

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

11.27.2027

Good morning baseball fans,

123 days 'til Opening Day. Easiest way to know that? Baseball-almanac.com. From lists of players who have been suspended for PEDs to baseball stamps to players who homered in their last at-bat, it is full of fascinating stuff. Over half a million pages, millions of facts. Definitely worth a look.

How did you do on last week's bonus trivia question—players with over 200 HRs, played for only one team, not in the Hall of Fame. It's a question that makes you think. Wish I could take credit for it—came from the Baseball Trivia and Statistics Facebook page. Re-run of the answer at the bottom of this week's edition in case you missed it.

This week: would you choose **Jacob deGrom** or **Justin Verlander**?, ranking the best 10 hitters, predicting the impact of banning the shift, Hall of Fame discussion, miscellaneous stuff and trivia. Pour yourself a coffee and enjoy.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE

Since 1960 five second basemen have won MVP.

2017 AL batting champion, hit .347 with 204 hits.

2008 AL led MLB with 213 hits, 54 doubles, rookie of the year in 2007

2000 NL hit 33 HRs and delivered 125 RBI.

1984 NL won second of his 9 straight gold gloves, traded in 1982 for **Ivan de Jesus**, later an NL manager.

1975-1976 NL only member of this group to bat lefty, only back-to-back MVP in the 1970's.

Name them.

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

I love learning new amazing stuff. From Joe Posnanski's newsletter. 1927. **Babe Ruth's** 60 HR season. on Sept. 5 of that year — with only 24 games left — Ruth and **Lou Gehrig** were actually TIED with 44 homers each? In those final 24 games, Gehrig hit .315 with three homers. And Ruth hit .393 with 16 homers.

Four White Sox players to win AL MVP Awards--**José Abreu** (2020), **Frank Thomas** (1993, '94), **Dick Allen** (1972) and **Nellie Fox** (1959).

Stan Musial and Ken Griffey Jr. 37 Combined All-Star Games -- Musial with 24 and Griffey with 13. They were both born on November 21st in tiny Donora, PA.

I hate to cause my Yankee fan friends upset--the biggest free-agent contract signed by a center fielder was **Jacoby Ellsbury's** seven-year, \$153 million deal with the Yankees prior to the 2014 season. **Mike Trout** and **Julio Rodríguez** eventually landed bigger guarantees, but through extensions, not the open market. Ellsbury may still be in line for an Oscar for persuading the Yankees he cared enough about baseball to merit a seven-year, \$153 million contract.

Eruption in the free-agent market for relievers — five years, \$102 million for **Edwin Díaz**; five years, \$46 million for **Robert Suárez**; three years, \$34.5 million for **Rafael Montero**.

28 players have hit 100 home runs through their age 23 season. This does not include **Barry Bonds** or **Babe Ruth**, but it does include **Henry Aaron**, who had 110 homers through age 23. The most homers through age 23, by the way, was 153, achieved by both **Mel Ott** and **Eddie Mathews**.

What **Aaron Judge** could mean to the Giants? SF Giants attendance was 30,650 fans per home game in 2022, down from 40,786 per game in 2017. If Judge could help deliver 10,000 incremental seats x \$75 average x 81 home games that is over \$60 million per year before increased ad revenue, increased merchandise revenue, plus playoff revenue.

Are you as surprised as I am that **Madison Bumgarner** is only 33?

In 2022 AL East teams won 58 percent of their non-division games last season. The AL West was at 48 percent and the AL Central at 45 percent. That the Blue Jays and Rays were two of the three wild-card teams was no surprise.

With the more balanced schedule starting in 2023, teams will play 52 divisional games, teams will play 64 intraleague games and a whopping 46 interleague games (up from 20).

From the “I didn’t know that” file:

Ron Kittle (35 for 1983 White Sox), **Matt Nokes** (32 for 1987 Tigers) are two of the 5 players who hit 30 or more HRs in their rookie seasons in the 1980s. **Mark McGwire** (49 for 1987 A’s), **Jose Canseco** (33 for 1986 A’s) and **Pete Incaviglia** (30 for 1986 Rangers) a little less surprising.

Hall of Famer **Joe Medwick** was born 111 years ago. “Ducky” averaged 228 hits per season between 1935-37, and in the latter season, he won the Triple Crown with a 31, 154, .374 line. The 10-time All Star and 1934 World Series champion as a member of the “Gashouse Gang” hit .324 for his career. He’s the last National Leaguer to win the Triple Crown.

Great hitting college lineups?

1987 Seton Hall Pirates of **Craig Biggio, John Valentin and Mo Vaughn**. 2002 Arizona State Sun Devils.

That team included **Ian Kinsler, Dustin Pedroia and Andre Ethier**, who led A.S.U. in hitting at .369 and went on to have a 12-year career as a dependable right fielder for the Dodgers. The Seton Hall team went 45-10 and the Arizona State team went 37-27, but the Sun Devils got the long-term edge, with 127.5 wins above replacement to the Pirates’ 125.1.

Carl Hubbell, known for his darting and baffling screwball, pitched in the major leagues for 16 seasons (1928-43) – all with the New York Giants. He made it to the major leagues – at the age of 25 – in July of 1928, in the middle of his fifth professional season. At the time, the 6’/170-pound southpaw was 12-9, 2.97 for the Class-A Beaumont Explorers. Hubbell’s progress while in the Tiger’s system was reportedly stymied by the belief that relying on the screwball (a “reverse-curve” that, at the time, was termed a fade-away) would be too hard on his arm to be sustained for any significant period of time. The Tigers sold Hubbell to Beaumont before the 1928 season, where – now set free to use his screwball extensively – he was spotted by a New York Giants’ scout. His contract was purchased by the Giants, he was quickly brought to the major-leagues and the rest, as they say, is history.

Hubbell pitched for the Giants for 16-seasons and earned the nicknames “King Carl” and “The Meal Ticket” – as well as a ticket to the Baseball Hall of Fame. Over that span, Hubbell was a nine-time All-Star, five-time 20-game winner and led the NL in earned run average three times, complete games once, innings pitched once, strikeouts once and strikeout-to-walk ratio five

times. He was also selected as the National League's Most Valuable Player twice (1933 & 1936).

His career numbers include a 253-154 record, 260 complete games, 36 shutouts, 2.98 ERA.

Hubbell pitched in five All Star Games, putting up a 2.79 ERA and fanning 11 batters in 9 2/3 innings. He also started six World Series games, going 4-2, 1.79, with four complete games. In the 1933 World Series, he started twice and pitched and won two complete games (one an 11-inning contest), giving up no earned runs (three unearned).

Carl Hubbell Makes All Star Game History

In the 1934 All Star Game (just the second AL/NL All Star Game), Carl Hubbell struck out six batters to set a single-game All Star record that has since been matched, but remains unbroken. And, Hubbell did it in grand – *even legendary* – fashion, fanning five future Hall of Famers in a row. After starting the game by giving up a single to AL 2B Charlie Gehringer and a walk to LF Heinie Manush, Hubbell fanned RF Babe Ruth, 1B Lou Gehrig and 3B Jimmie Foxx to get out of the inning. He then opened the second frame by fanning CF Al Simmons and SS Joe Cronin. After a Bill Dickey single, Hubbell fanned a sixth future Hall of Famer (pitcher Lefty Gomez).

