

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

2.27.2022

Good morning. Between the CBA and Russia, I'm pretty grumpy today.

Ken Rosenthal may have put it best-- Figure it out, or get tuned out. How's that for a lockout motto?

But to take your mind off such matters this week we feature:

- switch hitter power
- eliminating the shift
- the future of pitch framing with robo umps on the horizon
- ball park history
- the future of MLB managing
- biomechanics

Enjoy reading (a long edition today), enjoy your coffee.

(if you are a recent subscriber or just a glutton for punishment, back issues of the newsletter are available. Say the word and I'll be happy to forward a month or two, or the last 18 months' worth).

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

The Yankees announced this week they will retire Paul O'Neil's number. O'Neill will be the second hitter to have No. 21 retired by a team, after the Pirates' Roberto Clemente. Two pitchers have had the number retired in their honor--Hall of Famers Warren Spahn in Atlanta and Bob Lemon in Cleveland

With 113 Mark Teixeira is the career home run leader in the new Yankee Stadium.

Joey Votto's career OPS-plus of 148 is the same as that of Mike Schmidt, and one point better than Willie McCovey's. (Reminder--OPS+ takes a player's on-base plus slugging percentage and normalizes the number across the entire league. It accounts for external factors like ballparks. It then adjusts so a score of 100 is league average, and 150 is 50 percent better than the league average.)

Spotted amongst all the CBA back and forth—less than 20% of MLB players make 80% of all salary \$.

25 years of interleague play. American League leads 3482-3182 (exactly 300 games). Red Sox at 95 games over .500 have best record followed by Yankees at +80. Dodgers are top of a few NL teams at +15.

Robin Roberts was the only pitcher to defeat the Boston Braves, the Milwaukee Braves and the Atlanta Braves.

Worth repeating--Baseball has outdone the other sports in championship diversity, since eight different teams have won the last eight World Series and no team has won in successive seasons since the 1998-2000 Yankees.

Hats off to Ryan Zimmerman, who retired after 17 years in the Nationals organization. Zimmerman leaves with the most games played, at-bats, runs, hits, total bases, doubles, home runs, and RBIs in franchise history.

Two other statistics that mark Zimmerman's career:

- He was drafted on June 7, 2005, a first-round pick out of the University of Virginia, and made his major league debut that Sept. 1. That's not unheard of, but it's very unusual, especially for a hitter.
- Zimmerman finished his career with [11 regular-season walkoff home runs](#). Only nine other players have had that many and all are in the Hall of Fame, except for Albert Pujols.

Jim Thome had 13. Pujols, Jimmie Foxx, Mickey Mantle, Stan Musial, Frank Robinson, and Babe Ruth are at 12. Zimmerman, David Ortiz, and Tony Pérez had 11.

September 14, 1990. Ken Griffey Sr. and Jr. homered in consecutive at bats for the Mariners. The only time father and son have done that in MLB history. Angels right hander Kirk McCaskill served up both homers. Kirk played baseball and hockey at University of Vermont, was a Hobey Baker finalist and drafted by the Winnipeg Jets. McCaskill's father Ted played for the NHL's Minnesota North Stars.

The Rays, Rockies, Angels, Blue Jays and Mariners have never had a home-grown all-star catcher.

Eddie Murray in 1986—the last Orioles homegrown all-star 1B.

The A's haven't had a home grown 2B all-star since Jim Finigan in 1955.

The Pirates haven't had a homegrown SS all-star since Gene Alley in 1968.

The Yankees haven't had a homegrown 3B all-star since Gil McDougald in 1959.

Last week we mentioned 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.

A more modern-day pitcher with success against the Yankees was Frank Lary. During his years with the Tigers, Lary became known as "The Yankee Killer." He had a 27–10 record against the New York Yankees from 1955 to 1961, years during which the Yankees won six American League pennants. In 1956, he compiled a record of 5–1 against a Yankees team that had an overall record of 97–57 and in 1958, he went 7-1 against the Yankees during their 92-62 season.

THOUGHTS FROM PETER GAMMONS

(from a column in The Athletic)

As owners and MLB try to continually whittle down the minor leagues, the draft and opportunities in the game, try to go back and think about tanking.

Since 1980, the five worst five-year stretches were the 1998-2003 Tigers, 2001-2006 Devil Rays, the 1998-2003 Devil Rays, the 2009-14 (tanking) Astros and 2016-2021 Orioles, who have the second-worst record from 2001-2021. The tanking really began in earnest when MLB changed the draft system before the 2012 draft. The Commissioner's Office sought to prevent large-market teams from going over slot, above the suggested draft-round numbers when signing prospects.

For instance, in the 2011 draft, Boston paid Blake Swihart \$2.5 million as a late first-rounder, then paid pitcher Henry Owens and Jackie Bradley, Jr. \$1.55M and \$1.1M in the sandwich round, Mookie Betts \$800,000 in the fifth round and a left-handed pitcher named Cody Kuckuk \$800,000 in the seventh round. So the league put in a complicated slotting system with higher pools for each class based on record, so that Houston, with the worst record in the game in 2011, had the first pick and the largest pool.

