

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

2.20.2022

Good morning,

Early newsletter release as I'm hanging out with my 3 ½ year old grandson in N.H. Enjoy your coffee with lots of lists, records, oddities, history, Peter Gammons on developing catchers and then some well-chosen words on why MLB should be focused on the product.

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

Last pitcher to win the Cy Young Award in a season when he also won the World Series--Randy Johnson (2001 with the D-backs)

Cal Ripken Jr.'s 2,632 straight games played. Ripken's streak is also more than double the NL record of 1,207 games by Steve Garvey from 1975-83. The longest streak recorded by any player since is Miguel Tejada's 1,152 games from 2000-07 -- not even half of Ripken's total.

Most walk off grand slam HRs in a season across all of MLB was 9 in 2018. There were 8 hit in 2002, 7 in 2008.

July 25, 1956: Inside-the-park, walk-off grand slam There has been just one inside-the-park, walk-off grand slam in Major League history, and it was done by Roberto Clemente. His historic trip around the bases gave the Pirates a 9-8 victory over the Cubs., It was one of just 30 walk-off grand slams down 3 runs with 2 outs. It was the only one of the 30 that was inside-the-park. Fun fact: Clemente's first big league homer on April 18, 1955, was also an inside-the-park homer.

Tony Gwynn had 323 at bats against Smoltz, Maddux, Glavin and Pedro Martinez, struck out 3 times.

Only pitcher to lead both leagues in shutouts in the same season--C.C Sabathia, who started the 2008 season with the AL Indians and went 6-8, with a 3.83 ERA and 2 shutouts (which tied with 7 others for the AL lead) and, in July, was traded to the NL Brewers and went 11-2 with a 1.65 ERA and 3 shutouts (which tied teammate Ben Sheets for the NL lead.)

1961, Roger Maris hits 61 HRs to break Babe Ruth's single season record. Batting most of the year in front on Mickey Mantle, Maris received zero intentional walks that year.

First AL expansion team to win a division title (1976), League title (1980) and World Series (1985) -- Kansas City Royals.

Best winning pct. lifetime against the Yankees (minimum 15 wins) was Babe Ruth who went 17-5 against New York while pitching for the Red Sox.

Early in the 2010 season, Albert Pujols broke the record for most home runs in the first ten seasons of a big league career. Braves 3B Eddie Mathews held the previous record (at 370 homers over the first ten years).

Babe Ruth holds the record with 12 HR titles, while fellow Hall of Famer Ty Cobb earned 12 batting titles. Next best is 8 HR titles for Mike Schmidt, 8 batting titles for Tony Gwynn and Honus Wagner.

Those of us of a certain age can answer this in a flash--In the decade of the 1960s five players hit their 500th home run:

Ted Williams

Mickey Mantle

Ed Mathews

Hank Aaron

Willie Mays (500 & 600)

Juan Marichal, who went 25-8 in 1963; 25-6 in 1966; and 26-9 in 1968 without winning a Cy Young.

FOUR CY YOUNG WINNERS WHO WERE TRADED

Traded immediately after

2012: [R.A. Dickey](#), Mets to Blue Jays

After a journeyman career from 2001-09, Dickey joined the Mets for the 2010 season and discovered another level, making consistent starts and getting good results. In '12, he won the National League Cy Young Award, posting a 2.73 ERA and leading the NL in complete games (five), shutouts (three) and strikeouts (230). The offseason following that year, the Mets sent the then-38-year-old hurler to the Blue Jays in a deal that netted them prospects Travis d'Arnaud and Noah Syndergaard.

1998: [Roger Clemens](#), Blue Jays to Yankees

Clemens won his second consecutive Cy Young Award with Toronto in 1998, and fifth overall. In '98, he led the AL in wins (20), ERA (2.65) and strikeouts (271). In February 1999, Clemens was traded for the only time in his career, going to the Yankees in a deal for David Wells, Homer Bush and Graeme Lloyd. Clemens would go on to win two more Cy Youngs -- in 2001 with New York and in '04 with Houston.

1997: [Pedro Martínez](#), Expos to Red Sox

Martínez won the first Cy Young Award of his career in 1997 with the Expos, leading the Majors in ERA (1.90) and complete games (13). He had 305 strikeouts, but he finished behind Curt Schilling (319). Martínez turned 26 after the regular season ended, and he was about to start the portion of his career that propelled him to Cooperstown. In November, the Expos traded him to the Red Sox in a deal for Carl Pavano and Tony Armas. Martínez finished second in AL Cy Young voting in his first year in Boston, then won the award in two straight years in 1999 and 2000.

1994: [David Cone](#), Royals to Blue Jays

Cone won the AL Cy Young Award with the Royals in 1994, in his second stint with the club after it initially drafted him in '81. He recorded a 2.94 ERA in 23 starts. In April 1995, before the

season began, Kansas City sent Cone to Toronto in a deal for Chris Stynes and two Minor Leaguers. Cone was then traded again just more than three months later, when the Blue Jays sent him to the Yankees by the Trade Deadline.

HOW COULD THAT HAPPEN?

That Time a Team Turned a Triple Play Without Touching the Ball

From The Sporting News

Keith Bodie has seen hundreds of thousands of plays in his 42 years in a baseball uniform. He still remembers the exact details of one that occurred 30 years ago.

“It was in extended spring training in 1986 in Sarasota, Florida,” Bodie recalled. “I was with the Astros. We were playing the White Sox’ extended spring team and they had a kid named Sergio Beltre on second and a kid named Norberto Martin on first and nobody out.”

That’s when the Astros’ minor leaguers turned a triple play without any of them touching the ball. Bodie explained:

“It was a hit and run, and the batter popped the ball up into the infield and both runners had their heads down.

(The infield fly rule means the batter was out, one out.)

“Beltre slid into third and then got up and headed back to second. The coach is yelling ‘back, back, back’ and Martin came racing around second base with his hair on fire not knowing where the ball was.

(Martin passed Beltre on the basepaths, two outs.)

“Then the pop up came down and hit Beltre as he was going back into second base.

(The remaining runner was hit by the batted ball, three outs.)

“It was the most unbelievable thing I’ve ever seen in my life. No defensive player touched the baseball,” Bodie said.

Bodie is a well-respected baseball man who’s worked for six organizations and was recently inducted into the [Texas League Hall of Fame](#). He was also an eyewitness to the strangest triple play in baseball history.

GOOD LUCK BREAKING THESE RECORDS

Ichiro's 262 hits in 2004. Ichiro logged 704 at-bats in that [magical 2004 season](#), one of only four players to cross the 700 at-bat plateau in a single campaign. So to break this record, you'd have to hit .373 and log more than 700 ABs.

Putting **Rickey Henderson's 1,406 career steals and 130 steals in 1982 in perspective.** The last player to attempt 130 steals in a season was Vince Coleman in 1985, and 33-year-old Dee Strange-Gordon was the active steals leader through the 2021 season with just 333.

Pete Rose's 15,890 plate appearances and 4,256 hits

It is conceivable that Ichiro could have been within shouting distance of Rose's hit mark had he debuted in America well before his age-27 season. It's much harder to imagine any player not only equaling Rose's 24 big league seasons, but also maintaining the excellence required to average 662 plate appearances per season as the Hit King did. For as long and as well as Albert Pujols has played, for example, he finished the 2021 season more than 3,000 plate appearances and nearly 1,000 hits behind Rose.

MULTIPLE SERIES, MULTIPLE TEAMS

There are 17 Hall of Fame players who have won a World Series (1903-present) with more than one franchise as players, while on the active roster in each Series.

- Johnny Evers (1907-08 Cubs, 1914 Braves)
- Eddie Collins (1910-11/13 A's, 1917 White Sox)
- Tris Speaker (1912/15 Red Sox, 1920 Indians)
- Herb Pennock (1913 A's, 1923/27/32 Yankees)
- George Herman "Babe" Ruth (1915-16/18 Red Sox, 1923/27-28/32 Yankees)
- Frankie Frisch (1921-22 Giants, 1931/34 Cardinals)
- Mickey Cochrane (1929-30 A's, 1935 Tigers)
- Leon "Goose" Goslin (1924 Senators, 1935 Tigers)
- Enos Slaughter (1942/46 Cardinals, 1956/58 Yankees)
- Red Schoendienst (1946 Cardinals, 1957 Braves)
- Eddie Mathews (1957 Braves, 1968 Tigers)
- James "Catfish" Hunter (1972-74 A's, 1977-78 Yankees)
- Reggie Jackson (1972-74 A's, 1977-78 Yankees)

- Steve Carlton (1967 Cardinals, 1980 Phillies)
- Bert Blyleven (1979 Pirates, 1987 Twins)
- Jack Morris (1984 Tigers, 1991 Twins, 1992 Blue Jays)
- Rickey Henderson (1989 A's, 1993 Blue Jays)

Bonus:

- Leo Durocher (1928 Yankees, 1934 Cardinals) - inducted as manager

MLB Wild-Pitch Leaders (1901-Present) - 22/22

1. Nolan Ryan (277)
2. Phil Niekro (226)
3. Jack Morris (206)
4. Tommy John (187)
5. Steve Carlton (183)
6. Charlie Hough (179)
7. Joe Niekro (172)
8. A.J. Burnett (161)
9. Gaylord Perry (160)
- T-10. Red Ames (156)
- T-10. Felix Hernandez (156)
12. Walter Johnson (154)
13. David Cone (149)
14. John Smoltz (145)
15. Roger Clemens (143)
16. Sam McDowell (140)
17. Mike Moore (135)
18. Tim Wakefield (134)
19. Chuck Finley (130)
- T-20. Jim Kaat (128)
- T-20. Bobby Witt (128)

IN THE BALLPARK

Out of the 30 ballparks currently in use, 16 still have the same name since they opened for business, though technically 2 of which are new iterations of an older stadium.

Busch Stadium
Citi Field

Citizens Bank Park
Coors Field
Comerica Park
Dodger Stadium
Fenway Park
Globe Life Field
Great American Ballpark
Miller Park
Nationals Park
Oriole Park At Camden Yards
Petco Park
PNC Park
Target Field
Yankee Stadium

BUILDING ON LAST WEEK'S PIECE ON TWO SPORT ATHLETES

Kyler Murray, current QB for the Arizona Cardinals, was drafted in the first round by the Oakland A's. He actually signed with the A's for \$4.66 million but Murray then won the Heisman Trophy and was the top NFL draft pick in 2019.

Tim Tebow played 4 minor league seasons in the Mets organization as an outfielder, highlighted by a .734 OPS in 84 games at Double-A in 2018.

Russell Wilson played two seasons in the minors for Colorado Rockies.

Jeff Samardzija was an all-American receiver at Notre Dame. A projected high draft pick in 2007, he chose baseball instead. The right-hander, a 2014 All-Star, pitched in the Majors for 13 seasons and made over \$120 million.

Brian Jordan was selected 30th overall by the Cardinals in the 1988 MLB Draft, and also in the seventh round of the 1989 NFL Draft by the Bills. Jordan chose to pursue football, but was cut by Buffalo. He caught on with the Falcons, however, and played as a defensive back from 1989-91, making the Pro Bowl as an alternate in his last year. Jordan then gave up football to play full-time with the Cardinals in 1992 and would go on to have a 15-year MLB career from 1992-2006, playing for the Cardinals, Braves, Dodgers and Rangers. He was an All-Star in 1999, launching 23 homers and a driving in a career-high 115 runs for the Braves.