How did those five future Hall of Fame position players do after Hubbell left the game? They went a combined seven-for-fifteen (four doubles), with two walks, six runs scored and four RBI.

Can anyone Beak Tris Speaker's nearly 100-year-old record of 792 doubles?

Nobody has ever even come close to Speaker's record — **Pete Rose** is second on the list with 746 doubles, 46 behind. **Albert Pujols** was a doubles machine — he and **Ducky Medwick** are the only two players with 500-plus doubles through age 32 — but he retired more than 100 away from Speaker's record.

Freddie Freeman? Freeman has led the league in doubles three times in the last five years, and he has 414 total as he enters his age-33 season.

Rafael Devers? Yes, if Devers can just stay healthy — and stay in Boston — he might be the guy to do it. His 187 doubles through age 25 puts him ahead of Speaker at the same age and right there with a young **Carl Yastrzemski**. It also puts him right there with a young **Starlin Castro**, which tells you that there's a long way to go.

POSNANSKI ON 300 WINS

Will there be another 300-game winner?

There are 24 MLB pitchers who have won 300 games. They are basically bunched in four pretty distinct eras.

19th Century Baseball (7): Pud Galvin, Kid Nichols, Tim Keefe, John Clarkson, Old Hoss Radbourn, Mickey Welch and Cy Young all won 300 games back when pitchers would often make 50 or 60 (or more) starts in a season. Cy Young is the only one of the group to pitch on well into the 20th century, which is why Cy Young won 511 games.

Deadball (4): Walter Johnson, Pete Alexander, Christy Mathewson and Eddie Plank all pitched the bulk of their careers during Deadball, or before 1920, when the spitball was outlawed and various other safety measures and improvements to the baseball changed the game.

The Expansion Era (6): Starting in the mid-1960s and continuing on until the mid-1980s and beyond — a rather remarkable group of seemingly indestructible starting pitchers emerged. During that span, **Steve Carlton, Nolan Ryan, Don Sutton, Phil Niekro, Gaylord Perry and Tom Seaver** ALL won 300 games. Four others — **Tommy John, Bert Blyleven, Fergie Jenkins and Jim Kaat** — came close.

The 1990s (4): While everyone seems to remember the Selig Era for all the home runs, it was actually a golden age for great starting pitchers. **Greg Maddux, Roger Clemens, Tom Glavine and Randy Johnson** all won 300 games.

So that's 21 of the 24 pitchers. The other three are **Warren Spahn**, who was his own thing, plus **Lefty Grove and Early Wynn**, who each won EXACTLY 300 games.

Point is, the 300-game winners in years past have come in bunches. For different reasons, each of those eras had circumstances that opened up the possibilities for potential 300-game winners.

Times have changed. I'm not saying we'll never see another 300-game winner again — as you will see, The Toy gives Justin Verlander a very real shot at 300 — but I'm saying that almost

nobody in the game seems to care about pitcher wins anymore. And while there might be an extraordinary pitcher here and there who might win 250 games and even threaten 300, I think the very goal of 300 wins will soon seem ridiculous.

Here's why I think that: Do you know how many pitchers in modern baseball history have won 100 games through their age 30 season? Answer: 249. It's not too uncommon a thing, historically.

Do you know how many active pitchers who are 30-and-younger have 100 wins?

That would be zero.

None. Among pitchers 30 and younger, **Aaron Nola** has the most victories with 78.

The win is going away. Maybe you mourn it. Maybe you don't care. But it's going away.

The Toy gives five pitchers a percentage chance of getting to 300 wins. And while I appreciate the math, I'm simply not buying that **Adam Wainwright**, with 196 wins, or **Clayton Kershaw**, with 197, have any chance at all at winning 300. I don't think either one of them has any intention of sticking around long enough for that to happen.

That leaves three. Gerrit Cole has 130 wins and he turned 32 in September. If he averaged 15 wins per year, it would take him until age 44 to do it, so I suppose that's not entirely out of the question.

Second on the list is **Max Scherzer**, who has 201 wins at age 38. He needs 99 wins, and again, if you had him average 15 victories per season, that would mean he'd also get there at age 44. But his circumstances are a lot different. Mad Max is still great, but only in small doses; his days of making 30 starts a year are surely over. His job with the Mets is to be a playoff factor, and that means he needs to be fresh for October. I don't think he has a 5% chance of winning 300.

And finally — there's **Justin Verlander**. He has 244 career wins, and he's coming off a Cy Young season in which he led the league with 18 victories. Verlander has made it clear that he WANTS to win 300, which means he is likely to insist on circumstances that help him get there.

What would those circumstances be? Well, he will surely want to play for a really good team. He will want to pitch regularly, but also with enough rest to stay strong.

I mean, look, it's still a bit of a longshot. Verlander needs 56 more victories. The only two 300-game winners who headed into their 40s needing so many victories are **Randy Johnson** (who had 230) and **Phil Niekro** (who had 197). Niekro is probably not relevant here, but Verlander can look to Randy Johnson's example.

Big Unit led the league in starts, strikeouts and FIP at age 40 and then pitched so-so baseball for five more years with the Yankees, Diamondbacks and Giants*. He just kept on going. If Verlander can do that, he can get there.

**Do you remember Randy Johnson with the Giants? I don't.*

2023 HALL OF FAME

We will have a stream of notes leading up to the January 24 announcement.

Carlos Beltrán can make a good case for Cooperstown based on his accomplishments on the field. He's a nine-time All-Star with three Gold Gloves, a Rookie of the Year award, and a World Series title on his resumé. Beltran played 20 seasons. Hit 41 HRs in 2006. Drove in over 100 runs 8 times. 2725 career hits. Went to the post-season with the Rangers, Cards, Mets and Astros. Won Rookie of the Year, 12x all-star. Beltrán had a .279 batting average, 435 home runs, 1,587 RBIs, and 312 stolen bases. And a World Series title.

Ah, about that title. It was with the notorious trash-can-banging 2017 Astros. Further, Beltrán was the only Astros player named in the report assembled by commissioner Rob Manfred in 2020. Beltrán now faces a jury of Hall voters. Whether his choice of cheating is treated similarly to the use of performance-enhancing drugs remains to be seen.

R.A. Dickey, Huston Street, Francisco Rodríguez, Bronson Arroyo, and Matt Cain also are new to the ballot, joined by **Jacoby Ellsbury, Jayson Werth, Mike Napoli, J.J. Hardy, Jhonny Peralta, and Andre Ethier**.

Holdovers include **Scott Rolen, Todd Helton, and Billy Wagner**. Rolen received 249 of 394 votes last year (63.2 percent), when David Ortiz was elected with 307 votes (77.9 percent), 11 more than the 75 percent needed. Helton was on 205 ballots (52 percent) and Wagner 201 (51 percent).

Of the 14 holdovers on the ballot, only **Jeff Kent** is in his 10th and final season of eligibility. He has topped out at 32.7 percent and soaring to 75 percent won't happen.

With **Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens, and Curt Schilling** falling off the ballot and now in the hands of the Contemporary Era ballot, Scott Rolen will have the spotlight.

Rolen debuted at 10.2 percent in 2018 and has climbed steadily to 63.2 percent. That strongly suggests the eight-time Gold Glove winner at third base will eventually get in.