"That created tanking," says one general manager. If the owners and players were capable of working together, they could erect a different draft system that punishes repeated poor performance and a banking system co-run and co-sponsored by the two sides to help the 10 lowest-revenue teams finance free agents. It could benefit players, especially middle- and upper-middle-class free agents, and reduce dependence on revenue-sharing.

LOYALTY? THE RESERVE CLAUSE? SOME GREAT RUNS

183 players have played 10 or more years for one team.

Brooks Robinson and Car Yastrzemski at 23 years lead the AL. Mel Ott and Stan Musial at 22 seasons lead the NL. A few other names of distinction:

Al Kaline	Tigers	22 seasons
George Brett	Royals	21
Walter Johnson	Senators	21
Willie Stargell	Pirates	21
Alan Trammell	Tigers	20
Luke Appling	White Sox	20
Derek Jeter	Yankees	20
Tony Gwynn	Padres	20
Craig Biggio	Astros	20

Robin Yount	Brewers	20
Chipper Jones	Braves	19
Dave Concepcion	Reds	19
Ernie Banks	Cubs	19
Jim Palmer	Orioles	19
Mariano Rivera	Yankees	19
Lou Whitaker	Tigers	19
Ted Williams	Red Sox	19
Mike Schmidt	Phillies	18
Bob Feller	Indians	18
Roberto Clemente	Pirates	18
Ed Kranpool	Mets	18
Mickey Mantle	Yankees	18
Edgar Martinez	Mariners	18
Yadier Molina	Cardinals	18 (active)
Johnny Bench	Reds	17
Bill Freehan	Tigers	17
Bob Gibson	Cardinals	17
Todd Helton	Rockies	17
Bill Mazeroski	Pirates	17
Jorge Posada	Yankees	17
Ryan Zimmerman	Nationals	16
Jim Rice	Red Sox	16

Carl Hubbell	Giants	16
Whitey Ford	Yankees	16
Jeff Bagwell	Astros	15
Don Drysdale	Dodgers	14
Joe DiMaggio	Yankees	13

INTERESTING OBSERVATIONS FROM THE BOSTON GLOBE

Garrett Whitlock was perhaps the most unexpected story on the Red Sox in 2021. A 2017 18th-round draft pick of the Yankees, he'd never pitched above Double A, underwent Tommy John surgery in 2019, missed all of 2020 while recovering, then got plucked in the Rule 5 draft by the Red Sox.

Whitlock did not merely stick with the Red Sox for the full season. He emerged as one of the most valuable pitchers on the team, a multi-inning bullpen force who delivered many of the most important outs. For that, he earned a salary of \$570,500 — the MLB minimum.

If Whitlock had played in the NBA, he'd have earned at least \$925,258 in his rookie season. Had he been in the NHL, he'd have taken home at least \$750,000. In the NFL, his rookie minimum salary would have been \$660,000. But as a baseball player, despite the years of meager minor league salaries that preceded his arrival in the big leagues, Whitlock made less than a rookie in any other sport.

MLB hasn't always resided at the bottom of the early-career earnings scale. As recently as 2012, MLB's \$480,000 minimum was higher than those of the NFL (\$390,000) and NBA (\$473,604) while falling just below the NHL minimum (\$525,000).

But since that time, the MLB minimum has gone up just 19 percent, while those of the other major sports have jumped 43 percent (NHL), 69 percent (NFL), and 95 percent (NBA).

HRS FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE PLATE

From MLB.com and the Elias Sports Bureau, here's a look at the players with the most games homering from both sides of the plate (note that the active leader in this category is José Ramírez, with 6).

T-1) Mark Teixeira -- 14

Teixeira is ranked fifth all-time among switch-hitters with 409 home runs and was also a five-time Gold Glove Award winner at first base. His first career game in which he homered from both sides of the plate came on the Fourth of July in 2004, when he launched a solo shot in the eighth inning as a right-handed batter and a grand slam in the ninth while batting lefty during an 18-3 Rangers victory over the Astros.

Teixeira tended to have games in which he homered from both sides in bunches -- he did it twice within the span of a month for the Braves, on June 22 and July 20, 2008, and twice in a two-week span for the Yankees from May 4 to May 18, 2009. His last such game came on July 31, 2015, when he smashed a two-run homer batting lefty and then a grand slam while batting right-handed for the Yankees against the White Sox in Chicago.

The bulk of the games in which Teixeira homered from both batter's boxes came from 2008-11, a span in which he accomplished the feat nine times. Of the 14 games in which he went deep from both sides of the plate, Teixeira belted three homers on three occasions.