Drew Henson was the quarterback who took over for Tom Brady at Michigan, but the Yankees got to him before the NFL. Henson played eight games in the Majors from 2002-03, and got his only career hit in his final game. He pivoted to football in 2004 and made it to the NFL as a backup quarterback for the Cowboys, seeing action after Tony Romo and Vinny Testaverde got

hurt and throwing his only career touchdown pass. After playing his final snaps in 2008, he later returned to baseball as a Yankees scout.

D.J. Dozier was the [Tebow before Tebow](#). First, he was a running back for the Vikings and Lions from 1987-91, with seven rushing touchdowns in the NFL. Then he made the switch to baseball -- even though he hadn't played since high school -- and worked his way to the Major Leagues as an outfielder... also with the Mets. Dozier played 25 MLB games, all in 1992, going 9-for-47 with two doubles and four stolen bases.

Darin Erstad was a two-time All-Star, a Silver Slugger, a three-time Gold Glove and a World Series champion with the Angels. But before the Halos made him the No. 1 overall pick in the 1995 MLB Draft -- a Draft that also included a high schooler Tom Brady, who was taken by the Expos in the 18th round -- Erstad was the punter for the undefeated national champion 1994 Nebraska football team. In the Cornhuskers' Orange Bowl win over Miami, Erstad averaged 41.1 yards on his seven punts, with a long of 54 yards.

Todd Helton Drafted in the same first round as Erstad, eighth overall in 1995, the longtime Rockies star was also a college quarterback at Tennessee. In fact, he was even [ahead of Peyton Manning](#) on the depth chart Manning's freshman year, until Helton hurt his knee in a loss to Mississippi State and was replaced by Manning. It all worked out for Helton in the end, as he went on to belt 369 home runs in his MLB career, make five All-Star teams and win a batting title.

Frank Thomas went to Auburn on a football scholarship after he was passed over in the 1986 MLB Draft out of high school. The Big Hurt played tight end for the Tigers his freshman year and caught three passes for 45 yards, but he soon joined the baseball team -- and the rest is history. The White Sox drafted Thomas seventh overall in 1989, Thomas won back-to-back MVP Awards in 1993 and '94, crushed 521 homers in a 19-year career, and was elected to the Hall of Fame in 2014.

Kirk Gibson. The World Series hero for the 1984 Tigers and '88 Dodgers was an All-American wide receiver for Michigan State in the late 1970s. Gibson was even voted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 2017. He could have gone pro in baseball or football -- in 1978, Gibson was selected in both the MLB Draft (12th overall by the Tigers) and the NFL Draft (in the seventh round by the Cardinals). He picked baseball, and the Tigers and Dodgers are glad he did.

John Elway. The Hall of Fame quarterback defined his legacy when he led the Broncos to back-to-back Super Bowls in 1997 and '98. But he could have been a Yankee. Elway was drafted in the second round, 52nd overall by New York in 1981 -- six spots ahead of Tony Gwynn. In one season at Class A Oneonta, he hit .318 with four homers in 42 games and gave George Steinbrenner visions of Elway playing right field in pinstripes. It wasn't to be. Elway was taken No. 1 overall in the 1983 NFL Draft by the Colts, used his baseball prospects to force a trade to Denver and became one of the great football players of all time.

Bob Gibson: The Hall of Fame hurler also played basketball while in college at Creighton, averaging more than 20 points per game in his career. When he graduated college, he got offers

from both the Harlem Globetrotters and the Cardinals. He played for the Globetrotters for a year, before sticking to baseball permanently and beginning his Cardinals career.

Tom Glavine: The Hall of Famer, 300-game winner and Braves icon was also an NHL draftee by the Kings in 1984. Glavine was taken in the fourth round, 69th overall, ahead of hockey Hall of Famer Brett Hull and Luc Robitaille.

Kenny Lofton: A six-time All-Star, four-time Gold Glove and five-time stolen base champion, Lofton attended college on a basketball scholarship. He played in the Final Four at Arizona in 1988, and in two World Series with Cleveland and the Giants.

Tony Gwynn: Gwynn is one of the greatest pure hitters in baseball history, collecting 3,141 hits in his Hall of Fame career. But the same day he was drafted by the Padres in the third round in 1981, he was also drafted by the NBA's Clippers in the 10th round, after starring in both baseball and basketball in college at San Diego State. Luckily for MLB fans, he chose baseball.

Dave DeBusschere: DeBusschere's stardom was in the NBA with the Pistons and Knicks -- he's in basketball's Hall of Fame, not baseball's. But he played in MLB, pitching parts of two seasons with the White Sox in 1962 and '63. DeBusschere went 3-4 with a 2.90 ERA and 53 strikeouts, and threw a shutout on Aug. 13, 1963 against the Indians. He even got one hit as a batter.

Jackie Robinson: Before he broke baseball's color barrier, wowed Dodgers fans with his electric play, earned his spot in the Hall of Fame and had his No. 42 retired by MLB, Robinson did it all in college at UCLA. He was a varsity letterman in *four* sports -- baseball, basketball, football and track.

Jim Thorpe: A pioneering multi-sport athlete, Thorpe was the first Native American to win an Olympic Gold Medal for the United States -- winning the pentathlon and decathlon in 1912. Thorpe also played professional football, basketball and baseball. [In six MLB seasons](#), mainly with the Giants, Thorpe hit .252 with seven home runs.

MORE FROM THE GREAT JOE POSNANSKI

(he blogs daily on MLB, NFL and tennis—well worth a subscription.

<https://joeposnanski.substack.com/>)

I thought it would be fun to look at 12 of the best pitchers of recent years and offer up three things.

1. The batter they faced the most.
2. The batter who hit best against them.

3. The surprising thorn in the side, the hitter who (in limited at-bats) had rather shocking success.

Tom Seaver

I start with Seaver because he is the pitcher who inspired this idea. My friend Dan McGinn has challenged me — repeatedly — to find a way to talk about the pitcher Dangerous Dan McGinn, who pitched five years in the big leagues and went 15-30 with a 5.11 ERA and 10 career saves. I have tried to sneak Dan McGinn into a couple of posts here and there, but it's always been a bit of a side note.

Not today. Today Dan McGinn gets his due — we'll tell you why in a minute. But first, a little Dangerous Dan McGinn info. He played football at Notre Dame — was a backup quarterback, a punter, and a defensive back. He got his nickname Dangerous Dan not for anything he did on the mound but because once as a punter he chased down a bad snap and completed a first-down pass. That man was dangerous!

And his most famous achievement in baseball wasn't on the mound, either. He was drafted by Montreal in the 1969 expansion draft. Trivia: Do you know who started the first game ever for the Montreal Expos? It's a trick question: It's not McGinn. It's the late, great Mudcat Grant. But Mudcat made it only 1 1/3 innings before getting pulled for McGinn, who lasted only 2 1/3 innings.

But in those 2 1/3 innings, he did something awesome. He became the first Montreal Expos player to hit a home run. And he hit it, yes, off of Tom Seaver.

So we begin with Tom Seaver.

Batter faced most: Lou Brock — 157 PA

You will find that the player these pitchers faced most was always an excellent player — sometimes their excellence has been forgotten. That makes sense, if you think about it; you couldn't face a great pitcher that many times unless you were good enough to be in the lineup every day for a long time. Seaver was pretty successful against Brock, holding him to a .250/.274/.362 split.

Batter who hit best: Rick Monday

They faced each other more than 100 times, and Monday very much got the best of it, hitting .349/.456/.791 with 11 home runs. You know, Rick Monday was a good player. He was not a high-average guy and he was never a Gold Glover in center field, but he walked a lot, he hit with some power, and he just seemed to pop up an awful lot in 1970s and 1980s baseball.

Seriously. I'm seeing him come up again and again as I write my book *WHY WE LOVE BASEBALL*. You know, he was the one who stopped those guys from burning the flag. He hit the home run that sent the Dodgers to the World Series in 1981 (Tom Tango insists that remains the most pivotal moment in Expos history). He just keeps making special guest appearances. He's like baseball's Charo.

Thorn in the side: Tim Lollar

Yes, Tim Lollar was a pitcher. He also went five for 11 with a double, a triple and a home run against Seaver. It was, admittedly, against an older Seaver, but it still counts. Lollar was quite a good-hitting pitcher, good enough that the Yankees gave him a little time at first base in the minor leagues.

Greg Maddux

Batter faced most: Barry Bonds — 154 PA

There's something kind of funny about the Maddux-Bonds duel. In their primes, Bonds owned Maddux. From 1986 to 1993, Bonds hit .343 with six homers off Maddux. But at the end, when Bonds had "transformed" himself into the greatest hitter the game had ever seen, he couldn't touch the aging Maddux. After 2001, Bonds faced Maddux 28 times. He hit .087 without an extra-base hit.

Batter who hit best: Tony Gwynn

I could have gone with Luis Gonzalez, who hit .313 with 10 home runs off Maddux. But I'll stick with the legend, Tony Gwynn, who hit .429 and in 103 plate appearances against Maddux and NEVER STRUCK OUT.*

**Yes, I will repeat this statistic every chance I get.*

Thorn in the side: Junior Spivey

Spivey was a pretty good hitter for the Diamondbacks — he made the All-Star team in 2002 when he hit .301/.389/.476. Still, that doesn't explain him going 10 for 18 with two doubles and two homers off Maddux.

Randy Johnson

Batter faced most: Rickey Henderson — 85 PA

This one was one-sided, Rickey hit only .119 and slugged .170 against Big Unit. But, Rickey being Rickey, he did manage to walk 26 times. In fact, he walked six straight times against Johnson in 1989 and 1990.

Batter who hit best: Albert Pujols

Remember that scene in “Rookie of the Year” when Butch Heddo absolutely mashes Henry Rowengartner's pitch and then runs around the bases fake crying and saying, “Are you kidding me, I eat fastballs for breakfast!” That's how I always imagined Albert Pujols acting when he faced Randy Johnson. He hit .458/.500/1.208 with five home runs in 26 plate appearances against Big Unit.

Chipper Jones also had his way with Johnson, mashing six home runs and slugging .889.

Thorn in the side: Mike Simms

Mike Simms had a crazy career — he played in nine different seasons but he never even came close to playing 100 games in any one of them. He did pretty darned well against Randy Johnson, though, going four for 10 with two doubles and two homers.

Mariano Rivera

Batter faced most: Manny Ramirez — 44 PA

It speaks to Rivera's unparalleled greatness as a closer that Manny Ramirez, one of the true hitting savants of his time or any other, never quite figured out Mariano. MannyBManny hit just .205 with one home run in those 44 plate appearances. But he did get Rivera a bit in the 2004 postseason, going two for three with a double and a walk.

Batter who hit best: Edgar Martinez.

This is pretty famous — every aficionado of Edger or Mariano knows that Edgar fed on Rivera's cutter. They faced each other 20 times, with Edgar hitting .625/.700/1.188 with three doubles and two homers. I think his dominance over Rivera was actually a key ingredient in his eventually successful Hall of Fame case.

