbia course manual for an MBA in value investing and management.

Baseball History Is No Longer Written With Ash Bats

Invasive insects and batter preferences have led to the elimination of the wood that dominated the sport for generations. There may not be a single ash bat used in this postseason.

By [Zach Schonbrun](#), NYT

CLINTON TOWNSHIP, N.J. — On a glorious autumn afternoon, Rosa Yoo stepped off a road at the Round Valley Recreation Area and plunged into the woods to perform the grimmest task of her job as the New Jersey Forest Service’s health specialist: checking on the status of the white ash trees.

She arrived at a clearing, where a grove of ghostly gray husks cut haunting figures amid the colorful foliage. As she suspected, the trees, whose canopies a year ago painted the landscape in gold and maroon, were dead or hastily dying.

“There’s dead ash trees everywhere,” Yoo said. “It’s hard to find an ash tree anywhere that hasn’t been infested.”

Infested, she means, by an invasive insect called the emerald ash borer, which for years has been munching its way across North America, leaving huge patches of dead forest in its wake.

Among native tree species, ash represents a tiny fraction of the continental woodlands. But there is one arena where ash has historically reigned: in baseball.

Most of baseball history has been written with ash bats, from **Joe DiMaggio’s** 56-game hitting streak in 1941 to **Roger Maris’s** 61 home runs in 1961 to **Mark McGwire’s** 70 homers in 1998.

Babe Ruth swung ash bats weighing 46 ounces. **Ty Cobb** had his crafted for him by a coffin maker. **Ted Williams** used to travel to the factory of Hillerich & Bradsby, the maker of the Louisville Slugger, to select the lumber he wanted carved into his bats.

Today, however, ash has all but died out of baseball as the trees face beetle-driven extinction. This postseason, which stretches from early October to early November and began with 12 teams and more than 300 players, may be the first in generations that does not register a single plate appearance with an ash bat.

In 2001, Hillerich & Bradsby was producing roughly 800,000 ash bats a year, with many of them going to scores of major leaguers. Today, the company retains only one ash devotee: Evan Longoria of the San Francisco Giants, whose team did not make the postseason.

It is as if all Major League Baseball stadiums suddenly stopped selling hot dogs. When Jack Marucci started making bats for his son in a backyard shed in the early 2000s, the wood he picked up at the lumber yard was ash. Because what else would he choose?

“That was the staple,” Marucci said. “All I knew was ash bats.”

The company he started, Marucci Sports, and its sister brand, Victus, now make bats for more than half of the players in the big leagues. Only five Marucci customers requested ash this season: **Joey Votto, Javier Báez, Kevin Plawecki, Tim Beckham and Kiké Hernández**, none of whom made the playoffs.

There may be a handful of others, like Brad Miller of the Texas Rangers. But **Aaron Judge’s 62 home runs** for the Yankees this season came off the barrel of a maple bat.

Pete Tucci, the founder of Tucci Limited in Norwalk, Conn., thumbed through his logbooks trying to pinpoint the last client who came to him seeking ash bats.

“It was **Omar Narváez**,” said Tucci, referring to the Milwaukee Brewers catcher. “He ordered six ash bats in spring training in 2020.”

And that was it.

The transformation has not gone unnoticed. A former first-round pick of the Toronto Blue Jays in 1996, Tucci swung only ash bats during his career. He tried maple, which was gaining ground in the late 1990s. He didn’t like it.

“I kept trying it because other guys were liking it,” Tucci said. “But I’d always go back to ash.”

Baseball hitters are legendarily intuitive, and Tucci was no different. Because ash is a softer wood, with a looser grain structure, it can be more susceptible to splintering or flaking. But in the barrel, the so-called sweet spot, the softer ash bats can flex upon contact, producing a “trampoline” effect on the ball.

“The grain kind of creates a bit of a groove,” Tucci said. “I felt like that groove caught the ball a little bit more and produced more backspin. I felt like I got more performance out of an ash bat than a maple bat.”

When he got into bat making, though, in 2009, it was a different story. Joe Carter was the first notable star to experiment with a maple bat, in the 1990s. But after **Barry Bonds** hit 73 home runs in 2001 swinging a maple Sam Bat from the Original Maple Bat Corporation, a Canadian company, dozens of others followed, opting for maple’s hard-but-light combination.