T-1) Nick Swisher -- 14

Whereas Teixeira accomplished the feat with three different teams, Swisher did so with a record-tying five -- five times with the A's, five times with the Yankees, twice with the White Sox and once each with Atlanta and Cleveland. The only other player who homered from both sides of the plate with five clubs is coming up on this list.

Swisher's first game with homers as both a righty and a lefty came with Oakland on June 26, 2005, against the Giants. His last, in which he tied Teixeira's record of 14, came a decade later, when he launched a pair of homers for the Braves against the Cubs at Wrigley Field on Aug. 22, 2015.

Swisher is tied with Tony Clark for the single-season American League record for games with a homer from each side of the plate, with three in both 2007 and '09.

3) Carlos Beltrán -- 12

Beltrán's 435 career homers are third-most among switch-hitters in MLB history. The first time he homered from both sides of the plate in a game was on June 29, 2000, when he hit a pair of solo homers for the Royals against Cleveland at Kauffman Stadium. His last was with the Yankees, when he launched homers from both sides against the Tigers at Yankee Stadium on June 20, 2015. In between, he did it once more with Kansas City, once with the Astros, five times with the Mets and three times with the Cardinals -- five teams in all.

Interestingly, with all of his postseason success -- 16 homers in 65 postseason games -- Beltrán never had a playoff game in which he homered from each side of the plate.

T-4) Eddie Murray -- 11

Only Mickey Mantle hit more home runs as a switch-hitter than Murray's 504. Eight of Murray's 12 games in which he homered from both sides of the plate came while he was with the Orioles. The first was on Aug. 3, 1977, against the A's in Oakland, when the future Hall of Famer belted a solo shot while hitting left-handed in the eighth inning, and then a go-ahead, two-run shot in the 10th from the right side that proved to be the game-winner in an 8-6 Baltimore victory.

Murray's last such game came 17 years later, when at age 38 he drove in five runs with a pair of homers for Cleveland against the Twins at the Metrodome -- he smashed a three-run shot in the first inning while batting lefty against Pat Mahomes (no, not the superstar quarterback, but his dad) and then a two-run homer from the other side of the plate in the seventh. Ten of the 12 occasions on which Murray homered from both sides came in the American League, and two in the National League, both with the Dodgers.

T-4) Chili Davis -- 11

Davis was one of the game's finest designated hitters in the 1990s, though he began his career in the NL with the Giants, for whom he homered from both sides of the plate three times, once in 1983 and twice in '87. He then joined the Angels, and with California he homered from the left and right side in the same game six times (in two different stints with the club).

Davis also accomplished the feat once with the Twins and once with the Royals -- his two-homer, five-RBI performance for Kansas City on June 7, 1997, against the Rangers was the last of the games in which he homered from each side of the plate. Overall, his 350 career homers ranks seventh all-time among switch-hitters.

T-6) Mickey Mantle -- 10

The switch-hitting home run king with 536, Mantle is the gold standard of switch-hitters even though he didn't have the most games with a homer from each side of the plate. From 1955-61, Mantle homered from both sides in a game eight times. No one else did it once in that span.

The first time Mantle homered as both a righty and a lefty at the plate was on May 13, 1955, when he slammed three home runs and drove in all five runs in the Yankees' 5-2 win over the Tigers in the Bronx. The final time he accomplished the feat was on Aug. 12, 1964, against the White Sox at Yankee Stadium, when he launched a pair of solo homers in New York's 7-3 victory.

Although Mantle's 18 World Series home runs remain a record to this day, he did not have any World Series games with a home run from each side of the plate.

T-6) Ken Caminiti -- 10

Caminiti's run of dominance at the plate was brief, but it was tremendous. The third baseman hit 121 of his 239 career homers in a four-year span with the Padres from 1995-98, winning the 1996 NL MVP Award along with all three of his Gold Glove Awards. Seven of his 10 games

with a homer from each batter's box came from 1995-96 alone, including an MLB single-season record of four in his '96 MVP campaign.

There were two more occasions on which Caminiti homered from both sides. He blasted three home runs -- two as a right-handed hitter and one as a lefty -- and drove in five of San Diego's six runs in a victory at Dodger Stadium on July 12, 1998; his final such game came on Aug. 20, 1999, for the Astros, in which he hit a two-run shot in the third and then led off the top of the 16th with a go-ahead solo home run in Houston's 6-4 win over the Marlins in Miami.

T-6) Tony Clark -- 10

Nearly half Clark's 251 career homers came from 1996-99, a span in which he belted 124 of those home runs with an .862 OPS with the Tigers.

Clark's first game with a home run from both sides of the plate was on April 5, 1997, against the White Sox in Chicago, a slugfest in which he hit two solo shots in a 15-12 Tigers win. His next three such games all came in '98, setting a single-season AL record later tied by Swisher. He had two more with Detroit in '99 before a pair in New York: one for the Mets in 2003, and one for the Yankees in '04, in which he launched three homers. He then had two for the D-backs four years apart, one in '05 and one on Opening Day in '09.