Thorn in the side: Jason Kubel

Kubel was a good hitter with some power for a few years in Minnesota — he hit 28 homers and drove in 103 runs in 2009 and even got some MVP consideration. Still, you would not expect him, as a free-swinging left-handed hitter (Mariano's key constituency) to go five for nine with a homer.

Pedro Martinez

Batter faced most: Derek Jeter — 99 PA.

You'd probably have guessed this. I guess they fought to roughly a draw — Jeter hit .256/.347/.395 off of Pedro, which is obviously below his career numbers but certainly not bad against the most dominant pitcher of perhaps all time.

Batter who hit best: Mike Piazza

It's crazy how Piazza was simply invulnerable to Martinez's dominance — he hit .385/.407/1.115 with six home runs off Pedro, two more homers than anyone else. And this is not the last time Piazza's name will come up.

Thorn in the side: Willie Harris

Harris had a 12-year career for seven different teams, and you might remember him from his 6-for-6 game in 2007. He also had some success against the great Pedro, going four for eight with a double and a homer.

Nolan Ryan

Batter faced most: George Brett — 115 PA

It's the classic matchup, the best fastball pitcher against the best fastball hitter. Brett more than held his own, hitting .287 with four doubles and two triples. But he never homered off Ryan. Three other players — Freddie Patek, Claudell Washington and Steve Sax — had 100 or more plate appearances without a home run against Ryan. You would have to say Brett is the most surprising of the four.

Batter who hit best: Jim Wynn

Well, it's either Wynn (who hit .375/.516/.917 with four home runs) or it's Will Clark, who hit .333 but hit six home runs, most of anybody. Or it could be Harold Baines, who slugged .955 in 25 plate appearances. You want to know who the best fastball hitters were of that generation, just look and see how they performed against Ryan.

Thorn in the side: Andres Thomas

Remember him? He was shortstop for Atlanta in the mid-to-late '80s — my memory is of his 1987 Topps baseball card, which had a little trophy on it to signify that he was named to the Topps All-Rookie team. Even so, he hit just .234/.255/.334 for his big-league career, which ended when he was 26.

Still, he loved facing Ryan; he went six for 15 with two doubles and two home runs against him.

Bob Gibson

Batter faced most: Billy Williams — 201 PA

I've told the story many times about Billy Williams breaking down Bob Gibson's slider for me one day in a minor league press box. Well, he did see it more than anybody else. Williams hit .259 against Gibson with 10 home runs, and I'm sure he's more than happy with the result.

Batter who hit best: Richie Hebner

Hebner was perhaps best known for working for his father as a gravedigger during the offseason ... but he was a terrific player, one of the best to never make an All-Star team. And for whatever reason, he just had Bob Gibson's number. In 74 plate appearances, he hit .387/.466/.661 with five home runs. He also hit five home runs off Hall of Famer Fergie Jenkins.

Thorn in the side: Denny Doyle

Doyle might be best known for getting thrown out by George Foster in Game 6 of the 1975 World Series. You might know that story (or if not, there's a [book I can recommend](#)), he was on third in the ninth inning, fly ball in fair ground, Boston third base coach Don Zimmer yelled, "No no no!" Doyle heard "Go go go!" he ran, he was thrown out, and it all led to Carlton Fisk's wave-it-fair home run.

Doyle went 13 for 28 with a triple and a homer off Bob Gibson. In 1971, Gibson had one game against Philadelphia where he allowed six hits. Doyle had four of them, including a homer. "He hit everything I threw," Gibson griped. "Fastball, slider, curve ..."

"I was lucky to hit him like I did," Doyle said. "But he really doesn't pay much attention to hitters like me."

Roger Clemens**Batter faced most:** Harold Baines — 122 PA

Baines apparently liked hitting against Clemens; he hit .305 with a .402 on-base percentage. He didn't hit for a lot of power, but for some reason he just felt comfortable at the plate against the Rocket. As mentioned earlier, Baines also hit Nolan Ryan well. You could not intimidate Harold Baines.

Batter who hit best: Mike Piazza

Told you Piazza would be back. He tore up Pedro. And he crushed Clemens — hitting .421/.500/1.105 with four home runs in 22 plate appearances. This might be why Clemens threw a baseball at his head and threw a broken shard of bat at his body.

By the way, might be a coincidence, but after he threw that bat at Piazza in the World Series, Clemens held Piazza to 1 hit the last 13 times they faced each other.

Thorn in the side: Damian Rolls

Always one of my favorite baseball names — I just thought that if you were going to write a baseball movie, you should definitely have a player named Damian Rolls in it. Rolls went 5 for 14 with a double and two homers against Clemens; the home runs are particularly impressive since Rolls hit nine home runs in his whole career.

Steve Carlton

Batter faced most: Keith Hernandez — 154 PA

This tells you how good a player Keith Hernandez was — even as a lefty batter, he faced Steve Carlton more than anybody else. And he hit well — .321/.396/.445 with 11 doubles and a couple of home runs in those 154 plate appearances. Keith Hernandez really was one helluva player, and I do think his Hall of Fame case should be reconsidered.

Batters who hit best: Johnny Bench and Gary Carter

Carlton apparently had trouble pitching to catchers — Bench hit 12 home runs off of Lefty and Carter hit 11. They are the only two to get double-digit home runs off Carlton.

Thorn in the side: Rob Deer

Something about Rob Deer befuddled Carlton. It's true that Deer only batted against Carlton long after Lefty's prime, but still they faced off 12 times and Carlton walked him six of those 12 times. The other six? Deer went four for six with a double and a homer.

Clayton Kershaw

Batter faced most: Buster Posey — 120 PA

Nobody is even close — Kershaw vs. Posey was vividly the National League duel of the 2010s. And Kershaw was the clear winner, holding Posey to .221/.267/.327.

Batter who hit best: Adam Dunn

It doesn't make a lot of sense. Dunn really didn't hit lefties. He famously was a swing-and-miss guy. You would have expected him to be Clayton Kershaw's favorite batter. But, no, they faced each other 14 times, and Dunn hit .615/.643/.1.692 with four home runs.

Baseball! You just never know.

Thorn in the side: Gaby Sánchez

Remember Gaby? He had a brief period of glory in the early 2010s when he finished fourth in the Rookie of the Year balloting and made an All-Star team. He hit .365/.500/.818 with two doubles and a homer off Kershaw.

Jim Palmer

Batter faced most: Carl Yastrzemski — 197 PAs

Yaz hit .243/.345/.391 against Palmer.

But here's a different point: That's a lot of plate appearances. You might have noticed earlier that Billy Williams batted against Bob Gibson 201 times. So I started wondering — are those records for most times a hitter batted against a pitcher?

Answer: No. It's not even close to the record.

I don't know what the record is — but Baseball-Reference goes back (for the most part) to 1916 with its pitcher-batter data. So I looked at the pitchers who have faced a particular batter the most times since 1916. And here, based on some quick research, are some of the top pitcher-batter matchups:

1. Warren Spahn vs. Stan Musial, 353 PAs

Musial hit .318/.415/.566 with 32 doubles, six triples and 14 home runs off Spahn.*

**Spahn also faced Willie Mays 255 times, Red Schoendienst 244 times and Richie Ashburn 226 times. The key here is that he stayed in the same league his entire career and there were many fewer teams.*

2. Phil Niekro vs. Pete Rose, 266 PAs
3. Robin Roberts vs. Duke Snider, 260 PAs

Roberts also faced Gil Hodges 262 times; he pitched a lot against those Boys of Summer Dodgers.

4. Lefty Grove vs. Charlie Gehringer, 265 PAs

Grove also faced Lou Gehrig 245 times, and Gehrig hit .306 with 12 doubles, seven triples and nine home runs.

5. Red Ruffing vs. Charlie Gehringer, 261 PAs
6. Early Wynn vs. Yogi Berra, 257 PAs
7. Burleigh Grimes vs. Charlie Grimm, 247 PAs
8. Ted Lyons vs. Lou Gehrig, 231 PAs

I'm sure there are others in that range — Bob Feller faced Joe DiMaggio 217 times for instance — but in truth I'm sure the record will be from Deadball, something like Walter Johnson vs. Ty Cobb or Cy Young vs. Nap Lajoie.

Batters who hit best: Larry Hisle and Gorman Thomas

Palmer must have hated facing those late 1970s Brewers teams. Hisle slugged .677 off of him and Thomas slugged .723.

Thorn in the side: Fran Healy.

Fran Healy hit six triples in his career. He hit two of them off Palmer ... and a home run to boot. In all, Healy went five for eight and slugged 2.250 against Palmer.

Ferguson Jenkins

Batter faced most: Don Money — 129 PA

I have not thought about Don Money in ages — he was a four-time All-Star with the Brewers in the 1970s. Good player. Could play every position. Double-digit home run power when that meant something. He held his own against Fergie, hitting .254 with six home runs. Fergie did strike him out 32 times compared to only three walks; but then Fergie didn't walk batters. He challenged them.

Batter who hit best: Jim Ray Hart

The young Jim Ray Hart looked like he would become a superstar — he was called up to the Giants at 22 and hit 31 homers as a rookie. That would normally have been good enough to win Rookie of the Year, but that was 1964, when Dick Allen had one of the greatest rookie seasons ever. Hart was part of the Giants incredible talent rush of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In 1958, Orlando Cepeda won Rookie of the Year and went on to the Hall of Fame.

In 1959, Willie McCovey won Rookie of the Year with an amazing 52 games, and he went on to the Hall of Fame.

In 1960, they called up a 22-year-old Juan Marichal, who went on to the Hall of Fame.

In 1961, for the first time, they gave at-bats to Matt Alou, who would win a batting title. The team already had Felipe Alou, who would become a three-time All-Star.

In 1962, they called up Gaylord Perry, who went on to the Hall of Fame.

And in 1963, they first called up Jim Ray Hart, who would have a terrific career, and Jose Cardenal, who would finish with almost 2,000 hits, and Jesus Alou, who would play 15 years in the big leagues. I mean, it was a factory.

Anyway, Jim Ray Hart hit .395/.489/.974 against Fergie Jenkins with five homers in 47 plate appearances. Tony Perez also had his share of success, hitting eight home runs off Jenkins.

Thorn in the side: Dan Graham

Dan Graham played only parts of three seasons in the big leagues, but he got 13 at-bats against Jenkins and he got six hits, three of them doubles, two of them home runs. That's not a bad thing to be able to tell your kids.

ANSWER TO THAT GREAT TRIVIA QUESTION—YOUNGEST PLAYER IN MLB HISTORY. THAT WOULD BE JOE NUXHALL

With an increasing number of players being called to serve in World War II and baseball's color barrier still several years away from being broken, the AL/NL talent pool was seriously depleted by 1944.

That's how a 15-year-old found himself on the Reds.

Friday marks the anniversary of the day in 1944 when teenager [Joe Nuxhall](#) signed a contract with Cincinnati for a reported \$175 a month plus a \$500 signing bonus, beginning a remarkable baseball odyssey.

Nuxhall, who passed away in 2007 after battling cancer, remains the youngest player to appear in an AL/NL game. But after making his big league debut in 1944, the left-hander wouldn't log another MLB appearance for *eight years*.