It is a good thing, too. Because just as maple was gaining popularity, quality ash timber — with the favorable eight to 12 growth rings per inch — was harder to come by.

In the state park in New Jersey, Yoo swung her hatchet into one of the dying ashes. She peeled back a section of bark the size of a pancake as if it were Velcro.

“That’s not supposed to happen,” Yoo said.

The emerald ash borer is the size of a grain of rice. But it swarms the forest, penetrating the protective bark of ash trees. It lays eggs in the cambium layer, on which the larvae eventually feed, cutting off the tree’s vital nutrients from the inside. Once satiated, the winged insects burst out of the tree and restart the cycle.

Since the borers were first detected in the United States in 2002, in Michigan, efforts have been made to stop or slow their progress. But they have been spotted as far north as Winnipeg, Manitoba, and as far south as Texas. This summer, they were discovered in Oregon.

More recently, Yoo has been assisting as the New Jersey Department of Agriculture attempts a biological control, releasing parasitoid wasps known to feed on emerald ash borer larvae. But it will take years for the predators to catch on in the numbers required to fight back against the borer, which is native to Asia and most likely hitched a ride to the United States on a container ship.

Meanwhile, trees are dying.

“Nature has a very resilient way of hanging in there,” Yoo said. “I believe there will still be ash, but it will be a long time before it can get back to where it was.”

Bobby Hillerich, a fourth-generation bat maker for Hillerich & Bradsby, admitted the company was late to fully appreciate the impact. Louisville Slugger started in 1884 using ash and hickory, a heavier wood that fell out of favor by the 1940s.

For more than a century, Hillerich & Bradsby sourced its ash lumber from mills dotting Pennsylvania’s densely forested northern tier and across the southern New York border. The woods offered such abundance that 40,000 trees a year could be felled to make Louisville Sluggers, at a cost of just 90 cents per board foot.

“We had this fantasy that it was going to be containable,” Hillerich said of the insect infestation. “It was probably a few years later that we came to realize this was not going the way we thought.”

The company still makes 325,000 to 350,000 ash bats a year, Hillerich said, but they’re the low-end variety that customers might find at a local retailer.

“They’re usually used for protection,” Hillerich said, “or for costumes for Halloween.”

Regardless of the borer, Hillerich thinks maple would still have become the most popular wood wielded by major leaguers because of its firmness and consistency. But the demand for ash would have probably remained strong, he said, if bat makers could have maintained their supply.

“We had to have some hard conversations with some guys,” Hillerich said. “We said we can’t be sure of the supply of ash we were getting. We just can’t guarantee it was the quality wood that they’ve been swinging.”

Birch is another species that has gained a greater foothold in ash’s void. But it has its faults, too.

“Players don’t like the sound,” Hillerich said.

Jason Grabosky, the director of the Rutgers Urban Forestry Program, retains more optimism than most about the future of North America’s ash trees. Because they are capable of shedding seeds in large quantities, a new generation of ash trees might yet take root after the borer has laid waste to the old.

For baseball, however, it is the end of an era.

“It will probably be at least a generation before we see ash bats come back,” Grabosky said. “But if we have children playing baseball, I imagine we will still want ash bats.”

JOE POSNANSKI ON THE RUN UP TO 1986 WORLD SERIES

Why **Bill Buckner**? It’s one of the great mysteries of sports. Why has the sports world crashed down on Bill Buckner? Why not **Leon Durham**? Why not **Tony Fernandez**? Why not **Alex Gonzalez**? Why not **Jose Lind**? Baseball in particular has been a sport with no shortage of goats, players who made untimely errors. Why does Bill Buckner stand apart?

Of course, Red Sox and Mets aficionados know the truth: The game was already tied when Buckner let that ground ball go through his legs. The Red Sox had already blown it. This was Game 6 of the World Series, of course, and it was at the end of the most intense and overwhelming postseason of the last 50 years. It is stunning how many lives were forever altered by the 1986 baseball postseason, for good and bad, for joy and tragedy.