T-9) Bernie Williams -- 8

His 287 career home runs are tied with Bobby Bonilla for 10th all-time among switch-hitters, but his presence was felt most in the postseason for the Yankees' dynasty of the late 1990s. Williams launched 22 career postseason home runs, helping New York win four World Series titles in a five-year span from 1996-2000.

There have been only four instances of a player homering from both sides of the plate in the same postseason game, and Williams is responsible for two of them -- he did so in Game 3 of the 1995 AL Division Series against the Mariners and in Game 4 of the '96 ALDS against the Rangers. (The other two players who homered from each side of the plate in a postseason game are Chipper Jones in 2003, and Milton Bradley in '06.)

During the regular season, Williams distributed such games pretty evenly throughout his career. His first came in 1994, and he had one each in '96, '98 and '99 before accomplishing the feat twice in 2000. He then did it once in 2001 and once in '02.

T-9) Jorge Posada -- 8

It's fitting that Williams and Posada are tied for ninth all-time in this category since they each hit homers from both sides of the plate for the Yankees during a tremendous run in the 1990s. In fact, they became the [first pair of teammates in MLB history](#) to each homer from both sides in the same game, doing so against the Blue Jays on April 23, 2000.

Of Posada's 275 career homers, 16 came in games in which he belted a home run as both a left-handed and right-handed batter.

Posada's first such game came on Aug. 23, 1998, when he hit a pair of solo homers against the Rangers at the Ballpark in Arlington. His last was on Sept. 4, 2007, when he had another pair of solo shots as part of a 4-for-4 afternoon against the Mariners at Yankee Stadium. It was his second game involving homers from each side of the plate in about a month, after having done so on Aug. 1 vs. the White Sox, also in the Bronx.

And in the same vein, the only player to hit home runs from each side of the plate in a game twice in his rookie season--the Cardinals' **Dylan Carlson** (9/17/21 and 9/30/21) just last year.

THE DEATH OF PITCH FRAMING? A POTENTIAL AUTOMATED STRIKE ZONE LOOMS OVER THE FUTURE OF CATCHING

James Fegan in The Athletic

In considering the future of major league catching, one potential sea change stands above the rest. And if you've spent the last 15 years trying to master the demands of the position, it could spark a certain reaction.

"It would suck," said [Braves](#) special assistant and former catcher [Tyler Flowers](#), an expert pitch framer turned framing instructor. "My biggest skill set would be essentially obsolete."

The automated ball and strike system (ABS, or robot umps, if you prefer) is moving — literally, it's the same equipment in some cases — from the Atlantic League (it was one of a handful of [MLB](#) experiments [being conducted there](#)) to several Triple-A parks for this coming season. The long-term intent seems obvious.

"They're exposing this to Triple-A ballplayers with the expectation that 12, 24, 36 months down the road, they'll be in the big leagues, and this will not catch them off guard," said Rick White, president of the Atlantic League, which has housed the ABS system for the last three seasons. White witnessed the initial kinks of implementation, three separate MLB adjustments to the ABS zone to its current egg shape, and even players leaving the league for a game environment that better simulated the majors. But in his view, it was clear that the system could produce a strike zone more consistent and accurate than human umpires.

Not every potential change to the sport makes it to the majors and sticks. But amateur scouts searching for players who can catch for their team for the next decade say they're already

weighing how to evaluate the position while feeling that the ground is about to shift behind the plate. With an automated zone, pitch framing goes away. And in recent years, framing has been often evaluated as the most valuable element of catching defense — for good reason.

“It’s something that happens 120-plus times per game versus worst case, you get 10 pitches in the dirt that you need to block,” said Flowers, breaking it into layman’s terms. “And worst case, nowadays, you get three guys to throw out.”

An elite-framing catcher who is below average in every other aspect of defense can easily still grade out as an above-average defender overall by public metrics. The opposite profile has struggled to stay above water.

“Starting in maybe 2011, (Jonathan) Lucroy was unbelievable,” said [Rockies](#) special assistant Jerry Weinstein, who’s served as a catching coordinator for three MLB teams. “He was over 42 runs above average, which translates into probably five, six, seven major league wins, just based on his receiving. When people started to see the value of that, that’s been a priority.”

At age 78, Weinstein remembers Lucroy’s framing runs score from 11 years ago as easily as he reels off [research from MLB.com’s Mike Petriello](#) that indicates there are slightly fewer than 30 pitches in an average game where a catcher truly has an opportunity to affect a ball or strike call with their receiving. At the same time, he estimates he’s been preaching and writing about the value of presenting pitches well for 50 years. The shift to tangible framing value is akin to every team realizing 20 years ago that it should be paying attention to on-base percentage. But it’s been part of the fabric of catching for as long as most in the game can remember.