But Rolen is only five years into the process and it's unlikely voters who have passed on him so far will feel any pressure to change that decision.

The same is true for former Colorado Rockies slugger Todd Helton, who reached 52 percent last year in his fourth year on the ballot. Billy Wagner was just behind him at 51 percent. He has three years remaining.

There were 394 votes cast last season and he received 249 of them. Rolen would need 47 of those voters to change their minds or gain support from the handful of new voters.

BBWAA ballots are due Dec. 31. The Contemporary Era committee will make its choices, if any, known Dec. 4 in San Diego after it votes. Its ballot has Bonds, Clemens, Schilling, **Albert Belle, Don Mattingly, Fred McGriff, Dale Murphy, and Rafael Palmeiro**. Like the BBWAA slate, there is no obvious choice there.

Voters denied several stars tainted by steroids and scandal.

Barry Bonds (260 votes, 66 percent), Roger Clemens (257, 65.2 percent), and Curt Schilling (231, 58.6 percent) were dropped after their 10th appearances on the ballot last year and are among eight players who will appear on the ballot of the Hall's Contemporary Baseball Era Committee, which meets Dec. 4 in San Diego ahead of baseball's winter meetings.

Other holdovers on the BBWAA ballot include **Andruw Jones** (163 votes last year, 41.1 percent), **Gary Sheffield** (160, 40.6 percent), **Alex Rodriguez** (135, 34.3 percent), Jeff Kent (129, 32.7 percent), **Manny Ramirez** (114, 28.9 percent), **Omar Vizquel** (94, 23.9 percent), **Andy Pettitte** (42, 10.7 percent), **Jimmy Rollins** (37, 9.4 percent), **Bobby Abreu** (34, 8.6 percent), **Mark Buehrle** (23, 5.8 percent), and **Torii Hunter** (21, 5.3 percent).

Kent, who received his highest percentage last year, will appear on the BBWAA ballot for the 10th and final time.

BBWAA members with 10 or more consecutive years of membership are eligible to vote. Ballots must be postmarked by Dec. 31 and results will be announced Jan. 24.

Any players elected will be inducted into the Hall at Cooperstown on July 23 along with anyone elected by the Contemporary Baseball Era Committee.

Alex Rodriguez, a three-time MVP and 14-time All-Star who hit 696 home runs, was suspended for the 2014 season for violating MLB's drug policy and collective bargaining agreement, and Ortiz's name reportedly appeared on a list of players who tested positive during 2003 survey testing.

Some interesting notes on candidates:

Bronson Arroyo pitched in the majors for 15 seasons.

John Lackey had double digit wins for 14 straight years, won 188 games. In 2002 for the Angels Lackey became the first rookie to win a Game 7 since the Pirates' **Babe Adams** in 1909. Lackey went on to help the Red Sox and the Cubs reach the top, joining **Bullet Joe Bush, Jack Morris and Dave Stewart** as the only pitchers on championship-winning rosters for three franchises.

Mike Napoli with 267 HRs is 10th on the all-time catchers list.

Jhonny Peralta hit 376 doubles and 202 HRs.

Huston Street had 324 saves. His father James was 20-0 as a QB at Texas and won the 1970 national title, and pitched for the Long Horns in 3 college World Series.

Matt Cain threw a perfect game and in the 2010 post-season threw 21 1/3 innings without giving up an earned run for the Giants.

No second baseman in history hit more home runs than **Jeff Kent** (351). And the last second baseman with a higher slugging percentage than Kent's (.509) was **Rogers Hornsby**.

500 HRs used to be an automatic pass to Cooperstown. **Gary Sheffield** hit 509 HRs but hasn't topped 41% of the voters.

Jacoby Ellsbury's career 343 stolen bases would lead all active players today.

Francisco Rodriguez: brilliance on the mound, violence off it. He had 437 saves, including a single-season record 62 for the Angels in 2008. He was also arrested on assault charges at Citi Field in August 2010 after punching his girlfriend's father outside the family room near the Mets' clubhouse.

Rodriguez, who was suspended, tore a thumb ligament in the fight and was traded to Milwaukee the next summer. He toiled in relative obscurity through 2017, earning his fifth and sixth All-Star selections and compiling enough saves to rank fourth on the career list. Those ahead of him — **Mariano Rivera, Trevor Hoffman and Lee Smith** — are Hall of Famers.

In **Jered Weaver's** first nine seasons with the Angels, through 2014, only **Justin Verlander and C.C. Sabathia** earned more victories. Weaver won 150 games.

Looking forward to future ballots

2024 **Adrián Beltré, Joe Mauer, Chase Utley**

2025 **Ichiro Suzuki, CC Sabathia**

2027 **Buster Posey**

2028 **Albert Pujols, Yadier Molina**

In the last quarter century these players received 98% or greater on their first ballot **Nolan Ryan, George Brett, Ken Griffey Jr., Cal Ripken, Derek Jeter** and (unanimously), **Mariano Rivera**.

CASHING IN

As if winning the World Series wasn't enough, the Houston Astros will also receive the biggest postseason shares in baseball history for their championship effort.

Houston's shares this year are worth \$516,347 each thanks to a record players' pool of \$107.5 million, up 19 percent from last year's pool of \$90.5 million. The previous record for a postseason share came in 2017, when the Astros cashed in \$438,901.57 each for winning the World Series.

This year's increase in the players' pool came as a result of the new Wild Card Series, which was agreed to in the new Collective Bargaining Agreement earlier this year.

The Braves' postseason share for winning the World Series in 2021 was roughly \$397,000 apiece, though it should be noted that Atlanta issued more shares than Houston did.

The Astros issued 59 full shares and 14.14 partial shares, plus \$940,000 in cash awards.

The National League champion Phillies issued 72 full shares worth \$296,255 each, plus 15.03 partial shares and \$20,000 in cash awards.

The Yankees and Padres, who lost in the League Championship Series, took home shares worth \$145,820 (72 full shares, 16.47 partial shares) and \$152,709 (70 full shares, 14.47 partial shares, \$2,000 cash awards), respectively.

Prior to the World Series, the total pools are the same for the teams that reach each round. The size of full shares varies based on how many each team votes to give out, as well as partial shares and cash awards.

breakdown of postseason shares for all 12 of this year's participants. Each team's number of full shares is listed in parentheses:

Astros:	\$516,347 (59)
Phillies:	\$296,255 (72)
Padres:	\$152,709 (70)
Yankees:	\$145,820 (72)
Guardians:	\$45,795 (60)
Braves:	\$44,878 (60)
Mariners:	\$42,221 (69)
Dodgers:	\$36,148 (82)
Cardinals:	\$10,351 (63)
Blue Jays:	\$10,007 (68)
Mets:	\$9,480 (68)
Rays:	\$8,387 (79)

ALL-TIME RUNS SCORED

8 players with 2,000+ runs scored. Elite group.

Rickey Henderson	2295
Ty Cobb	2245
Barry Bonds	2227
Hank Aaron	2174
Babe Ruth	2174
Pete Rose	2165
Willie Mays	2062
ARod	2021

(Stan Musial, Derek Jeter, Albert Pujols, Lou Gehrig, Tris Speaker, Mel Ott, Craig Biggio, Frank Robinson, Eddie Collins, Carl Yastrzemski, Ted Williams, Paul Molitor not too shabby as the next ten).