This is the story of a baseball prodigy who quickly flamed out, briefly stepped away from the game, toiled away in the Minors for years, eventually made it back to The Show and went on to become an icon in Cincinnati.

Joining the Reds

Initially, the Reds were interested in Nuxhall's father, Orville, a semi-pro pitcher.

"I've told the story often," Nuxhall said in an interview with the New York Times in 1976. "They were scouting my father. It was just playground ball in Hamilton [Ohio]. My father, who was about 36, was pitching for one team and I was on another. These two scouts came to Diamond No. 1 on this playground complex where we had a game already started.

"'Where's Ox?' they said. Everybody called my father Ox. 'He's over on Diamond No. 3,' somebody told them. 'Who's that kid pitching?' one of the scouts asked. 'That's Ox's son,' they told 'em.

"So they stayed and watched me and then they invited me to Cincinnati for a look. They offered my father a tryout, too, but he had five kids to feed and couldn't take the gamble. He was working in a plant that made locomotives and diesel engines.

“But the way I always tell it is I beat my father out of a job,” he joked.

Nuxhall, who was 14 at the time, attended a tryout at Crosley Field in the summer of 1943. Standing well over six feet tall and possessing a live left arm, he impressed Reds manager Bill McKechnie and was given an opportunity to travel with the team on a road trip to St. Louis.

“I pitched batting practice for three days in the Cardinal park at St. Louis,” Nuxhall later recalled to The Journal Herald. “I also would have gone to Chicago with the Reds, but had to return home for the opening of the school term.”

Nuxhall had been bred to love the game of baseball from a young age. But before the chance to play for the Reds emerged, he was forging a promising path in another sport, excelling at center for the Wilson Junior High School basketball team, with plans to play hoops once he arrived at Hamilton High School in 1944.

According to sportswriter and baseball historian Lee Allen, then the Reds’ publicity director, Nuxhall didn’t sign with the club until February because he wanted to preserve his amateur standing for the basketball season.

The Reds finally got him under contract on Feb. 18, 1944, with his father signing the deal on his son’s behalf. Reds officials were adamant that the team hadn’t signed the youngster solely because of the talent drain from the war.

“Nuxhall is a great prospect,” Cincinnati general manager Warren Giles told The Associated Press. “We are not signing him because of the war situation. Two other clubs wanted him, and he would have been signed, war or no war.”

“This boy is not just a wartime blossom who will fade in big-time baseball,” McKechnie said. “He has more poise than most youngsters and knows all the tricks by instinct.”

Although he “played hooky,” as the Dayton Daily News put it in a story published on April 19, 1944, to suit up for the Reds on Opening Day (in reality, he had permission from his principal), Nuxhall didn’t make his MLB debut until after the school term ended in June. By then, he was raring to go.

“I’m all set,” he told the Dayton Herald. “I’m convinced I’m making the right move in going right into the Reds’ camp instead of agreeing to let them farm me to the Minor Leagues. I know I can learn a lot from Mr. McKechnie, Bucky Walters and the other players. Mr. McKechnie hasn’t told me what he has planned from my program. Would I like to get in a big league game? What do you think I’ve been waiting for all these months?”

He got his chance on June 10, 1944, against the Cardinals. With the Reds trailing 13-0, McKechnie called on the youngster to pitch the ninth inning.

"He must have called to me three times," Nuxhall said in his biography, "Joe: Rounding Third and Headed for Home." "I wasn't paying attention. I never thought they would put me in the

game. I figured I would just sit there until they decided where they were going to send me. Tell ya the truth, I was shocked."

Nuxhall retired two of the first three batters he faced, with a walk in between, but after a wild pitch and another walk, he found himself face to face with 1943 NL MVP Stan Musial.

Musial laced a single to right field to load the bases, and Nuxhall walked in three runs before giving up a two-run single to Emil Verban, prompting McKechnie to pull him from the game.

"All of a sudden, I couldn't throw a strike," Nuxhall said in the book. "Couldn't come close. Damndest thing. I guess I finally realized where I was, what I was doing. But, you know, three weeks before that, I was pitching to junior high school guys in Hamilton. My nerves just started getting to me."

Nuxhall's debut line read as follows: five runs allowed on two hits and five walks in 2/3 of an inning.

It would be 2,902 days before he was able to get that third out.

Back to school

Following his rocky debut, the Reds optioned Nuxhall to Birmingham. He remained in the Minors through 1945, then decided to put his professional baseball career on hold until he finished high school.

In 1946, the Ohio High School Athletic Association reinstated Nuxhall for amateur competition, and he went on to earn all-state honors in football and basketball.

He returned to the pro baseball ranks in the summer of 1947, and for the next five years he pitched for various Reds-affiliated Minor League teams, honing his craft in hopes of earning another big league opportunity.

Nuxhall pitched for Double-A Tulsa in 1951 and later credited Tulsa manager Al Vincent with helping him learn to cope with his longstanding control problems.

"I had the habit of becoming so mad at myself for giving base on balls that I would lose all control over my pitches and walk other batters to bring my trouble piling down on top of me," he told the Cincinnati Post while attending Reds Spring Training in February 1952. "After I had done this a few times for the Tulsa team last year Vincent laid down the law to me."

According to Nuxhall, Vincent told him he would pull him from the game if he displayed his temper on the mound, regardless of the score or the inning.

"I saw that he meant it, and for a while every time I happened to walk a batter, I took a grip on myself and paid attention to fighting the other team instead of myself," Nuxhall said. "In time the habit of losing my temper over walking a batter disappeared and I became more capable in every

respect. Curbing my temper was the greatest advance I have made so far in pitching. From now on I'm going to concentrate on improving my control and deception."

Nuxhall made the Reds out of Spring Training, but he'd have to wait just a bit longer to complete his comeback, as he registered nary an appearance in the team's first 28 games of the 1952 campaign.

A lengthy career

At long last, Nuxhall was called upon to pitch for the Reds against the Dodgers in Brooklyn on May 21, 1952.

He came into a strikingly similar situation to the one he faced against the Cardinals in 1944, with the Reds trailing the Dodgers 19-1. But unlike his first appearance, the lefty held his opponent in check, firing three scoreless innings with three strikeouts and no walks.

Nuxhall finished his rookie season with a 3.22 ERA over 92 1/3 innings, proving that he belonged in the Majors. He earned back-to-back All-Star selections in 1955-56, a stretch in which he recorded a 3.58 ERA across 457 2/3 innings.

The Reds traded him to the A's in 1961, but after brief stints with Kansas City, the Orioles and the Angels, he returned to Cincinnati in 1962 and remained with the club until his final season in 1966, his age-37 campaign.

All told, Nuxhall went 135-117 with a 3.90 ERA and 1,372 strikeouts in 2,302 2/3 innings spanning 16 seasons.

Along the way, he picked up the nickname "The Ol' Left-hander," ironic considering his status as the youngest player in AL/NL history.

After the end of his playing career, Nuxhall immediately moved into the Reds' broadcast booth, eventually forming a partnership with Ford C. Frick Award winner Marty Brennaman until retiring from full-time duty in 2004.

Following his death on Nov. 15, 2007, Great American Ball Park's address was changed to 100 Joe Nuxhall Way. A statue of the pitcher stands outside the stadium alongside other Reds greats, and a sign bearing part of his famous radio signoff -- "This is the Ol' Left-hander, rounding third and heading for home" -- hangs on the park's exterior facade.

An estimated crowd of at least 6,000 people attended a public visitation at the high school in Fairfield, a suburb of Cincinnati, to pay their respects to Nuxhall. Former Reds Ken Griffey and Ken Griffey Jr., Barry Larkin, Sean Casey and Pete Rose were among those in attendance.

On Opening Day in 2008, the Reds honored Nuxhall by wearing his name and No. 41 on their jerseys during pregame ceremonies. Cincinnati starting pitcher Aaron Harang received

permission from Major League Baseball to wear the jersey during the game instead of his usual No. 39. The team also wore a "NUXY" sleeve patch for the entire season.

PETER GAMMONS IN THE ATHLETIC—TEAMS ARE VALUING CATCHERS MORE THAN EVER, AND WHEN THEY CAN'T FIND THEM, THEY'RE MAKING THEM.

The morning after Colombia won its first Caribbean World Series, I sent a "Colombia!" text to a veteran of many of this unique tournament's wars. Within seconds came the reply: "Sandy León."

OK, so León and the texter won a World Series ring together, and so he may not be the most unbiased of observers. But a couple of hours later came another text from another voice, "another ring for Sandy León, who always puts down the right finger." Then a longtime minor and major-league catching coach and instructor brought up León as an example of what trust, calm, and unselfishness from a catcher can do to create conviction in a pitcher.

"Like," he said, "[Buster Posey](#) and [Yadier Molina](#). Look at the [Marlins](#), with all that good young pitching. They were fine with León early last season. Then they turned to the analytics toolbox, now they've traded for [Jacob Stallings](#), and [Don Mattingly](#) and Mel Stottlemyre will have those pitchers pointed back in the right direction."

León is 32 years old, with a .212/.277/.319 career slash line, and 1.6 career WAR. Yet the Red Sox know they probably wouldn't have won the 2018 World Series without León imitating Ken Dryden in Game 1 of the ALDS against the [Yankees](#), when [Craig Kimbrel](#) was bouncing breaking balls in the dirt in the ninth inning with runners in scoring position. It was a performance up there with the [Dodgers'](#) [Austin Barnes](#) guiding seven pitchers through a 3-1 World Series-clinching Game Six in 2020 — yes, the Barnes who was a middle infielder when Dodgers exec Andrew Friedman snuck him out of Miami with Kiké Hernández.

These discussions about León and Barnes and [Yan Gomes](#) — whom the [Cubs](#) signed for two years, \$13 million to help drive the turnover in their pitching — came up at a point when owners and players seemed locked in negotiations that seemed fixated on different facts, different truths, different languages, different purposes without even a common starting point. Baseball is an enormously profitable business that can lead players to creatively go off to mint NFTs and owners to buy hockey teams and dabble in the [Premier League](#), not to mention develop a small city on the North Side of Chicago. It has been an untouched growth. And yet here we are, with the chances of a full season slipping further and further away by the day.

So, in lieu of the traditional February way of thinking about seeing [Marcus Semien](#), [Corey Seager](#) and [Jack Leiter](#) in [Rangers](#) uniforms and walking across the complex to see [Bobby Witt Jr.](#), this year's early buildup towards spring training was León in Colombia, and cross-checkers in Norman, Okla., getting a peek at a potential Mike LaValliere clone named Jimmy Crooks

catching for the Sooners. You might remember that LaValliere wasn't exactly what ballplayers are supposed to look like, but he played in the big leagues for 12 seasons, caught in four postseasons, won a Gold Glove, and one of his best college teammates and buddies was [Kris Bryant](#)'s father.

"In today's game," said one scouting director, "that may be what we're looking for. That someday may be the guy we get with the draft pick we receive for losing a free agent. Checked first-round catchers in the last dozen years?" Well, from Posey as the fifth pick in the 2008 draft (because Tampa Bay took [Tim Beckham](#) No. 1) until the Dodgers took Will Smith in 2016, there were 14 catchers taken in the first round, and the only ones catching in the majors at the end of the 2021 season were [Tyler Stephenson](#), [Mike Zunino](#) and [Yasmani Grandal](#).