To Weinstein and veteran backstops in the majors, negotiating and understanding each umpire’s zone, modeling and adjusting game plans to it, and executing how they catch the ball in response have been fundamental parts of demonstrating their skill, observance and preparation. It creates a value to league experience, the observational and communication skills. It’s also why catchers block pitches that might otherwise go screaming past them.

“If there’s an automated zone, you’re gonna see guys that have that big (throwing) arm and can really swing it,” [Mets](#) catcher [James McCann](#) said. “When you take into account now every young catcher is headed out to the field with a wrist band on his arm on how to call the game, they have essentially taken away the necessity of a catcher to understand swings, understand their pitching staff and use their eyes. And you’re gonna see teams that think we can just get someone who can throw and can hit and we’ll take care of everything else from inside. I think that takes away from the game a lot.”

What these catchers and catching instructors are championing are not missed calls for the sake of a vague human element, though all are quick to point out that the best major league umpires are far more precise than isolated screenshots of errors that the ABS would suggest. They are testifying to the depth of their investment in a skill, which they see on display even in moments that the ABS is designed to correct.

“A missed call is a byproduct of a catcher that doesn’t know how to catch a ball — 100 percent,” Flowers said. “When I was playing, I would watch every game I could watch and re-watch my own games, and calls I got missed was my fault. And every call I saw on TV was 99.9 percent of the time the catcher’s fault.

“Which is why I have that stance of it’s a skill set that for whatever reason is being eliminated. It’s the same as saying you can’t throw curveballs anymore.”

To be clear, under the ABS, pitch framing goes away. White cracks up recalling the first weeks of the 2019 Atlantic League season, when catchers were still in the habit of freezing their mitt in place to sell a call. Or how umpires would diffuse arguments about the strike zone from the dugout by just pointing upstairs, where the decisions were actually being relayed from. White would argue that it’s easy to overlook how the elimination of these elements would free up the flow of the game. But from a player standpoint, it’s catchers who will most acutely feel the force of the change. The question is how much.

There are amateur scouts who keep notes on players who don’t show the receiving skills to thrive in the majors but would be palatable in a game with the ABS. That would suggest a scenario like what Flowers and McCann predict, where the catcher position becomes less defensive specialist and field general, and more of a place where teams look to jam an impact bat — provided the backstop has a powerful throwing arm and the willingness to learn how to block and relay a game plan. Another view is that it simply strips catching of a component that makes it the most vital defensive position, and brings it closer to shortstop and center field (with game-calling and reading opponents’ swings remaining as vital intangibles to what will still be a defense-first position).

“Generally the guys who are receiving well are already the ones making smooth transfers,” said Weinstein, explaining that the habits of good framing are symbiotic with throwing and other catching responsibilities. “The guys that are good receivers are the guys that center the ball in the sweet spot of the glove. When you center the ball in the sweet spot of the glove, the ball comes to rest. It doesn’t rattle around your glove. From a throwing perspective, it’s a lot easier on your exchange when you catch the ball clean.”

And for a league that simultaneously wants to increase the amount of action on the basepaths, the ABS could divert a lot of catchers’ vigilance to combatting the already diminishing supply of base stealers. McCann quickly began rattling off how he might more aggressively angle his pre-pitch setup whenever he anticipates throwing to a base if he knew that his responsibilities for presenting a pitch were eliminated, since there are many other ways of establishing a target than presenting a glove. He also forecasted a decline in one-knee catching stances aimed at grabbing low strikes, which he already views as a hindrance to blocking.

“When you’re on a knee and the ball is directly in front of you, you can block those typically fine,” McCann said. “But it’s the ones that may get away from a pitcher that’s a little bit outside your body, and you don’t block it. Now, that’s a free base for the base runner. Especially if he’s

in scoring position, that really hurts. Especially if you're talking about how good pitching is nowadays, and how hard it is to really manufacture runs. You don't see a ton of single, single, single (leading to) scoring runs. It's the big hits. If you're giving away free bases, because you're not in a position to block that slider in the dirt, that adds up over the course of the season."

Game-altering missed calls inspire plenty of frustration, but eliminating catchers' impact on calls will lead them to focus their efforts on what is already a sparse offensive environment.

"You can get more of an advantage for sure on catch-and-throw and on blocking because in the back of your head, I don't really have to worry about stealing this strike and presenting it," said Albert Gonzalez, bullpen coach for the High Point Rockers of the Atlantic League.

Gonzalez was behind the plate when the first test pitch was thrown with the ABS in 2019, and bounced between catching bullpens, instructing catchers, consulting pitchers handling the new zone and catching in games himself over the past three seasons. He experienced the initial spike of walks as pitchers saw the wide corners their catchers used to snag for them disappear. He also would qualify that a full-scale abandonment of receiving did not take place, since the goal of catchers in the Atlantic League is to get out of the Atlantic League, rather than adjust to its environment. The same would apply to the Low-A Southeast, where the ABS was also selectively implemented.