WANT TO FIND A POWER HITTER THIS OFF SEASON? GOOD LUCK.

Alex Speier Boston Globe

Several longtime power hitters found in 2022 that blasts that customarily landed several rows into the stands instead expired well shy of the wall. The sight of barreled balls — particularly those hit to the opposite field — transforming from homers into outs created panic and confusion.

J.D. Martinez became a star by developing a swing plane geared to drive fastballs out to right-center while pulling breaking balls over the fence. But in 2022, fastballs he crushed to right were no longer producing familiar results.

“That stuff affects you mentally more than you know,” said Martinez, who cited a ball he blasted to right-center at Fenway in June with an exit velocity of 104 miles per hour against Tigers lefty **Tarik Skubal**. “I was like, ‘Oh, yeah, got him!’ It got caught at the warning track. I’m like, ‘How does that happen? This is unbelievable.’ I’m in [the cage] thinking, ‘OK, I’m missing a gear in my swing.’ I start tinkering. Then my next three at-bats go to [expletive].”

HRs. After a record 6,776 were hit in 2019, MLB’s homer total dropped by 12 percent in each of the last two years, with big leaguers going deep 5,215 times in 2022.

Players who blast 30 homers have become even scarcer, going from 58 in 2019 to just 30 this year.

Some players and teams believe that the power drop-offs couldn’t be foreseen because they weren’t entirely a product of eroding skill but instead of changing game conditions — specifically, the ball. Prior to the 2021 season, Major League Baseball — which owns a stake in Rawlings, the company that produces the baseballs MLB uses — altered the specifications to lower the ball’s coefficient of restitution, with the goal of making the ball less springy after the absurd 2019 power surge.

Because of what MLB described as supply-chain problems, it actually ended up using two balls in 2021: Leftover stock of the springier balls that were manufactured for 2020 and the deader balls manufactured for 2021. Hitters and teams were puzzled when balls hit almost identically yielded two very different outcomes.

In early 2022, the inconsistency faded, yielding to a more straightforward decline in power, viewed by some as the product of both the deader ball and the use of humidors in all 30 parks.

Hitters became frustrated that barreled balls were dying well short of their expected distances. Not all such shots were affected equally, however.

Barreled balls (defined by [MLB.com](https://www.mlb.com) as balls hit 98-plus miles per hour at a launch angle that typically yields an extra-base hit) to the pull side saw a slight drop in the frequency with which they left the yard. In 2019, a pulled barrel resulted in a homer 74.3 percent of the time; in 2022, that was down to 65.7 percent.

But to center and the opposite field, the decline was profound. Barreled balls turned into homers with roughly 31 percent less frequency when hit to straightaway center, and with 29 percent less frequency when hit to the opposite field.

The approach at the foundation of many players' success became a liability. In 2021, Martinez hit .714 with a 2.714 slugging mark and nine homers when barreling balls to right. In 2022, despite nearly identical exit velocities and launch angles, he hit .400, slugged 1.400, and had just three homers on such balls.

Those sorts of drastic and unforeseen power plummets wrought havoc on teams' projections.

Multiple MLB officials said that neither the ball specifications nor the humidex regulations are going to change for 2023. Players aware of that stance are contemplating more pull-oriented approaches, especially given that the elimination of shifts will further reward balls hit to the pull side.

"Now, you're pretty much encouraging just straight pull hitters. No one that goes the other way is getting rewarded," said Martinez. "The only way you're going to get rewarded is if you hit a low liner that's a single. Who cares about that?"

ROLLING THE DICE ON A FREE AGENT ACE

So if you are the Yankees do you pay big bucks for a year (or two) of **Justin Verlander**? Verlander is doing a Tom Brady impersonation—Cy Young season after Tommy John surgery at age 40. I had that discussion with someone this week. (I said "I'm happy to spend Hal's money—we can use any help we can get"). MLB.com offered some thoughts:

BUYER BEWARE

It's difficult to argue with much of what we saw from Verlander in 2022, when he led the AL in ERA, wins, winning percentage, WHIP, ERA+ and hits per nine innings. If there's anything for potential suitors to be wary about, it's that only one pitcher in the Modern Era has ever posted an ERA below 3.00 in his 40s (minimum 400 innings): **Roger Clemens**, who had a 2.99 ERA in 849 2/3 innings between the ages of 40-44.

FOR COMP'S SAKE

It's nearly impossible to find a good comparison for Verlander after his stellar age-39 season, but contractually, the three-year, \$130 million deal **Matt Scherzer** signed with the Mets last winter seems like a good place to start. Scherzer had gone 49-22 with a 2.74 ERA in 102 starts (639 2/3 innings) from 2018-21 before inking that deal, while Verlander is 56-19 with a 2.33 ERA over 97 starts since the start of '18, making just one start between 2020-21 due to injury). Scherzer was entering his age-37 season when he signed his deal, while Verlander turns 40 in February, so it will be interesting to see whether he can land a three-year pact.

JACOB DEGROM OR JUSTIN VERLANDER? 10 SCOUTS WEIGH IN.

Will Sammon in *The Athletic* wrote this very interesting piece

Jacob deGrom or Justin Verlander?

Since the Mets have an interest in re-signing deGrom and have met with Verlander, *The Athletic* polled 10 scouts/executives on the question: If money were no object, which pitcher would you rather have for the next two years?

Most of them prefaced their answers with the same caveat. They said it was tough. Really tough. Really, really tough. That's because both pitchers can be considered generational talents and both carry risk as free agents. Do you go with Verlander, who will turn 40 in February and returned from Tommy John surgery to produce a major-league-best 1.75 ERA in 175 innings while winning the AL Cy Young Award? Or deGrom, the game's most dominant pitcher when healthy, who turns 35 in June and was limited to 156 1/3 innings the past two seasons because of a variety of injuries?

One evaluator analyzed the question in a way that underscores the quandary: When comparing two pitchers at high levels with slim margins, is quality better than quantity?

"Does the value of deGrom being on the mound when he's healthy negate what you might lose in some IL stints and how you'd have to juggle workload management and how that impacts the rest of your staff?" the evaluator said. "To me, I would roll the dice on deGrom."

Most agreed. Participants were granted anonymity to shield them from tipping off their respective clubs' plans and to encourage more candor in sharing their rationale. The vote went 7-3, with the majority choosing deGrom.

"When you have this guy who possesses the best stuff across the board in all of baseball — and they both are probably going to get similar deals in respect to the years and terms — I would just roll the dice that what you're getting in deGrom is potentially organization-changing," the same evaluator said.

“No one dominates like him when he’s healthy,” a top executive from one club said.

“deGrom is the best starter in baseball,” one special assignment scout said, “and he showed it when he came back this season.”

After coming off the IL on Aug. 2, deGrom produced a 3.07 ERA in 12 starts, including one in the postseason. His strikeout rate was 42.7 percent. His walk rate was only 3.3 percent. To put that 39.3 K/BB% in perspective, consider the qualified leader for the statistic: **Shohei Ohtani**’s 26.5 percent.