But teams are picking them high, and valuing what they can bring, no matter the league-wide track records of draft success.

The [Pirates](#) took Louisville's Henry Davis with last July's first pick, with justifiable confidence in his tools, bat, and particularly in his makeup. There is an industry-wide hope that [Adley Rutschman](#), the first overall pick in 2019 by the [Orioles](#), Toronto's [Gabriel Moreno](#), the Dodgers' [Diego Cartaya](#) and [Mets'](#) [Francisco Álvarez](#) are all top-tier catching prospects. With [Tucker Barnhart](#) traded to Detroit, Stephenson becomes Cincinnati's expected regular. "He's 26, that isn't so long a development," said one veteran scout. "Draft a high school catcher, and a lot of things can happen." In the 12 years preceding Oakland's pick of Tyler Soderstrom in 2020, there were nine high school catchers taken in the first round; Stephenson was the only one in the majors in 2021.

Go back to 1966, a year after Mike Scioscia was the first catcher drafted (by the Dodgers) in the very first draft. The Mets had the first pick and selected Steve Chilcott, a high school catcher from Lancaster, Calif. The Kansas City A's picked second and took Reggie Jackson, Hall of Famer. Whitey Herzog was with the Mets at the time, and has always maintained Chilcott looked as if he were going to be a star, but he tore his throwing shoulder sliding into second base, then tore it even worse climbing through barbed wire doing drills in the military reserves. Boston drafted a 6-foot-8 catcher named Tom Maggard in the first round in 1968, who died while playing in the minors from a reaction to a bee sting, and in 2017 they paid \$3.1 million for catcher [Daniel Flores](#) from Venezuela, who also died from illness after they believed he was the best prospect in that international signing period.

An uncertain development path

Sometimes top young catchers end up switching positions. Dale Murphy was the fourth pick in the 1974 draft by the [Braves](#), but as he rushed towards Atlanta, he began having throwing issues; in spring training in 1977, he tried to throw out a base stealer at second base and the throw was caught in the air by center fielder Barry Bonnell. Murphy moved to first, where he played 209 games, then left for 101, right for 749 and center for 1,041, won two MVP awards, five Gold Gloves, shared the 1977 Sportsman of the Year from Sports Illustrated among

"Athletes who Care" and for some unknown reason never received more than 23.2 percent of the vote for the Hall of Fame. Craig Biggio made the move from All-Star catcher to Hall of Fame second baseman. Joe Torre moved from catcher to third, as did Todd Zeile, with B.J. Surhoff and Brian Downing heading to the outfield. [Kyle Schwarber](#) was drafted as a catcher, but the last four years has played the outfield and first base. There's a lot to it, and not everyone is suited for the spot.

"To get the necessary pitching results, you have a catcher who thinks pitcher first, is calm and in control and understands what each pitcher needs to succeed," said one National League general manager. "Unfortunately, there is no way to absolutely quantify catching." Brad Ausmus, who has caught the eighth-most games in history, said, "The first job of the catcher is to create conviction in the pitcher." A few Julys back, Johnny Bench got down on his haunches in the lobby of the Otesaga Hotel in Cooperstown to demonstrate how that is done, through a catcher's presentation and other means.

Having asked eight of the 17 players who caught the most games (Pudge Rodriguez, Bob Boone, Molina, Jason Kendall, Ausmus, A.J. Pierzynski, Ted Simmons, Bench), knowing what Bill Freehan taught Mike Matheny at Michigan and knowing Jason Varitek, they all answer that their first responsibility is to the pitcher. Bench drove home the point that if the pitcher throws the ball to just the right place, the catcher doesn't *have* to frame it; Curt Schilling in his 1998-2007 prime had such command of the six different fastballs he used that catching him was no problem, although one catcher once said, "Catching *with* Curt could be a trip."

"A lot's happened in our industry in the last decade that makes finding catching difficult," said one GM. "Colleges are a problem. There is so much money in college coaching today the egos and the control freaks are themselves out of control. They want to call every pitch, so a lot of big programs don't develop the mental part of catching. Increasingly high school kids are playing the showcase circuit, where it's not important to build relationships and all that is important is the individual skills. First come exit velo and launch angles, then throwing pop times ... winning is not part of the big money part of showcase baseball. Infield practice is important to show off an arm."

I once covered a young catcher who was deemed a defensive master because of how he threw in infield practice, but he had trouble catching behind batters and seldom could throw anyone out.

"Let's face it," said that GM. "It's a really tough position to play every day." Still, some find a way, though they're exceedingly rare. Yadier Molina is 39 now, and he caught more innings last year than any other National League catcher after Realmuto. Over the last four seasons, Molina and Martín Maldonado are second and third in innings caught.

Take the top nine in innings caught 2018-21: Not one was under the age of 30 by last Labor Day. It is interesting how many times Will Smith at the age of 26 last season was called the best catcher in the National League. He doesn't turn 27 until the end of March, at which point he

may or may not be in spring training. He's caught 197 games, with 48 homers in 892 plate appearances.

Oh, yes. He was an infielder for much of his college career.

Making catchers instead of finding them

Converting players from other positions to catcher is something the Dodgers do extraordinarily well. A while back, a scout working on a deal with the Dodgers returned from Bakersfield with glowing reports about a third baseman he put in as a "must get."

His name? [Russell Martin](#), who caught 1,579 games in 14 major-league seasons (27th all-time), won a Gold Glove, ranks eighth all-time in putouts and is 27th by Jay Jaffe's JAWS rating of catchers. Will Smith was an infielder. Barnes was a middle infielder. Just as with relief pitcher usage, platooning and multi-positional catchers, Casey Stengel was ahead of his time in his 1949-61 Yankees tenure. In 1961, the Yankees were 113-54, including their five-game World Series win over Cincinnati, and Elston Howard caught 111 games, Yogi Berra 15, Johnny Blanchard 48. Berra played 81 games in left field and, like Howard, made the All-Star team.

Others have tried. Earl Weaver dreamed of a lefty-swinging, power-hitting platoon catcher and in 1980 got former infielder Dan Graham, who hit 14 homers platooning with Rick Dempsey. The [Royals](#) picked Jamie Quirk in the 1972 first round as an infielder, converted him to catcher, and he played in the majors from 1972 to 1992. Gomes was a third baseman at Tennessee because J.P. Arencibia was behind the plate. Kevin Cash converted from an outfielder to catcher playing for Falmouth in the Cape League; I remember the day Falmouth GM Chuck Sturdevant drove up with newly-bought catchers equipment; Toronto scout Tim Wilken — ever early — signed him and a career was born. Jorge Posada was an infielder.

Posey was a high school pitcher who wanted to play shortstop at Florida State and will probably go to the Hall of Fame as a catcher. "Buster could have been a first-rounder as a pitcher," said one scout who knew him well. "But when he did go behind the plate, he knew how to get hitters out. Nothing in his life has ever been about himself, so he naturally could handle pitchers. He's always been about team and winning and leadership."

All these conversions come against a backdrop where catchers are increasingly hard to find in the amateur ranks, and with [MLB](#) cutting back on draft rounds and short-season leagues where players can learn, clubs are identifying young players who have the tools, want to catch and want to try and make the transition. Boston, for instance, has at least a half-dozen players who are trying the conversion route.

"The first thing is that the young player has to really buy in, he has to want to make the change," said Chad Epperson, who for more than a decade has been Boston's organizational catching instructor and worked closely with Jason Varitek before moving to manage Double-A Portland this season.

“He has to be very quiet when he goes back there,” Epperson said. “Selfless, like Jason. The mindset is really important. We look at [Christian Vázquez](#). He was a second baseman-shortstop when he signed him and played some at third base in the low minors. He signed in 2008, he’s still here.”

Vázquez is also a free agent after the end of next season, so the Red Sox are looking long-term. They acquired converted shortstop [Connor Wong](#) in the [Mookie Betts](#) trade, and there’s general agreement that he has the collaborative verbal and personal skills to work with pitchers, and Epperson and others think the bat will come. They picked up Ronaldo Hernández from Tampa, who has a power bat, power arm and has worked hard on changes to his body. They have three college bats — [Jaxx Groshans](#) (Kansas), [Kole Cottam](#) (Kentucky) and Stephen Scott (Vanderbilt) who are catching; Scott, with left-handed power and prized makeup, began his transition in the Instructional League and has opened eyes. They took [Nathan Hickey](#) from Florida last July, and while he had some defensive questions in college, he has adjusted with the hope his power will play. They also took a high school infielder from California named [Daniel McElveny](#) last summer and are converting him. “Right now, we’re optimistic,” said Epperson. “It’s worth a try.”

Epperson caught for nine years in the Mets and Red Sox systems as well as in independent ball. Along the way, he caught Robinson Checo, Bret Saberhagen, Tomo Ohka and Ramón Martínez, and as his career was winding down, Dan Duquette acquired Varitek and Derek Lowe from the [Mariners](#). At the end of Varitek’s first half-season with the Boston organization, some of the minor-league people privately were “disappointed” in him defensively. When I got to Fort Myers the following spring, Jimmy Williams said Varitek “will be our catcher. He’s special. I mean special.” Not with framing, which was hardly talked about at the time; just in the way he worked with pitchers, was ever accountable, modest. He now runs game preparation, and as the catchers’ guide, he translates the analytics for the catchers and pitchers.

It may be that Rutschman and Moreno are so gifted that their roads to Baltimore and Toronto are expressways. Other catchers will have to take in the complexity of the position, which Will Smith learned and maintained. It’s hard. They’re human. But their contributions are appreciated now more than perhaps ever.

BECAUSE GAMES LIKE THIS SHOULD BE REMEMBERED

Cliff Corcoran, *Sports Illustrated*, April 26, 2013

In the July 4, 1984 contest, the Mets used 21 players (including seven pitchers), while the Braves used 22 players (including seven pitchers).

The Mets’ Gary Carter caught all 19 innings of the game and, consequently, Mets’ backup catcher Ronn Reynolds was the only position player to not take the field that day.

On July 4 (and July 5), 1985, the Atlanta Braves and New York Mets took part in one of the wildest games in either franchise's history. In Atlanta, it's known as the "***Rick Camp Game***" in honor of the role(s) the Braves' reliever played in the 19-inning marathon.

That the game happened at all is a bit of a surprise. The Independence Day contest did not start until 9:04, thanks to a 94-minute rain delay. Still, attendance was reported at 44,947 (many fans likely attracted by the planned post-game fireworks). In addition, the hometown Braves were 34-41, in fifth place, ten games off the pace. I should also note here that the inclement weather continued, with another 40-plus minute delay in the third inning.

The fans who stayed in the park not only enjoyed the post-game fireworks, but plenty of in-game fireworks as well. The 19-inning contest featured 29 runs and 46 hits. Mets' first baseman Keith Hernandez hit for the cycle and Mets' C Gary Carter collected five hits and a walk in ten plate appearance. Seven Mets had at least three hits in the game – including Howard Johnson, *who didn't come into the game until the ninth inning* (and still went three-for-five, with a home run, a walk, four runs scored and two RBI). Johnson, by the way, entered the game hitting just .194 (in 58 games) on the season. On the Braves' side, LF Terry Harper went five-for-ten, with a home run, four RBI and three runs scored. Harper was one of four Braves with at least three hits in the game.