In the American League Championship Series, the California Angels were on the brink of going to their first World Series. Twice. In Game 5 — with a commanding 3-1 lead in the series — they

led 5-2 going into the ninth inning. Part of the reason they led was that in the seventh, with a man on, California's **Bobby Grich** had hit a long fly ball to the warning track. Boston's **Dave Henderson** reached it, and the ball deflected off his glove and bounced over the fence for a home run. Henderson was directly in the goat line of fire. But his destiny was not to be a goat but, instead, a hero.

With one out in the ninth, **Don Baylor** hit a two-run homer to pull the Red Sox within one. After **Dwight Evans** made the second out, reliever **Gary Lucas** came in and hit **Rich Gedman** with a pitch. That was the only batter Lucas faced. Gedman had hit .186 against lefties that season. Lucas had not hit a batter in almost five years.

And then Angels reliever **Donnie Moore** came into the game. Moore was a good enough closer in 1985 to finish sixth in the MVP voting. His 1986 was shakier; he had blown eight of his 29 save opportunities. Still, he was the best the Angels had for the moment. Henderson hit a two-run home run that gave the Red Sox the lead.

That was the first time that the Angels were on the brink of winning. But, not quite as well-known, the Angels tied the game in the bottom of the ninth and then had the bases loaded with only one out. A relatively deep fly ball, a well-placed ground ball, a wild pitch, so many things could have won the game for the Angels. **Doug DeCinces** hit a shallow fly ball toward Evans, too shallow to even try to test Evans' great arm. DeCinces would say that he has regretted that at-bat ever since. Grich then lined back to the pitcher to end the inning. The Red Sox won in 11 innings. They blew out the Angels in Games 6 and 7 to go to the World Series.

Moore's life, after that, was a spiral of despair. He was booed every time he stepped on the field in Anaheim. His pitching disintegrated. And in 1989, after being released by a team for the final time, he killed himself, one of baseball's most tragic stories.

In the National League Championship Series, the Astros and Mets played an equally monumental series — monumental largely because of one man named **Mike Scott**. The Mets had come in as huge favorites. They had won 108 games, and they already were being talked about as one of the greatest teams in baseball history. They led the league in runs scored and

ERA, they had probably the two most exciting players in the game — **Darryl Strawberry** and **Dwight Gooden** — and they were in New York. It was supposed to be pretty easy come October.

Scott made it epic instead. He had started his career with the Mets, and after going 14-27 with a 4.64 ERA over parts of four seasons, he was traded to Houston for **Danny Heep**. Scott kicked around for a couple of years with the Astros before connecting with the guru of the split-fingered fastball, **Roger Craig**. Scott took to the pitch quite well. There are those who will say that Scott also took to scuffing baseballs, but the larger point was that in 1985 he won 18 games, dropped his ERA by more than a run, and the Astros signed him to a two-year deal.

Then came 1986. Think of the most stunning seasons in baseball history — **Jose Bautista** in 2010, **Brady Anderson** in 1996, **Davey Johnson** in 1973, **Norm Cash** in 1961 — and double them for Scott in 1986. He led the National League in ERA (2.22), strikeouts (306 — he had never struck out more than 137 in a season), WHIP (0.923), hits per nine innings (5.9), batting average against (.186) and strikeout-to-walk ratio (4.25 to 1).

Scott had, seemingly overnight, become a right-handed **Sandy Koufax**. He was pitching about the same as he had been until, say, May 25, at Wrigley Field, when for the first time in his career he struck out 10 in a game. His next time out, against Montreal, he struck out 11. In late June, he threw a two-hit shutout against the Dodgers and struck out 11 again. Scott had found that magical convergence of speed and drop — the ball LOOKED like a strike, but then it dropped and WASN'T a strike — and hitters swung over it again and again and again. He struck out 13 in Philadelphia. He struck out 14 in San Diego. He clinched the Astros' division championship with a 13-strikeout no-hitter against the Giants. In his last six starts, he struck out 65 in 46 innings, and the Astros entered the playoffs with the hottest pitcher imaginable.

And sure enough, in Game 1 against the Mets, Scott threw a shutout, struck out 14. The Mets could not touch him. New York won Games 2 and 3, and then Scott returned, allowed three hits and one run, and the Astros won again.

And that led to Game 5, where Gooden and **Nolan Ryan** matched up. Ryan allowed two hits and one run (a Strawberry homer) in nine innings. Gooden allowed one run in TEN innings. It went

to the bullpens, and the Mets scored on **Charlie Kerfeld** in the 12th to win it.