What he saw was more the seeds of a transition in pitching styles that could forecast new priorities for receiving. Finesse pitchers who thrived on nicking corners and — with the help of their catchers — expanding the zone on the edges after earning the benefit of the doubt from umpires with their command, were worse off than power arms who suddenly were even better suited to live at the top of the zone, since the ABS' by-the-book definition of the high strike is significantly more generous than the average umpire. The next frontier for cerebral catchers is exploring new areas for exploitation.

"With the system not being human, but instead being a machine, you throw the ball at chest level and inside to an opposing hitter, it's basically an unhittable pitch," White said. "You can work hitters if you understand the system and you understand count theory. You can have your way with them."

Gonzalez has spent the intervening years working with pitchers on identifying and targeting the sections of the ABS zone that don't read to hitters as traditional strikes. White foresees a game within the game emerging for catchers who make an effort to deceive hitters with their setup locations, knowing they will no longer be punished for reaching across the zone. The game is constantly evolving, and whether it's an increased emphasis on transfers and footwork, or a quick disappearance of one-knee catching stances for framing low strikes, anyone who has played baseball long enough to reach the majors knows their survival behind the plate rests on rolling with it.

The question is whether this is just another shift in a game that is constantly changing, or a large-scale loss that forever alters the sport.

“For me, it’s going to be a big deterrent to even want to be a part of baseball,” Flowers said. “That’s how I’ve made my living; that specific aspect of catching. It’s gonna be difficult to watch it and or accept it and move past that.”

If that sounds extreme, consider Flowers’ journey and its similar iterations across the league over the past decade. He made himself into one the best framing catchers in the league through video review of his receiving, before teams began devoting coaching personnel to the practice. Now, after all this time acclimating to a league that has increasingly demanded framing above all else from its catchers, the overriding fact is that the future of the position is unknowable, and possibly unrecognizable.

“But if it happens, we’ll find a way,” Flowers said. “All of a sudden, you have to come up with different setups and such to be conducive to the modern game. I’m kind of excited for the new challenge of figuring out how to be as quick as you can, as far as transfers and footwork that fits pitch location with no bearing on how you receive the ball. So it’s going to be a drastic change. But it’s also going to give me something else to dial in on and study and try to figure out.”

DOMINANT PAIRS OF HITTERS WHOSE CAREERS OVERLAPPED

Subscriber Allen Miller continues to build on the discussion over the last month. My premise in the last edition was Ruth/Hornsby, then Williams/Musial, then all the rest. Allen took it from there...

So, as for your list last week, the big surprises for me were Schmidt (higher than I thought) and Tris Speaker (lower). Mays’ and Aaron’s places on the list make a lot more sense when you realize they are in the same league together (same for Foxx and Gehrig, who had each other and part of the Babe’s career to contend with, but STILL managed to be beasts). Same for DiMaggio when you remember the chart I sent before. Here’s another interesting question: is it just coincidence that there isn’t anyone (not even Mantle, Bonds Trout or Pujols) who dominate a league after 1947 when all the talent from the Negro Leagues starts to share some of the glory. The only other guy I could find who had the same kind of broad offensive dominance as Ruth, Hornsby, Musial, and Williams was Ty Cobb, all prior to integration.

Although I like the way you broke things down—and it’s pretty obvious that Ruth and Hornsby are a legitimate pairing according to whatever method you use—I wanted to rework the analysis along the same lines that I used before. I felt your methodology might favor players that had dominance in a narrower set of offensive categories (Carew and Gwynn come to mind)

vs. someone with overwhelmingly broad offensive dominance (like the four guys we've been focusing on), even if it was for a shorter period of time (and 9-13 years isn't just a blip on the radar). Also, it doesn't make a big difference but I noticed that for certain periods in each league between 1922-1931, MVP winners were not eligible to win the award a second time. This didn't affect Hornsby who did win it twice in '25 and '29 but might have affected Ruth. Anyway, here's what I found.

Here are Ruth's stats:

YEAR	G	PA	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	OPS+	TB	WAR	MVP
1919	130	543	432	103	139	34	12	29	113	101	58	0.322	0.456	0.657	1.114	217	284	9.1	
1920	142	617	458	158	172	36	9	54	135	150	80	0.376	0.532	0.847	1.379	255	388	11.9	
1921	152	693	540	177	204	44	16	59	168	145	81	0.378	0.512	0.846	1.359	239	457	12.9	
1922	110	496	406	94	128	24	8	35	96	84	80	0.315	0.434	0.672	1.106	182	273	6.4	
1923	152	699	522	151	205	45	13	41	130	170	93	0.393	0.545	0.764	1.309	239	399	14.2	<u>MVP-1</u>
1924	153	681	529	143	200	39	7	46	124	142	81	0.378	0.513	0.739	1.252	220	391	11.8	
1925	98	426	359	61	104	12	2	25	67	59	68	0.290	0.393	0.543	0.936	137	195	3.5	
1926	152	652	495	139	184	30	5	47	153	144	76	0.372	0.516	0.737	1.253	226	365	11.6	
1927	151	691	540	158	192	29	8	60	165	137	89	0.356	0.486	0.772	1.258	225	417	12.6	
1928	154	684	536	163	173	29	8	54	146	137	87	0.323	0.463	0.709	1.172	206	380	10.2	
1929	135	587	499	121	172	26	6	46	154	72	60	0.345	0.430	0.697	1.128	193	348	8.1	
1930	145	676	518	150	186	28	9	49	153	136	61	0.359	0.493	0.732	1.225	211	379	10.3	
1931	145	663	534	149	199	31	3	46	162	128	51	0.373	0.495	0.700	1.195	218	374	10.5	<u>MVP-5</u>