It was a back-and-forth battle, with the teams tied at one run apiece after one inning, the Braves up 3-1 after three, the Mets up 5-3 after four, the game tied at eight after nine and tied again at 10-10 after 13 – with more still to come. You get the idea.

So, why, given all this, did the contest become known as the Rick Camp Game?

Let's pick up the action in the top of the 17th, when Camp came on to pitch in a tie game (10-10). He held the Mets scoreless in the inning (one walk, two whiffs and a groundout). The Mets' Tom Gorman returned the favor in the bottom of the inning and the game went into the 18th frame still knotted. That's when things got a little "Campy."

Camp gave up a single to Mets' SS Howard Johnson, LF Danny Heep attempted to sacrifice and was safe on an ***error by Camp***, with Johnson going to third. Johnson then scored the go-ahead run on a sacrifice fly by CF Lenny Dykstra. Camp retired the next two batters.

In the bottom of the eighteenth, Met's reliever Tom Gorman retired the first two batters on easy ground outs. That brought up Camp. The Braves were out of position players, so Camp came to the plate. At this point in his career, Camp was batting 0.60 (10-for-162), with no home runs and five RBI. As you might expect, he quickly fell behind 0-2. He was now one strike away from being the final out in the marathon (and, of course, taking the loss). Then the unexpected happened. On an 0-2 pitch, at approximately 3:30 a.m. on July 5, ***Camp hit what was to be the only home run in his MLB career*** – tying the game and sending it into the 19th inning. (After Camp's home run, Gorman gave up a walk before getting the final out of the frame.)

Unfortunately, Camp did not avoid the "loss" for long. In the top of the nineteenth, ***Camp gave up five runs on four hits and two walks*** (both intentional). But Camp's Day was not over. In the

bottom of the inning, facing Ron Darling, the Braves scored two runs and – with two outs – ***had two on and the tying run at the plate in the person of (Who else?) Rick Camp. Camp struck out to end the game.*** The time? Approximately 3: 55 a.m. News reports indicate that about 8,000 fans stayed for the duration – and for the 4:00 a.m. fireworks.

DEAN STONE, ALL-STAR ODDITY

From BaseballRoundtable.com

Dean Stone's 1954 All Star Game relief stint, when Stone picked up a win without retiring a single batter.

Thirteen pitchers were used in the 1954 All Star Game. It was the only career All Star selection for six of them: Carl Erskine; Marv Grissom; Sandy Consuegra; Bob Keegan; Bob Porterfield; and ***Dean Stone.***

The game proved to be one of the highest scoring in All Star history – an 11-9 American League win – featuring home runs by Ted Kluszewski, Gus Bell, Al Rosen (two homers and five RBI), Ray Boone and Larry Doby. But back to Stone's appearance. Stone was called in to replace Bob Keegan with two outs in the bottom of the eighth inning, with runners on first (Al Dark) and third (Red Schoendienst). (Earlier in the inning, Keegan had given up a two-run, pinch-hit home run to Gus Bell to give the National League a 9-8 lead.) The pitching change put the southpaw Stone up against lefty batting Duke Snider (who already had three hits and a walk in the game).

As Stone prepared to fire his third pitch to Snider, Schoendienst (apparently hoping to catch the rookie unaware) broke for home. Stone stepped off the rubber and threw to catcher Yogi Berra to retire Schoendienst and end the inning. In the bottom of the ninth, the AL scored three runs to take the lead – putting Stone in line for the win. The White Sox' Virgil Trucks pitched a scoreless top of the ninth to save the victory.

Over the years, Stones' All Star Game win has not been without controversy. While some report that Stone picked up an All Star Game victory "without retiring a batter," others assert that – since Snider did not complete a plate appearance – Stone's win came without "throwing an official pitch." That demanded further digging. Where did I go to seek an answer to this "thorny" question? To the best source I know for getting an accurate assessment of such issues – Stew Thornley. Thornley is one of MLB's official scorers (assigned to then Twins), a datacaster for the MLB.com website and a member of the MLB Official Scoring Advisory Committee. He also has authored dozens of books and articles on professional baseball and basketball (for a list, click [here](#).) Thornley has won national awards for his baseball research from McMillan Publishing Company, the Society for American Baseball Research, USA Today Baseball Weekly and The Baseball Reliquary. How did Thornley answer the Stone question? Here it is. "*There is*

no 'official count' on pitches, but since he (Stone) stepped off, this was a play and not a pitch, so there were only two pitches ... It is correct that Stone got a win without retiring a batter, but too often it's been written that he got a win without throwing a pitch."

Stone signed with the Cubs in 1949, right out of high school, but was released that May and signed as a free agent with the Senators in June. Stone pitched pretty well in the Senators' minor-league system – including a 17-10, 3.16 season for the Class-B Charlotte Hornets in 1952. He earned a September 1953 call up after an 8-10, 3.33 season at for the Double-A Chattanooga Lookouts. He appeared in three games for Washington (one start) and went 0-1, 8.31 in 8 2/3 innings.

In 1954, Stone made the Senators squad out of Spring Training. He jumped out to that 7-2, 3.47 start (before the 1954 All Star Game) and finished at 12-10, 3.22 (31 appearances, 23 starts, ten complete games, two shutouts). It would be his best season in the majors. In fact, it would be one of only two seasons in which he recorded a winning record.

From 1955-57, Stone pitched in 104 MLB contests (52 stars), going 12-23, 5.08 for the Senators and Red Sox.

Stone spent most of 1958-61 in the minor leagues (Red Sox and Cardinals systems.) He did into 18 games for the Cardinals in 1959, going 0-1, 4.20. At Triple-A, he showed promise, pitching in 153 games (81 starts) – going 43-31, 3.28. That got the attention of the expansion Houston Colt .45s, who picked him up in the November 1961 Rule Five Draft. Stone started the 1962 season with the Astros and threw a pair of complete-game shutouts in his first two appearances – 18 innings pitched, eight hits, three walks, 12 whiffs. He struggled after that hot start, going, 1-2, 6.82 in his next 13 appearances (five starts). He was traded to the White Sox on June 25, where he pitched well out of the pen (1-0, 3.26 with five saves in 27 appearances). After the season, he was sold to the Orioles and, in 1963 (his final MLB season), he went 1-2, 5.12, with one save in 17 relief stints.

Stone played in eight MLB seasons (1953-57, 1959, 1962-63 ... Senators, Cardinals, Red Sox, Orioles, Colt .45s, Orioles) – and put up a career line of 29-39, 4.47 in 215 games (85 starts), with ten complete game and five shutouts.

AS THE CBA BATTLES CONTINUE, HERE ARE SOME GREAT ARGUMENTS THAT “IT’S THE PRODUCT, STUPID”

AS BASEBALL FIGHTS OVER THE SHORT TERM, LONG-TERM PROBLEMS LOOM

TYLER KEPNER, NYT

Arguments over the sport's financial structure could delay or shorten the season, but owners and players should address a bigger issue: improving the product.

The saddest part about the baseball lockout, which almost certainly will delay the start of spring training and perhaps trim the regular season, is the missed opportunity. Again.

This is quite the pace for Major League Baseball and the players' union. In the 2020s, the owners and the players have already blown two chances to help grow their sport. Two years ago, they spent the early months of the pandemic squabbling about the economics of a restart, ending up with just 60 games. Now this.

The owners [imposed a lockout on Dec. 2](#) after the expiration of the collective bargaining agreement with the players. The sides have made almost no progress since. Spring training is supposed to start next week, the regular season on March 31. Will they play the full 162 games this season? Bet the under.

To speak with several people directly involved in the negotiations is to come away extremely discouraged. There is nothing to suggest a quick or satisfying resolution. The owners will begin three days of meetings on Tuesday in Orlando, Fla., and must find a way to re-engage a union that [rejected the idea of a nonbinding federal mediator](#) last week.

The owners generally like the current system but want more revenue in the form of a garish money grab: expanded playoffs and advertisements on jerseys and helmets. The players will not agree to those changes without significant adjustments to the game's economics.

The real pity is that finances should be the easy part. The basic goals [outlined on Twitter](#) by the Mets' Max Scherzer, a member of the union's executive subcommittee, seem reasonable enough: "We want a system where threshold and penalties don't function as caps, allows younger players to realize more of their market value, makes service time manipulation a thing of the past, and eliminate tanking as a winning strategy."

Makes sense, right? Who wants to see the Baltimore Orioles use subpar pitchers every night because they know it helps them in the long term to lose aggressively in the short term? Who thinks it is fair that Pete Alonso has earned more by winning two Home Run Derbys than he has by playing three full seasons? Who believes an executive who insists that a top slugging prospect should stay in the minors to work on his defense — not as a way to delay his time to free agency?

These have been glaring problems for years, and it's hard to fathom that the leadership of the commissioner's office and the union still cannot find a solution. Yet this lockout has always seemed inevitable because neither side trusts the other or views the sport as a partnership.

If they did, they would have found common-sense answers to the obvious issues and moved on to the hard ones that jeopardize the sport's long-term health. They should focus on improving the product.

Take the starting pitcher. He's the guy who draws you to the ballpark, the TV, the gambling app. He's disappearing, and that's a major problem. In 2011, there were 39 pitchers who worked 200 innings. A decade later, there were four. The starter is baseball's most marketable position; fewer dynamic starters make for a less appealing game.

But, hey, at least it lasts longer than ever. Baseball achieved two dubious records last season: longest average game time (3 hours 11 minutes) and most pitchers used per team (4.43 per game, tied with 2020). The average time between balls in play was about four minutes. Teams averaged nearly nine strikeouts per game, while stolen bases (0.46 per game) plunged to a 50-year low.

M.L.B. has [experimented with various rule changes in the minors and independent leagues](#) in an effort to improve the pace of play and stimulate action. But Commissioner Rob Manfred has held off from implementing any of those changes — bigger bases, banning the infield shift, enforcement of a pitch clock, and so on — and has been unable to persuade the union to work with his office on those issues.

Again, that highlights the deep mistrust players feel toward ownership, a factor that Manfred has consistently dismissed.

"I think this whole relationship thing gets overplayed and misinterpreted," he said at the All-Star Game last July, in comments he echoed after implementing the lockout. "You're in a collective bargaining relationship, you're going to have points in time where you have disagreements. I don't think that's a good thing, but it happens. It just is the way of the world. And agreements get made or not made based on the substance of what's out there."

Perhaps the pressure points on the calendar will lead to more substantive moves, by both sides. Canceled exhibitions in March? Missed paychecks in April? And what about those hundreds of free agents remaining on the frozen market? Eventually, they'd like to find a team.

There is so much work remaining and not enough fear of the far-reaching impact of a work stoppage. If history is a guide, the fallout can be toxic.

After the 1981 strike, which cost 713 games, and a brief strike in 1985, owners illegally conspired to collude against free agents. After the 1994 strike, which canceled the World Series, owners staged a farcical spring training with replacement players. When an explosion of home runs finally brought the fans back, nobody had the appetite — or the courage — to confront the obvious specter of steroids.