And THAT led to Game 6, which lasted 16 innings. Scott obviously did not pitch in Games 5 or 6, but his presence was always there. Everybody understood — E-V-E-R-Y-B-O-D-Y — that if this series went to a seventh game, Mike Scott would pitch and the Astros would win. The Mets were spooked by him. In other words, this was an elimination game for both teams. If the Astros lost, they were done. If the Mets lost, they would face Mike Scott ... and they were done.

The Astros led 3-0 going into the top of the ninth. Before October 1986, after October 1986, big leads in the ninth inning tended to be pretty decisive. But they seemed to mean nothing at all for those three weeks. Here's what followed for the Mets:

Lenny Dykstra tripled

Mookie Wilson singled (Dykstra scored, 3-1 Astros)

Kevin Mitchell grounded out (Wilson to 2nd)

Keith Hernandez doubled (Wilson scored, 3-2 Astros)

Gary Carter walked

Darryl Strawberry walked (loading the bases)

Ray Knight sac fly (Hernandez scored, 3-3 tie)

Wally Backman walked

Danny Heep (with a chance, perhaps, to knock out his trade counterpart) struck out swinging

So that made it 3-3. The Mets scored in the top of the 14th. **Billy Hatcher** homered in the bottom of the 14th to tie it.

Then in the 16th, the Mets seemed to put it away by scoring three runs, in large part because of the wildness of **Jeff Calhoun**. But this game could not end easily. The Astros scored two and had runners on first and second with two outs. And that's when **Jesse Orosco** struck out **Kevin Bass** to send the Mets to the World Series.

The point is that everything felt outsized in the 1986 postseason. The improbable happened so often that it no longer felt improbable. The floor felt unstable. When the Red Sox scored two runs in the top of the 10th inning in Game 6 of the World Series — one on a home run by the suddenly insatiable Dave Henderson — and then got two quick outs in the bottom of the 10th, reality demanded that the game was over and Boston would finally win the World Series. But this was 1986. And reality was having a bad month. Carter singled to left. Mitchell followed with a single.

The ghosts began to howl. I don't believe in curses. But I do believe that others believe in curses. Knight singled to score Carter and move Mitchell to third.

That's when **Bob Stanley** came in and threw the wild pitch that logic demands was the crucial mistake of the game. He, not Buckner, could be the goat. That pitch scored Mitchell, which meant that the game was tied again. That pitch also moved Knight into scoring position. The very best that the Red Sox could hope for was another inning and another chance. They had already blown the lead.

But then Mookie Wilson hit the ground ball that, well, in Vin Scully's words: "Little roller up along first ... Behind the bag! It gets through Buckner! Here comes Knight and the Mets win it!"

Buckner's career — a fine 22-year run with more than 2,700 hits, almost 500 doubles, a batting title, an All-Star game appearance — has in the minds of so many been reduced to a single ground ball that slipped through his legs in Game 6. That's a sad thing, of course, and an unfair thing. But even more than that, it's a puzzling thing. Why did that error so pierce the consciousness? Yes, it ended a stunning World Series game. Yes, it climaxed a collapse for a team that had already grown famous for its collapses. Yes, it spoke to New England's fragile baseball psyche. But I think perhaps most of all, it happened in October of '86, when everything just felt bigger and brighter and sadder than ordinary life.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE ANSWERS

Pitchers don't often win the MVP award. 12 times since 1956. How many can you name?

1956	NL righthanded starter	Don Newcombe , Dodgers
1963	NL lefthanded starter	Sandy Koufax , Dodgers
1968	AL and NL righthanded starters	Denny McLain , Tigers and Bob Gibson , Cards
1971	AL lefthanded starter	Vida Blue , A's
1981	AL righthanded reliever	Rollie Fingers , Brewers
1984	AL lefthanded reliever	Willie Hernandez , Tigers
1986	AL righthanded starter	Roger Clemens , Red Sox
1992	AL righthanded reliever	Dennis Eckersley , A's
2011	AL righthanded starter	Justin Verlander , Tigers
2014	NL lefthanded starter	Clayton Kershaw , Dodgers
2021	AL righthanded starter	Shohei Ohtani , Angels

HOUSEKEEPING

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