Through deGrom’s first seven starts and 43 1/3 innings of 2022, he had a 1.66 ERA/1.38 FIP. Over his final four starts and 21 innings, he looked more human, allowing a few more home runs than usual and getting hurt by some poor luck with a 6.00 ERA/3.68 FIP. None of the people polled were worried about that, though. One chalked it up to deGrom just being on a different calendar at the time.

“He hit a lull, but guys go through that during the season,” an evaluator said. “I guarantee you, though, if it was a different time and the season kept going on, he would’ve built up the workload to where he would have finished two months later very strong. That’s how guys are built. When that happens in July for a few starts, it is less magnified.”

That same special assignment scout said he could think of several arguments for either pitcher, but if he thought he could get 170 innings from each, he’d pick deGrom.

That’s the thing, though. Can both be counted on for a similar workload?

The dissenting opinions said no and pointed to deGrom’s injuries. After forearm issues plagued him in the second half of 2021, a stress fracture in deGrom’s scapula ahead of 2022 cost him four months. He went more than one year without throwing a major-league pitch until he returned on Aug. 2.

“Verlander will make more starts and deGrom’s injuries scare me,” one former professional scout said.

It’s worth noting, too, that as great as deGrom is with prolific swing-and-miss stuff, Verlander understands who he is as a pitcher as good or better than anyone, another scout said, noting the right-hander’s multiple plus-pitches and durability. Since Verlander essentially didn’t pitch in all of 2020 and 2021, the Astros were careful in their usage of him. He made 23 of his 28 starts on five or more days’ rest. He also missed time with an injured right calf from Aug. 30 to Sept. 16. He had a 1.17 ERA over his final four regular-season starts, and while he was inconsistent in the postseason, he managed to capture his first World Series victory.

“He’s the rare type of pitcher where age just doesn’t matter anymore and it’s amazing for a pitcher to rebound so well from a major surgery at this age,” one scout said. “Hard to bet against him for one or two more seasons.”

In defending a vote for Verlander, a club executive said, “My Plan A would be Verlander. He’s both an ace and a bulldog. He’s the better bet to make 28 starts.”

Nearly everyone acknowledged that Verlander may throw more innings over the next two years. It’s hard to say by how much, though. If it wasn’t more than, say, three or four starts, the consensus preferred the perceived higher quality from deGrom.

“This is not a knock on Verlander, but I just think deGrom brings a little more to the table on pure stuff,” one evaluator said. “The caveat is that Verlander probably posts up better and you get more innings out of Verlander. But the innings you get out of deGrom are serious impact innings. And you roll the dice on what if this guy stays healthy for the term of his contract. A lot of teams need impact. You go out and get the most impactful guy even if you know, like, hey, he may only make like 26 starts this year. I’d rather have those 26 starts.”

These scouts and execs weren’t privy to the Mets’ plans for the offseason, so they answered the question more in a vacuum, and not with the context of which direction New York should take. For what it’s worth, *The Athletic* projected deGrom to land four years and \$148 million total while pegging Verlander’s next contract at two years and \$87 million. Mets owner Steve Cohen has shown he will continue to spend. It’s possible the Mets sign one of the pitchers. It’s possible they end up with neither — the Astros, Dodgers and Yankees loom as speculative landing spots for Verlander while the Rangers could make a play for deGrom. It’s also possible that free-agent **Carlos Rodón**, 29, might be the better value at starting pitcher, even though he’s a Scott Boras client coming off a career year. And it’s worth acknowledging, in the context of the Mets, that there’s probably some value in keeping a generational talent like deGrom in Flushing for the entirety of his career.

In picking between Verlander and deGrom, the group of scouts and executives said it also depends on the look of the staff they’d be joining. Perhaps a rotation that already has more risk would be better with the few more projected starts from Verlander, one scout said, but even so, it’d still be hard to pass on deGrom. The Mets’ rotation presently consists of Max Scherzer, who is 38, and **Carlos Carrasco**, who in February will turn 36. Their other internal options include the less-established **David Peterson, Tylor Megill and Elieser Hernandez**. With Scherzer, closer Edwin Díaz and a few All-Stars in their lineup, the Mets are looking to continue to win now with an eye toward sustainability. While their farm system catches up, they can spend on free agency to help bridge the gap to long-term winning. Clearly, there’s a need for another top starter, and the next couple of seasons are vital. Verlander is a worthy alternative even if between the two deGrom has the edge.

“Verlander will probably be the ace of at least 25 of the 30 staffs, but deGrom is the ace of 30 out of 30,” an evaluator said. “You can make the argument that Scherzer is the ace even with

deGrom there. But he's definitely the ace with Verlander there. So, if you have the inventory depth behind deGrom, it's all about the culture change he brings with deGrom being the best in the game every fifth day or sixth day taking the ball for you."

BROWN'S OLIVIA PICHARDO, THE FIRST WOMAN ON A DIVISION 1 BASEBALL ROSTER

The Queens, N.Y., native's father, Max, would not allow his daughter to let doubt creep into her mind. He grew up playing baseball in the Dominican Republic. Never organized ball, but on the streets or in sandlot games. He made it his mission that Olivia would play organized ball.

Roughly three months shy of her 19th birthday, the two have executed that mission, etching the younger Pichardo's name in a stratosphere only they foresaw.

Pichardo made history Monday, becoming the first woman to make an NCAA Division 1 baseball roster. Pichardo, a freshman at Brown, received the news from her head coach, Grant Achilles, in front of her new teammates, who cheered the announcement.

There were no guarantees that Pichardo, who came in as a pitcher but will serve primarily as an outfielder for the Bears, would make the team. Achilles knew who she was before she touched down on campus. Through the school's standard application process, Pichardo informed Achilles that she wanted to try out.

So he gave the 5-foot-7-inch lefthanded hitter, who throws righthanded, the fall to show what she could do, giving her a chance to walk on.

Pichardo did not disappoint.

"She's just a confident person," Achilles said. "She would be very strategic in her preparation. That was the first thing I noticed about her. Her tenacity from Day 1 has been something that stood out, just from staying and hitting in the rain to showing up before classes."

THE 10 BEST HITTERS IN BASEBALL

Before you scroll through the following list think of your top ten hitters. Here is Joe Posnanski's list:

So, I've been asking around — asking people in baseball, asking statistically-minded analysts, asking friends — a simple question: Who is the best hitter in baseball?

Before we can answer that, I suppose we have to define terms: What do we mean by “best hitter in baseball?” That used to be an easier question: The batter with the highest average was *called* the batting champion (and still is). **Rod Carew, George Brett, Tony Gwynn, Wade Boggs**, these players had the best batting averages and, as such, were often called the best hitters in baseball.

But even when batting average was king, the batting champ was not always considered the best hitter. **Bill Madlock** won FOUR batting titles, and I’d wager to say that nobody thought he was the best hitter in baseball even in those seasons. He never finished Top 5 in the MVP voting.

Instead, I’d say the best hitter in baseball is a more ambiguous title. The way I have described it is like so: It’s the bottom of the ninth inning. Two outs. You’re down a run and there’s a runner on first base. Or maybe the score is tied and there’s a runner on second base. Or maybe you’re down three runs and there are two runners on. Or maybe you’re down two runs and there’s nobody on base.