Consider the damage. World Series ratings have never again been as high as they were in 1980 and now are an annual embarrassment. Per-game attendance reached an all-time high in 1994 (an average of 31,256 per game), and took 12 years to return to that level. Now it is falling again: In 2019, the last season with full capacity, the average crowd was 28,203, the fourth consecutive year it had dropped.

Baseball has been propped up financially by regional sports networks, but that model is severely threatened as more households alter their viewing habits and drop cable. The most pressing issue for the sport's leaders should be finding a new broadcast paradigm and a better game to pitch to it.

There is so much to celebrate in baseball, so many more fans who should be entranced by spellbinding players competing in the greatest sport ever devised. Instead, the league and the players are deadlocked on the easy stuff and hastening their own decline.

FIVE THINGS MLB COULD LEARN FROM THE NFL PLAYOFFS

JAYSON STARK IN THE ATHLETIC

I know I'm a baseball writer. But let's recap the last three weekends of [NFL](#) playoff games. Why? Because they sum up why we love sports, the greatest reality show ever created.

Seven games. Five walk-offs. Two overtime classics. All seven games decided in the last minute and a half. There's a word for that: Entertainment!

Yeah, I'm a baseball guy, not a football guy. But most of all, I'm a fan of spectacular sports theater. And now that the Super Bowl confetti is all swept up, here's what I think:

There's a lot baseball can learn from the NFL playoffs.

For one thing, in football, they actually play. Call me strange, but I enjoy it when the sports we care about actually play. Playoff games > lockout games. And you can quote me on that.

But I have other thoughts. I also spent time this week reflecting on this with people in baseball and with a man whose career has taken him to the biggest games in pretty much every sport, the always thoughtful Bob Costas. So if you're ready, here come those thoughts — on five things [MLB](#) can learn from the NFL playoffs.

(I do admit, by the way, that there is one thing the NFL can take away from the baseball postseason: At least in baseball's "overtime," both teams get a chance to score. But I digress. Now where were we? Oh, right. What MLB can learn ...)

1. While you're negotiating, feel free to change the rules

I chatted Monday morning with a longtime baseball official who professed, unabashedly: "I love the NFL." When I asked him what he thought baseball could learn from the magic of the NFL postseason, he didn't even need to think about it — not for three seconds.

"The main thing MLB can learn from the NFL is that the only thing that matters is the quality of the on-field product," he said. "People watch the NFL because the product is great. And why is the product great? Because the product changes over time."

By that, he means the NFL has no fear of changing its rules to make its sport more entertaining. More passes. More points. More opportunity to produce the type of drama we've watched for the past month. No rule is sacred. So no rule is off limits. What a concept.

And it led him to zero in on the most important frustration we share over the state of baseball these days: Why are our favorite labor negotiators [not discussing any of that?](#)

"When people (look back on) the 2021 CBA negotiations," he said, "the biggest headline should be: They didn't have *any* negotiations over the single biggest issue — the product."

Bingo. I think we all agree that nobody watches baseball to derive joy from the settlement of core economic issues. But a game with more action and better rhythm, driven by a limited number of smart, strategic rule changes? Now we're talking.

"Baseball doesn't need to transform itself," Costas said. "It needs to go back to its future. Not back to when people arrived at games on trolley cars wearing fedoras, but back to a relatively recent past. Back to the beginning part of this (21st) century. That kind of pace of play. That balance between pitching and hitting."

Yet these labor talks are so bogged down in economic muck, they won't address any of that. It's a massive missed opportunity because it was a chance for the sport to come out of this months-long fight and say to its weary fans: *We weren't just thinking about our wallets. We were thinking about you.*

"Even though these issues they're talking about, on a labor basis, are important, the biggest issue is the game going forward," Costas said. "What kind of game are we going to have?"

2. The stars have a chance to change every game

You know what else was fantastic about these NFL playoff games? The games were almost always about the best players in the world displaying their greatness, putting on the kind of show that compels us to watch, and literally making the difference between winning and losing.

And guess what? I'm not even talking about the quarterbacks. Not yet anyway. They're coming right up in the next section. But it should tell us something that I can write those words about the game-changing stars of the NFL — and leave the most famous stars of all in a whole other category.

Think about what Cooper Kupp and Aaron Donald just did in that Super Bowl. They were more than merely great. They essentially willed their teams to win. But they also reminded us of something else — of how many ways the stars of their sport can leave their imprint in the decisive moments of every game, in a way that baseball, in its current form, can't duplicate.

"Some of that is just the nature of the game," Costas said, "except when it comes to the starting pitcher that night. But Derek Jeter, [Mike Trout](#) are only going to come up to bat a certain number of times. The ball may or may not be hit in their direction. And if it is, it may just be routine plays over the course of a game. But that's just the nature of baseball. It's difficult to change."

No doubt, the nature of football, as opposed to baseball, is a big advantage in that respect. Without getting ridiculously gimmicky, baseball can't do much to combat that. But that doesn't mean there's nothing baseball can do.

I have a goofy idea. How about trying to craft a sport where the ball might, miraculously, be in play more? How would that fix this issue, you ask? Let's explain it this way.

The last time baseball had a work stoppage, in 1994, the average lineup produced more singles every game than strikeouts. Now, that's flipped — to nearly *half* as many singles (five per game) as strikeouts (nine).

If we prorate the number of balls in play back then to the number of games that comprise a full season now, we're talking about a sport where nearly 20,000 fewer balls would be put in play per season. Yes, I said *20,000*.

In other words, that's 20,000 fewer times every year when star players can't impact a game with their legs or their glove, their creativity or their genius-level baseball I.Q. — simply because that's 20,000 times where there's no opportunity for anyone other than the pitcher, catcher or hitter to impact much of anything.

You want to design a sport where the stars can shine, no matter who, no matter how? Let's try working on that action thing! But also, in the NFL ...

3. The NFL's best "pitchers" pitch with the games on the line

In the NFL, we all knew that quarterbacks rule. But these last few weeks of playoff football have provided one more vivid example of how and why they rule.

When the clock is ticking, when game is turning, when lives and legacies are ready to be defined, the ball is in their hands. When the biggest games of their careers are there to be won or lost, Joe Burrow has the ball, Patrick Mahomes has the ball, Tom Brady has the ball. Matthew Stafford, Josh Allen, Aaron Rodgers — it's always their game to deliver ... or not.

Once, that was also true of baseball, of course. But you don't need to check in with Sandy Koufax to know this sport has gravitated in the opposite direction. Here are a few ways to illustrate that.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO JACK MORRIS? Why do people still rhapsodize about Game 7 of the 1991 World Series? Not merely because the [Twins](#) won the World Series on a 1-0 walk-off in an extra-inning Game 7. Because it was *the Jack Morris Game*.

Because the starter for the winning team (Morris, obviously) went all 10 innings and allowed no runs. The starter who opposed him, John Smoltz, went 7 1/3 shutout innings, and is still steamed about being taken out. Epic.

Will we ever witness another postseason game like it? Take the under! In the three decades since, we've seen just two postseason elimination games in which one starter went nine innings and the other pitched into the eighth inning. They're memorable!

Game 5, 2011 NLDS: Chris Carpenter (9 shutout IP) vs. Roy Halladay (8 IP, 1 run — allowed with no outs in the first inning).

Game 5, 2001 NLDS: Curt Schilling (9 IP, 1 run) vs. Matt Morris (8 IP, 1 run).

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO JUSTIN VERLANDER? In Game 2 of the 2017 ALCS, Justin Verlander had an October performance for the [Astros](#) right out of a 1990s time warp: A 124-pitch complete game in a 2-1 win over the [Yankees](#), in which ...

He was allowed to take the mound, in the ninth inning of a 1-1 game, even though he'd already thrown 109 pitches. *And A.J. Hinch left him in the game* — even after the go-ahead run reached base. The Astros then won on a [Carlos Correa](#) walk-off double in the bottom of the ninth.

Will we ever see another game like that? Good luck. That was five years ago. In the last 10 postseasons, there have been only two other times in which any starter was still on the mound to begin the ninth inning of a tied or one-run postseason game.

Game 2, 2014 NLDS: [Jordan Zimmermann](#) ([Nationals](#)) starts the ninth with a 1-0 lead against the [Giants](#), famously gets hooked after a two-out walk, and the Nationals go on to lose in 18 innings.

Game 3, 2012 ALDS: The Yankees let Hiroki Kuroda start the ninth, down a run (2-1) against the [Orioles](#). He goes 8 1/3 innings. The Yankees rally to win in 12.

And that's it. Last pitcher before Verlander to do this in a League Championship Series? Mark Buehrle, way back in 2005. Last pitcher to do it in a World Series game? Al Leiter — in 2000. (142 pitches!) What about [Matt Harvey](#) in 2015, you ask? Nope. He started the ninth with a two-run lead. But it's now so rare, we even remember that.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO JOHNNY CUETO? In Game 1 of the 2016 NLDS, Bruce Bochy let Johnny Cueto keep pitching long enough to take one of those rarified complete-game postseason losses, in a 1-0 Giants-Cubs game. A Javy Báez homer off Cueto, in the eighth, was the game-winner.

So let's ask one more time: Will we ever see another game like that? Don't bet your World Series trophy replica on it. Over the last 20 postseasons, Cueto is the only starter, on any team, to find himself still on the mound when the go-ahead (and ultimately winning) run scored, in the eighth inning or later of any game.

To find the last games that were even close, we need to go back to 2003:

The Steve Bartman Game! [Cubs](#) starter Mark Prior took the loss but wasn't the pitcher who allowed the game-winning Jeff Conine sac fly in the eighth, or all those runs the [Marlins](#) poured on after that.

The other Josh Beckett Game: Four games before Beckett's legendary, World Series-clinching Game 6 shutout in Yankee Stadium, he took a tough loss in Game 2 of the 2003 World Series. He started the eighth in a tie game, but wasn't around when Dontrelle Willis allowed Hideki Matsui's game-turning, tie-breaking hit.

OK, see where this is going? Of course you do. Those games now feel like they happened in 1903, not 2003, because we know how baseball is trending away from its most important stars, the starting pitchers.

We had a game, as recently as the 2021 World Series, in which Ian Anderson got removed after five innings *while pitching a no-hitter*. Even if we understand every factor [Brian Snitker](#) processed to make that decision, it's not one any Hollywood director would ever script.

Now imagine Joe Montana getting hooked for Guy Benjamin before he got to throw That Pass to Dwight Clark. Or Mahomes getting gonged so Chad Henne could quarterback the Chiefs in the last 13 seconds of that classic against the Bills just three weeks ago. That's preposterous — in their sport. But this is how baseball's scripts are written every game now.

"Name any ace in today's game ... [Jacob deGrom](#) ... [Max Scherzer](#), anybody you want to mention," Costas said. "You will never have that image of Sandy Koufax or Bob Gibson — or even [Madison Bumgarner](#) — on the mound when a huge game ends, right? Where's the comparable moment to Sandy Koufax jumping into Johnny Roseboro's arms?"

“We’ll never see that ... because no (manager is) going to give up even the slightest edge in even one game — because that’s where the pressure is coming from, on their job and what the front office is saying.”

Nobody is trying to argue with the data that says these modern strategies make sense. Nevertheless, there are ideas out there that could create incentives for managers *not* to yank their starters every time one of those data points shows up on their iPad screen: limiting the number of pitchers on a roster, [the Double Hook](#), etc. It’s time to explore those ideas.

Football has shown us precisely what late-game entertainment is all about — at the same time that baseball is evolving in a totally different direction. As I’ve written many times, what makes for great baseball strategy doesn’t always make for great entertainment strategy. And more and more in baseball, it’s the entertainment strategy that’s losing.

4. Can we start the games earlier?

Two weeks ago, after a sensational NFL conference championship Sunday, I sent a text to one of my baseball-writing friends:

Both NFL games are over by 9:40 (ET). If this was the World Series, we’d be in the second inning.

True, right? Now roll the time machine forward two weeks. The Super Bowl kicked off at 6:30 p.m. ET. It was over before 10. Amazingly, over 100 million people still watched.

Meanwhile back in baseball, only one game in the 2021 World Series ended before 11:30 p.m. ET. No game in that World Series started before 8 p.m. ET — and none has since 2010.

Once again, we understand all the reasoning for that. By which we mean: TV! And clearly, the TV poohbahs have no interest in starting any World Series game before it gets dark.

“It’s a decision that MLB and the networks made,” said the same baseball official quoted earlier in this piece. “I don’t know that it’s the right one.”

Oh, it’s the right one if the only priority is: Collect the most money your TV partner is willing to pay you — so you then let that partner call all the game-time shots.

So if that TV partner is calling the shots, *of course* it wouldn’t want to start any Sunday baseball game until that Jags-Broncos game, in the late NFL window, is over. And *of course* it would want to maximize its audience in the Pacific Time Zone. But ...

If you have other priorities — say, building an audience you’ll desperately need in 20 years — maybe it isn’t the optimal decision to have every World Series game end between 11:30 and 1 in the morning in the East. Just sayin’.

“I’ve been making this point over and over again for many years,” Costas said. “From the television standpoint, when you’re committed to picking up every last nickel, those decisions have consequences beyond those dollars. And you give up control of your sport.”

Once upon a time, in a simpler age, all World Series games were played in the afternoon sunshine. That ain’t coming back. Later, up until 1984, there were at least some World Series day games on the schedule every October. But it’s now been 35 years since any World Series game was a day game. And it might be 135 before we see another.

But why? Because it might look bad if you start one Saturday World Series game in the late afternoon and it gets a lower TV rating than the Auburn-Georgia college football game? Because a 6:30 ET weeknight start might cut into some affiliates’ “Jeopardy!” window?

Obviously, football has inherent advantages here. It’s once a week. It’s the middle of winter. Not to mention *it doesn’t have to compete against football*. But here’s a thought:

You know how you build fans? By allowing them to actually stay awake to see who wins the most important games of the year!

5. Elimination games are always an “event”

Baseball is an every day kind of sport. Football is a once-a-week sport. There’s nothing wrong with either.

Baseball is the only every day comfort food in sports. It’s always there. It’s nightly company. It’s a daily soap opera that builds on the days, weeks and months that precede it. And there’s a beauty in that, especially on laid-back summer evenings.

But what football has — and baseball will always struggle to replicate — is the feeling that every game is An Event. You get one game a week, and that will have to keep you all fueled up until the next one. But hey, at least you get to talk about it all week.

In January and February, though, every stupendous NFL playoff game feels like the stuff of legends. You will never hear Joe Buck describe the final play of any football classic with the words: “We will see *you* tomorrow night.” But he once paid homage to his late, great father by speaking those very words after maybe the greatest World Series game ever.

So am I saying baseball needs more elimination games every October? Well, it’s crossed my mind. Yet at this very moment, our friendly neighborhood labor negotiators are poised to kill the only guaranteed win-or-else games on the postseason schedule: the wild-card games.

They’ll be replaced by a wild-card round potentially featuring three best-of-three series in each league. We know there will be at least one potential elimination game in each of those series — but possibly no winner-take-all games in those (or any) series.

The fun side to that version of the expanded playoffs is those days packed with postseason baseball from noon to midnight. But if that's supposed to be baseball's answer to March Madness, Bob Costas is calling a technical foul on that notion.

"This idea that it'll be like March Madness — no," Costas said. "The beauty of March Madness is that some school that's a 16th seed is at least hanging in, in a game against a 1-seed. But in any case, it's one game and it's over. I don't know that baseball is able to match that."

The wild-card game — the equivalent of starting the postseason with a Game 7 — makes for tremendous drama, but it's also so un-baseball-like, because it's such an inaccurate reflection of how these teams got there. So of course, the front offices of all 30 teams rebel against that, and have from the beginning.

Here, though, is what they miss. Here is the lesson those games teach us, and that the NFL teaches us: Baseball needs more games that feel like "Events." Off the top of his head, Costas points to the Field of Dreams Game, from this past August. It was the highest-rated regular-season baseball game since 2005. I wonder why. It wasn't about the corn.

The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It's been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game — it's a part of our past, Ray. It reminds us of all that once was good, and it could be again.

"I think that baseball makes a mistake if it tries to copy, in any way, the other sports," Costas said, "because the nature of the sport is so different. I think that the north star of this has to be to get back to what baseball was — not in 1965, but what it was in 2005. With a few tweaks, even in 2005, you could have seen some of this coming. So the idea for baseball is just: Get back to its best version of itself."

I think the lesson for baseball is: Think big. Then think bigger. The more games that feel like "Events," the more they show off the beauty of your sport. It's still great. Which doesn't mean it can't be greater. It simply needs to re-point its compass to find its sweet spot.

Maybe we just needed to watch Patrick Mahomes, Joe Burrow and Matthew Stafford work their magic to remember that.

POSNANSKI ON WINNERS AND LOSERS IN THE CBA NEGOTIATIONS

Joe Sheehan — he of the essential [Joe Sheehan Baseball Newsletter](#) (sign up now!) — did some back-of-the-envelope math the other day, and he basically determined that the reason we are not talking right now about pitchers and catchers reporting and players being in the best shape of their lives and, well, BASEBALL, is \$440 million.

The actual amount is just an estimation, a placeholder — it might be \$370 million or \$510 million or some other nine-digit number that is unfathomable to the rest of us — but the point is not the number.

The point is that it IS a number.

The point Joe makes — and, alas, I agree with this — is that there is no larger fight here, no grander ambitions, no effort whatsoever to deal with the many issues baseball faces. The players have caved on all of that. They've given up on getting earlier free agency. They've given up on getting earlier arbitration. They do not seem interested in getting minor leaguers a living wage. They do not seem to know how to stop major league teams from manipulating service time. As far as I know, they have not pressed to right the absurd wrong of the MLB pension plan excluding older players who didn't play four years (the rule now is just 43 days of service).*

**Just one example of this would be Pat Darcy — who was a key figure in the Big Red Machine's 1975 run to the World Series. He went 11-5 that season, and is probably best known for throwing the pitch that Carlton Fisk waved fair in Game 6 (he threw two scoreless inning leading up to it). Darcy played three years in the big leagues. He is not eligible for the pension because the rule didn't change until 1980.*

So what ARE the players fighting for?

Well, I'll tell you: They're just fighting to stem the tide; the owners have been kicking their butts for 20 years now — they owners have basically put in a salary cap with their payroll tax, they are paying younger players significantly less than they're worth (they have almost entirely stopped giving older players obscene contracts to make up for it), they have made it advantageous for any number of teams to tank for a few seasons and build back up with young and relatively cheap talent, they have taken an ever-larger piece of the pie (which they now want to grow with more rounds of playoffs).

This is the time when many people will say: "Hey, baseball players seem to be doing just fine for themselves." And, indeed, many of them are. But that misses the point. Let's say you hire Harry Houdini to perform escapes in various theaters across America, and the net gain after expenses is \$1 million and you pay him \$750,000. Well, you can argue whether that's fair or not. But let's say that the net gain after expenses is \$100 million, and you pay him \$750,000 — well, yes, \$750,000 is still a lot of money, nothing has changed there, but you're obviously cheating him.

Of course, you don't need a fictional example — here's a real life one: Atlanta signed the young Ronald Acuña to an eight-year, \$100 million deal, with the team option making it a 10-year, \$124 million deal. Nobody could say that \$12 million a year is a bad deal. But I don't think anyone doubts that Acuña will be worth much, much, much, much more; FanGraphs ALREADY has his career value at \$126 million.

But Acuña signed that deal because the system has it so that the first three years of his career, he was going to make a tiny fraction of his worth, and for the next three years he still wouldn't be allowed to go into the open market, he'd have to rely on an arbitrator to get paid somewhere close to his value.

Don't believe me? In 2019, Acuña led the league in runs and stolen bases, had a 35-35 homer-stolen base season, helped carry the Braves to a 97-win season, finished fifth in the MVP balloting, and FanGraphs valued his season as worth \$44.3 million. He was paid \$560,000. That means he was paid roughly 1.26% his worth.

So what to do? The promise of money down the road carries all sorts of risk. What if you get hurt? What if your career somehow careens off track? So, he gives up the possibility of several hundred million dollars for the security of a long-term deal. Who wins in that deal? You know who wins.

Now, you might say, "Well, doesn't the team take on the risk by giving a long-term deal?" And the answer is: No. Of course not. Not at those prices. Acuña is 24 years old, extraordinarily talented, and he has already paid off the Braves contract. The next seven years (SEVEN YEARS!) is basically house money for Atlanta.

But here's the thing: The players have given up on changing the system. There's nothing grand at stake here. They are doing too well, many of them, to have a stomach for that fight. And, being honest here, they seem to lack the imagination or will to push for real improvements in the game or offer any extra support to those players on the fringe.

No, instead, the players are simply trying to work around the edges. Raise the minimum salary. Get some extra money to the top young players before they are arbitration eligible. Get the owners to raise the payroll tax threshold in a meaningful way so that the most committed teams can spend more money on players without being excessively taxed.

And the owners — even though they vaguely concede that these things should be done — are simply willing to lock out the players, torpedo spring training and put the season in jeopardy so that they can put their foot on the necks of the players. They like the way things are going. They like sharing exactly the amount they share with players now; they'd love less, but certainly no more. They don't want to change the system in any even halfway meaningful way — except to add more teams to the playoffs so that they can make even more money.

That's it. That's all that this stupid, stupid fight is about.

Not one bit of it is about trying to make baseball a better game for the fans. Not one bit.

One of the frustrating themes of baseball is it so rarely has a 100 percent good day. Big Papi gets elected to the Hall of Fame, the talk is about PEDs. The World Series goes on, the talk is declining ratings or bad umpiring or the length of the games. A thrilling and promising young player emerges in the minor leagues, the talk is about how long to keep him down there to delay

him getting paid fairly. An all-time great veteran player approaches hallmark numbers like 3,000 hits or 3,000 strikeouts, the talk is about how overpaid he is.

There are a million more examples of this, but none more horrifying or heartbreaking than the billionaire owners telling everybody that they would rather fight for the last dollar than play ball. At some point, surely, they will get the players to cave properly — this is, after all, how they got to be billionaires in the first place — and the game will return, and all of baseball's myriad problems will be exactly as they were, and we fans will come back because this game has a grip on us.

In the meantime, pitchers and catchers and the rest of us are locked out. The owners will tell us when they've gotten rich enough to let us all back in.

HOUSEKEEPING

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