And the question being asked is: Who do you want to come up in not just one of those situations but in ALL of them? In other words, who would you most bet on to give you the great at-bat, the one who is best-suited to give you a single if you need a single, a double if you need a double, a home run if you need a home run and draw a walk if you need a rally started?

Oh, also, we’re not just talking about one season. **Aaron Judge** was the best hitter in 2022. But is he the best hitter in baseball or did he just have one season for the ages? The one player who is not on this list, even though everybody talked about him with awe, is **Fernando Tatis Jr.** I just don’t think you can put him on the list after he missed the entire 2022 season.

OK, enough preamble. Who are the 10 best hitters in baseball?

Here are the results based on a few conversations.

Honorable mentions: Fernando Tatis Jr.; **Vladimir Guerrero Jr.**; **Manny Machado**; **Trea Turner**; **Rafael Devers**.

10. **Paul Goldschmidt, Cardinals**

I don't know why, but for some reason in the late 2010s, I kind of thought Goldschmidt was declining. As I look over his career, I wonder why I thought that. I guess his batting average and overall effectiveness dropped a bit in 2019, his first year with the Cardinals.

But you look over his career — he has been good every single year since 2013. Every one. He hits .300, he hits 30 homers, he drives in 100 runs, he scores 100 runs, he walks a lot, he plays excellent first base defense, he runs the bases aggressively and well, all of it. Paul Goldschmidt is going into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Goldschmidt seemed on his way to a Triple Crown in 2022, but he had a bit of a nasty slump in the final two weeks of the season. Throughout his career, he's had sluggish Septembers, probably because he plays so hard and plays every day and his body wears down.

Composite comment*: *He does have quite a bit of swing-and-miss in his game, which might move him down on your list, but few batters in baseball control the strike zone the way he does. He rarely goes chasing out of the zone. You can usually count on him to give you a good at-bat; that's why he has been so incredibly consistent over his career.*

**After each player, I'll put together a composite comment that reflects the array of comments I heard from people.*

9. Shohei Ohtani, Angels

Over the last three seasons, Shohei Ohtani has been intentionally walked 34 times, most in the American League. That tells you two things. One, it tells you that the Angels have done a pretty terrible job of putting a good hitter behind him. Here is a full list of the batters who came up after Ohtani intentional walks the last three years:

- **Phil Gosselin**, 10 times
- **Taylor Ward**, 7 times
- **Anthony Rendon**, 6 times
- **Luis Rengifo**, 3 times
- **David Fletcher**, 2
- **Jo Adell**
- **Mark Canha**

- **Brandon Marsh**
- **Justin Upton**
- **Tyler Wade**
- **Jared Walsh**

Rendon is the hugely disappointing one: The Angels believed they were getting one of the best hitters in baseball when they signed him, and it hasn't worked out that way.

Anyway, that's the first reason Ohtani has been intentionally walked so much.

But the second reason is that he puts together great at-bats. Ohtani does strike out a ton, so his batting average will not leave you overly impressed. But he walks a lot, and hits the ball hard into gaps; it's telling that Ohtani led the league in triples in 2021 in addition to his 46 home runs.

***Composite comment:** It's easy to miss just how good a hitter Ohtani has become because of the hype that always surrounds him. He's an aggressive hitter who swings and misses a lot, but he really knows how to work an at-bat, and he hits the ball hard all the time. He's also one of those guys who could see his numbers jump when baseball eliminates the shift.*

8. Mookie Betts, Dodgers

Something weird has happened with Betts since he got to Los Angeles — his batting average on balls in play has tumbled. BABIP can be unpredictable, but in his six seasons with the Red Sox, his was .314. In his MVP season of 2018, it was .368, third-highest in baseball. A lot of hits dropped for Mookie.

It hasn't been as true in Los Angeles. With the Dodgers, his BABIP is .277 — and that is reflected in his diminishing batting average. He was a lifetime .301 hitter with the Red Sox. He's hitting .271 with the Dodgers. Some of it, certainly, is leaving Fenway Park. But it's also true that he's simply not hitting the ball as hard as often.

But he's obviously still one of the game's elite hitters. He led the National League in runs in 2022. He set a career-high with 35 home runs. He doesn't chase bad pitches, he's one of the harder hitters to strike out (even though he did strike out 100 times in 2022) and he hits balls

into gaps (he was one of only four players in baseball to have 40 doubles and 30 homers this year).

Composite comment: *Mookie does seem a bit streaky to me — he can look pretty bad one week and look like the best hitter in baseball the next — but at the end of every season, you look up and see him with elite numbers. You wonder what sort of adjustments he will make now that he's 30 years old and probably doesn't have quite the elite speed he once had. He's such a great hitter, though, I suspect he'll just ramp up the power.*

7. José Ramírez, Guardians

Ramírez has put up five MVP-caliber seasons in the last six years, and I suspect there are casual baseball fans who still have never heard of him. It's simply his fate to be overlooked. He doesn't seem to mind.

What makes him such a great hitter? He doesn't miss pitches in the strike zone. His contact percentage on balls in the zone is among the best in baseball, and unlike some of the other hitters who make a lot of contact, he drives the ball into gaps. He led the league in doubles for the second time in 2022.

Composite comment: *I think people overlook Ramírez because if you saw him walking down the street, you would never think he's a ballplayer. He's short and kind of round, sort of Kirby Puckett-shaped. He doesn't impress you with his exit velocity — other guys on your list certainly hit the ball harder — but nobody in the game gets more extra-base hits.*

6. Freddie Freeman, Dodgers

Well, what do you know: Another MVP-type season from Freddie Freeman. He led the league in runs scored for the third season in a row. He led the league in doubles for the third time. He led the league on-base percentage for the first time.

And if you look over his career — he just gets better and better. He's cut down his swings and misses to the point where he's now one of the tougher hitters in the league to strike out. He just makes so much more contact than he did before, and it is hard contact. And because of his great approach at the plate, he's become a guy that teams are reluctant to shift against.

Composite comment: *Freddie is not a technical guy; he's all about seeing the ball and hitting the ball. What I've seen with him over the last few years is how much confidence he's gained. He doesn't mind having two strikes on him. He's not one of those hitters who barely misses a good pitch and then thinks to himself, 'Oh, man, I missed my chance.' He's sure that he'll just hit the next one.*

5. **Juan Soto, Padres**

I'd say Soto inspired more conflicting comments than anyone else in the Top 10. Some love him. Others think he's a bit overhyped. He had a weird 2022 season; he came into the season a .301/.432/.550 hitter. But first playing with a going-nowhere Nationals team and then getting dealt midseason to the Padres, he never got his batting average going at all. His hard-hit percentage dropped. He ended up hitting just .242 and slugging just .452. After he got to San Diego, he hit ground balls — lots and lots and lots of ground balls. There were some comments about that.

Of course, Soto is still a unicorn. He walks so much more than he strikes out. He still has elite power. And he's only 24 years old (his birthday was on Tuesday). I'd lock him up if I were the Padres.

Composite comment: *Soto is the best young hitter in the game. ... He took a step backward this year. ... I think once he settles in with the Padres, he's going to be the National League MVP in 2023. ... I think all the **Ted Williams** talk has not done Juan much good. He's always going to walk a lot because of his incredible plate discipline, but he looked a lot less aggressive to me this year. And he started hitting a lot of ground balls. That's something he will have to deal with because of his swing and approach. I saw it happen **to Christian Yelich**; he just stopped putting the ball in the air. Soto's a great hitter for sure, and he should only get better, but for the first time there were a couple of danger signs.*

4. **Bryce Harper, Phillies**

This year was hampered by injury, but once the playoffs began suddenly Harper was Harper again. I don't like to give myself too much credit — mainly because I almost never deserve it — but there was an at-bat in the Cardinals' wild-card series when Harper fouled a ball straight back and I thought; "Uh-oh, Bryce is back." There was just something about the way he

attacked the pitch that suggested he was feeling healthy again and he was about to blow up. Which he did.

It's been a wild career already for Harper. He had a season for the ages in 2015. He had seasons when pitchers simply threw fastballs right by him. His batting average has fluctuated from .243 to .330. his slugging percentage has fluctuated from .423 to .649. For a long time, you simply didn't know what you were going to get.

But now, as he enters his 30s, you get the sense that he's figured it all out. He's No. 4 on this list, but in two years he might just be No. 1.

Composite comment: *He's probably my favorite hitter in baseball to watch right now because he's just so smart about hitting. You're just not going to fool him much. That home run he hit against San Diego is a perfect example. [Robert] Suarez challenged him and mixed speeds and Bryce fouled off pitches until he saw the one he wanted. And then he drove the pitch the other way for a home run. It was a masterclass.*

3. Aaron Judge, Yankees

I mean, what more is there to say about Judge? He led the league in runs, homers, RBIs, on-base percentage and slugging percentage in 2022. He also hit .300 for the first time in his career. It was one of the greatest offensive seasons in baseball history.

So why is he not No. 1? The people I talked with, pretty much unanimously, think this was a once-in-a-lifetime season for Judge, and while he will continue to be great, he will not be THIS great. I don't know if they're right, it might be the case that Judge is healthy and has figured it all out.

Composite comment: *The thing that impresses me most about Judge is how much more contact he makes now. He used to chase a lot; pitchers would count on getting ahead of him in the count and getting him to swing at a pitch out of the zone. He pretty much stopped doing that in 2021 and 2022. He was so locked in this year; it was really fun to watch. But it will be interesting to see how he ages; he's such an unusual talent because of his size and strength that it's tough to project what he will be like at age 35.*

2. Yordan Alvarez, Astros

If there has been a surprise in my conversations, it's how much people in and around the game are in awe of Yordan Alvarez. I mean, yes, he's obviously a terrific hitter, but he's only 25, and he's never led the league in any category, and he only played in his first All-Star Game this season.

Still, people talk about him in hushed tones.

Composite comment: *I don't think people who don't follow the Astros fully understand just how good Yordan is. Maybe they figured out some of it when he hit that home run to beat the Mariners, but I think he might be the toughest guy in baseball to face. When he's right, there's no way to get him out. You can't throw it by him. You can't get him to chase sliders. He loves off-speed stuff. He doesn't swing and miss. He keeps his bat in the zone for such a long time. He's the guy I'd want at the plate.*

1. Mike Trout, Angels

The once and future king.

Composite comment: *I don't know how healthy he is or how healthy he is going to be. But Mike Trout is the best hitter I've ever seen. As good as you think he is, he's actually better than that.*

WHAT IMPACT WILL BANNING SHIFTS HAVE? THOUGHTS FROM TOM VERDUCCI OF SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

As teams cobble together their rosters this winter, they must tackle this riddle thrown at them: How will the ban on shifts change offense and defense? Baseball will look different next season—at least from the past seven years or so, when shifts grew prevalent, sucked more than 2,000 hits out of the game and deemphasized range at second base.

We have so much data on how shifts changed baseball that it is not difficult to make an educated guess as to what will happen next year without them. My top conclusions:

1. The MLB batting average should increase from .243 last season (the fifth-worst ever, and the worst in 54 years) to .255 (equaling the highest since 2011).
2. Ground balls will go up, and strikeouts will go down, both slightly.

3. **Corey Seager** of Texas and **Matt Olson** of Atlanta will benefit the most from the new rules.

4. The Giants need a second baseman, and the Cardinals will rethink **Nolan Gorman** at second base.

Here are the questions and answers that prepare us for the shift away from shifts:

1. How did shifts change baseball?

To understand how the game will be played in 2023, first you must understand the arc and effect of defensive shifts. They have been around since **Ted Williams**, but only in the past four years did they become massively prevalent and effective. The big leap began when the use of shifts doubled from 2017 to '19—largely because of the success of the Astros and Rays, the first and only teams to exceed 30% shifts in those years. Houston won the '17 World Series using a shift 35% of the time in the regular season—then a record, now a level exceeded by 11 teams.

Since 2019, shifts changed how the game looked and how it was played. They made the game aesthetically awkward and less entertaining, which is why a rule change was needed: to rebalance the entertainment value of baseball against its brutish efficiency. In the blend of art and science, baseball should always be more about an athletic competition than an intellectual contest among hackers.

Always remember this about shifts: They were designed to turn hard-hit balls into outs. The average ground ball is hit 86.8 mph. Most balls hit softly or at average velocity are still going to be outs next year. It's the hard-hit ones that are more likely to become hits because more velocity = less time.

Defenders will have less time because teams can't bunch three fielders on the pull side of the infield, and they can't push infielders into the outfield grass to cover more ground.

With that in mind, when I looked at the year-by-year use and effect of shifts I considered hard-hit balls (90 mph or more) to be most instructive. Over the past seven years, shifts more than tripled and *they reduced batting average on hard-hit grounders by 80 points!*

MLB Batters on Hard-Hit Grounders (90+ MPH)

	Shift Pct.	Avg. vs. No Shift	Avg. vs. Shift
2022	34%	.349	.273
2021	31%	.346	.290
2020	35%	.355	.271
2019	26%	.375	.309
2018	18%	.376	.293
2017	12%	.396	.315

	Shift Pct.	Avg. vs. No Shift	Avg. vs. Shift
2016	14%	.381	.313
2015	10%	.384	.285
Total		.373	.293

Here is how rapidly things changed, the demise of hitting in four-year increments:

	Shift Pct.	Ground-ball Batting Avg.
2019–2022	31%	.241
2015–2018	13%	.248

2. Don't hitters want fewer ground balls anyway?

Yes, that was one effect of the proliferation of shifts. Batters saw hit probability on grounders reduced by the shift, so they tried to hit over the defensive alignment. They chased slug, not batting average, also because that is the reward system clubs use as compensation. "Slug is in the air" became the mantra of the Launch Angle revolution.

From 2015 to '22, the shift helped take 2,065 ground-ball hits out of the game. Put them back in, and the MLB batting average goes from .243 to .255.

Over those same seven years, batters hit 7,206 fewer ground balls, a decline of 12%. As ground balls become more rewarded—by hits, and in time, by compensation—those ground balls will come back.

Think about what happened to **Cody Bellinger**: from 2019 MVP to '22 non-tender free agent. His average launch angle from his first four seasons to the past two seasons increased from 17.1 degrees to 21.0 degrees. His ground-ball hits were cut in half, from 37.8 per year to 18.5.

3. How noticeable will the change be next season?

Not as noticeable as you think. Put those 2,065 ground-ball hits back into the game and you're still talking about only about one more hit per game.

Let's use the past World Series as an example—the last one with shifts. The Phillies and Astros used a shift 38% of the time, slightly above the MLB regular-season rate of 34%. Batters combined to hit 30 ground balls when facing a shift. I looked at each one of them. Only seven of them were likely hits without the shift—that's a small sample that dovetails with the large sample rate of about one more ground-ball hit per game.

Here is what is interesting about those seven World Series hits taken away by the shift: **Kyle Schwarber and Bryce Harper** of Philadelphia each accounted for three of them. And the Astros' combined no-hitter doesn't exist without the shift; it took away a hit from Schwarber.

4. Which hitters benefit the most from the ban on shifts?

Seager and Olson will love the new rules. Seager hit .176 last season on hard-hit grounders—65 points below the major league average. He lost at least nine hits because of shifts. Turn those outs into hits and his batting average improves from .245 to .260. Nobody hit more hard-hit groundouts into the shift last season than Seager:

Most Hard-Hit Groundouts Facing Shift, 2022 (90+ MPH)

Corey Seager, Rangers 71
Yordan Alvarez, Astros 66
Rowdy Tellez, Brewers 66
Matt Olson, Braves 59
Kyle Tucker, Astros 54
Shohei Ohtani, Angels 51

By the way, the right-handed batter with the most such hard-luck outs was **Rhys Hoskins** of Philadelphia with 43.

Seager is the canary in the coal mine of the shift era. In five years, he has seen his shift rate increase from 14% to 93% and his hard-hit groundouts increase by 70%.

Seager Year-by-Year Batting

	Shift Pct.	Hard-Hit Groundouts	Batting Avg. on Hard-Hit Ground Balls
2022	93%	75	.176
2021	77%	39	.328
2020	75%	26	.270
2019	36%	35	.375
2017	14%	44	.366
2016	11%	64	.385

5. What's the story with Olson?

He's another canary. In his first three seasons, Olson saw 57% shifts and hit .355 on hard-hit grounders. In four seasons since, he has seen 86% shifts and hit .247 on hard-hit grounders. Over the past three seasons, nobody has grounded out hard into the shift more than Olson:

Most Hard-Hit Groundouts Facing Shift, 2020–22 (90+ MPH)

Matt Olson, Braves	147
Yordan Alvarez, Astros	122
Max Kepler , Twins	121
Kyle Tucker, Astros	114
Corey Seager, Rangers	113

6. What does the ban mean for second base play?

The days are over of signing a free agent like **Mike Moustakas** for \$64 million over four years to play second base. No longer can you hide a lack of range at second base.

The Giants gave 138 starts at second base to **Thairo Estrada** and **Wilmer Flores** and wound up with the worst second base defense in the majors (–52 defensive runs saved). Estrada (–12 DRS) and Flores (–9) were two of the four worst second basemen who played at least 60 games at the position. **Jose Altuve** (–15) and **Jonathan India** (–15) of the Reds were the other two.

Wanting to get Gorman's lefty bat in the lineup, the Cardinals played him at second base last season because Nolan Arenado was cemented at third base, Gorman's true position. St. Louis could mask Gorman's limitations at second with **Tommy Edman**, one of the best fielders in the game, playing shortstop. Gorman (–6 DRS) will get more exposed if he remains at second base next season without the shift.

7. What about line drives?

Thankfully, no more of those scorched line drives into the shift that are outs because of the rover position. They didn't happen often, but they were buzz killers. In five years, line-drive outs hit at least 100 mph and between 140 and 250 feet increased *fourfold*, from 39 to 153. Your tough-luck line-drive leaders last year? Yep, Seager and Schwarber. Welcome back, hits that should be hits.

8. What is the workaround?

Front offices are thinking of countermeasures right now. One idea: flex the off-side outfielder into the rover position to jam the pull side with outfielders against dead pull hitters such as

Anthony Rizzo, Max Muncy or Schwarber. That seems too risky, though, because you are defending the single at the risk of an extra-base hit to the opposite field, as rare as that may be.

You may see the shortstop, when positioned directly behind second base, in motion to the pull side as the ball is thrown, which could be a distraction to the batter as well.

And beware the team that tries to bow the arc of the infield dirt farther into the outfield to give their infielders more depth. MLB will have to enforce the industry standard as they do with the height and slope of mounds.

9. What teams are affected the most?

The Dodgers and Astros ranked in the top three last season in most shifts (the Dodgers led with 53%) and lowest batting average on balls in play vs. the shift (the Astros led at .246). You would think the ban hurts whatever “intellectual advantage” they enjoyed from what they know about playing defense. But Los Angeles manager **Dave Roberts** told me the ban is advantageous for bigger market teams because they can afford the power hitters who see the most shifts. His take is that the offensive benefit outweighs the defensive restraint.

Apply that theory to the Yankees. Imagine you are Rizzo or any other left-handed hitter and you see a shift with the rover crowding that small right field at Yankee Stadium. It is visually intimidating. It looks like there is no room to get a hit. Indeed, Yankees left-handed hitters facing a shift at home had a BABIP of just .200, the lowest in baseball. Next season the field will open for them.

Rizzo pulled the ball slightly more with the 2016 Cubs (39.6%) than he did with the '22 Yankees (38.3%). But his BABIP in '16 was .309 and in '22 it was .216. Why the huge difference? He saw way more shifts and, as a result, hit way more fly balls. As the field opens, Rizzo should be a better hitter.

10. What's the bottom line?

Expect to see changes, all of them for the better, but not drastic ones. Expect one more ground-ball hit per game. Expect batting average to go up. Expect more athletic plays at second base. Expect a few more doubles (remember, no more four-person outfields). Expect Seager and Olson to be grabbed quickly in your fantasy league draft.

Municipal Stadium, Kansas City, 1964 - A's owner Charlie Finley wanted same distance from RF to home plate as Yankee Stadium (296') but a new rule in 1958 required the span to be no less than 325', so Charlie got cute and tried to skirt the rule seen here with K.C. Pennant Porch



THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE ANSWERS

Since 1960 five second basemen have won MVP.

2017 AL batting champion, hit .347 with 204 hits.

2008 AL led MLB with 213 hits, 54 doubles, rookie of the year in 2007

2000 NL hit 33 HRs and delivered 125 RBI.

1984 NL won second of his 9 straight gold gloves, later an NL manager.

1975-1976 NL only member of this group to bat lefty, only back-to-back MVP in the 1970's.

Name them.

2017 **Jose Altuve**, Astros

2008 **Dustin Pedroia**, Red Sox

2000 **Jeff Kent**, Giants

1984 **Ryne Sandberg**, Cubs

1975-76 **Joe Morgan**, Reds

LAST WEEK'S BONUS TRIVIA QUESTION

13 players

Played for only one MLB team

Are not in the Hall of Fame

Hit 200+ HRs

All of them played in 1970 or later

Angels, Brewers, Mets, Nationals, Phillies, Red Sox, Rockies, Tigers, 2 Twins, 3 Yankees.

Ryan Howard	Phillies	382
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HOUSEKEEPING

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This week’s sources include:

The Athletic

Baseballalmanac.com

Baseballroundtable.com

Bleacher Report

Boston Globe

Mlb.com

The New York Times

Joe Posnanski newsletter

Sports Illustrated

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