Things of note:

1919 – Led MLB in R, HR, RBI, OBP, SLG, OPS, OPS+, and TB

1920 – Led MLB in R, HR, RBI, BB, OBP, SLG, OPS, OPS+, and WAR

1921 – For third year in a row led MLB in R, HR, RBI, OBP, SLG, OPS; also led MLB in BB, TB, and WAR; and led AL in OPS+

1922 – Played just 110 games, but he led the AL in SLG, OPS, OPS+

1923 – Won the MVP while leading MLB in R, HR, RBI, BB, OBP, SLG, OPS, OPS+, TB, and WAR.

1924 – Won his only AL batting title and led the league in OPS, OPS+, and WAR; led MLB in R, HR, RBI, OBP, and TB, which means he won his “only” triple crown.

1925 – Played 98 game with 61 R, 25 HR, and 67 RBI.

1926 – Led MLB in R, HR, RBI, BB, OBP, TB, and WAR. Led AL in SLG, OPS, OPS+.

1927 – Set THE record with 60 HR, also led MLB in R, BB, SLG, OPS, OPS+, WAR; led AL in OBP. Interestingly, he had 165 RBI, .356 BA, and 417 TB but didn't lead the league in any of those categories.

1928 – Third year in a row led MLB in R, HR, BB, and WAR; also led in SLG, OPS+, and RBI. Led AL in OPS.

1929 – In just 135 games led MLB in HR, and AL in SLG, OPS, OPS+, TB, and WAR—how is that even possible?

1930 -- Led MLB in BB and WAR, and AL in HR, OBP, SLG, OPS, OPS+.

1931 – Led MLB in HR, BB, OBP, SLG, OPS, OPS+, and WAR. Fifth in MVP voting.

How dominant is Ruth over these 13 seasons?

Led MLB 8 out of 10 years in R. Had more than 130 nine times.

Led MLB in HR 10 out of 13 years, and the AL another time
 Led MLB in RBIs five times, had over 100 RBIs eleven times, and over 150 five times!
 Led MLB in BB nine times
 Only led the AL in BA once, but hit over .320 eleven times. Had 200 H three times.
 Led MLB six times in OBP, and AL twice more. Had an OBP above .500 five times!
 Led MLB seven times in SLG and AL five more times (led AL 12 or 13 years).
 In OPS and OPS+, led MLB and AL six times each in both. Had OPS above 1.200 seven times!
 Had more than 300 TB (peaked at 457!) 11 out of 13 years, while leading MLB six times.
 Led MLB in WAR eight times and AL twice more—led AL 10 out of 13 years!
 Won one MVP and a triple crown in different years
 He struck out a lot (led MLB 3 times and AL once), but much less than today's players.

Now let's see how Hornsby's stats look:

YEAR	G	PA	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	OPS+	TB	WAR	MVP
1920	149	660	589	96	218	44	20	9	94	60	50	0.370	0.431	0.559	0.990	185	329	9.6	
1921	154	674	592	131	235	44	18	21	126	60	48	0.397	0.458	0.639	1.097	191	378	10.8	
1922	154	704	623	141	250	46	14	42	152	65	50	0.401	0.459	0.722	1.181	207	450	10.1	
1923	107	487	424	89	163	32	10	17	83	55	29	0.384	0.459	0.627	1.086	188	266	6.8	
1924	143	642	536	121	227	43	14	25	94	89	32	0.424	0.507	0.696	1.203	222	373	12.3	MVP-2
1925	138	606	504	133	203	41	10	39	143	83	39	0.403	0.489	0.756	1.245	210	381	10.3	MVP-1
1926	134	604	527	96	167	34	5	11	93	61	39	0.317	0.388	0.463	0.851	124	244	4.5	
1927	155	684	568	133	205	32	9	26	125	86	38	0.361	0.448	0.586	1.035	175	333	10.2	MVP-3
1928	140	621	486	99	188	42	7	21	94	107	41	0.387	0.498	0.632	1.130	202	307	8.9	
1929	156	712	602	156	229	47	8	39	149	87	65	0.380	0.459	0.679	1.139	178	409	10.5	MVP-1

Things to note:

1920 – Led the NL in H, 2B, RBI, BA, OBP, SLG, OPS, OPS+, TB, WAR.
 1921 – Second year in a row led NL in H, 2B, RBI, BA, OBP, SLG, OPS, OPS+, TB, and WAR, and also led league in G and R, and MLB in 3B.
 1922 – Led MLB in R, H (250), HR, SLG, OPS, TB (450), and WAR. Led in NL in 2B, RBI, BA (.401), OBP, and OPS+. Won the triple crown.
 1923 – In 107 G, led the NL in BA, OBP, SLG, OPS, and OPS+.
 1924 – Led MLB in H, BA (.424!), and WAR, and led NL in R, 2B, BB, OBP, SLG, OPS, OPS+, and TB. Finished second in MVP (to 28-6, 262K Dazzy Vance)
 1925 – FOR THE SIXTH CONSECUTIVE YEAR led the NL in BA (.403), OBP, SLG, OPS, and OPS+, and also in TB. Also led MLB in HR, RBI, and WAR. Won the triple crown (second time in four years) and the MVP.
 1926 – Off year slumping to .317 with 91 R and 93 RBI.
 1927 – Led MLB in G, and the NL in R, BB, OBP, OPS, OPS+, and WAR. Finished third in MVP.
 1928 – Led MLB in OBP, and NL in BB, BA, SLG, OPS, OPS+, and WAR.
 1929 – Led MLB in G, TB and WAR; led NL in SLG, OPS, OPS+. “Only” hit .380 with 229 hits, 39 HR, and 149 RBIs, while managing to win his second MVP in five years.

How dominant is Hornsby over these ten seasons?

Led MLB and NL twice each in H. Had more than 200 H seven times in 10 years!

Led MLB in R twice and NL three more times. Had over 130 R five times.

Led MLB in 3B once, HR twice, and NL in 2B four times.

Led MLB in RBI once and NL three more times. Had over 100 RBI five times.

Led MLB in BA once and NL six more times. From '21-'25 he AVERAGED over .400! During these ten years he hit .400 three times, and hit above .380 a total of seven times and hit below .360 only once!

Even though he didn't walk much, he led MLB in OBP once and the NL another seven times.

Led MLB in SLG once and NL seven more times.

Led MLB in OPS once and NL eight more time.

Led NL in OPS+ 9 out of 10 years!

All together he led the NL in BA *and* OBP *and* SLG *and* OPS *and* OPS+ SIX YEARS IN A ROW! Five of those six years he *also* led the NL in TB *and* WAR!

Led MLB twice in TB and NL four more times. He had more than 300 TB eight out of 10 years.

Led MLB and NL in WAR four times each (meaning he led the NL 8 years out of 10).

Between '24-'29 he won two MVPs and a second and a third.

Won the triple crown twice! (One of those years he did not win an MVP)

So, between these two guys, the league and MLB leader board for this period looks like this.

YEAR	G	PA	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	OPS+	TB	WAR	MVP
1919				R				R	R			R	R	R	R	R		
1920				R	H	H		R	R	R		R	R	R	R		R	
1921				R				R	R H	R	H	R H	R H	R H	R H	R H	R H	
1922				H	H	H		H	H		H	H	R H	R H	R	H	H	
1923				R				R	R	R	H	R H	R H	R H	R H	R	R	R
1924				R H	H	H		R		R H	R H	R H	R H	R H	R H	R H	R H	
1925								H	H		H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H
1926				R				R	R	R		R	R		R	R	R	
1927	H			R H				R		R H		H	R	R H	R H		R H	
1928				R				R	H	R	H	H	R H	R H	R H	R	R H	
1929	H			H				R					R H	R H	R H	H	R H	H
1930								R		R		R	R	R	R		R	
1931								R		R		R	R H	R	R H	H	R	

I'm pretty sure you'd agree that Cobb is the only other offensive player as dominant as the four we've looked at, so just for laughs here's a look at his peak years (1907-1918, although I have to

say he won the batting title in '19 and hit .401 in 1922, he just wasn't as dominant across the board). Obviously, you need to change things up a little and include stolen bases for Cobb, whereas Williams and Musial never got to double digits in SB, and Ruth and Hornsby maxed out at 17 each (I removed PA as being only marginally relevant).

Here are Cobb's stats:

YEAR	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	SB	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	OPS+	TB	WAR	
1907	150	605	99	212	28	14	5	119	53	24	55	0.350	0.380	0.468	0.848	167	283	6.8	
1908	150	580	88	188	36	20	4	108	39	34	42	0.324	0.368	0.476	0.844	170	276	6.2	
1909	156	573	115	216	33	10	9	107	76	48	45	0.377	0.431	0.517	0.947	192	296	9.9	
1910	140	508	106	194	35	13	8	91	65	64	46	0.382	0.455	0.549	1.004	205	279	10.5	
1911	146	592	148	248	47	24	8	127	83	44	42	0.419	0.466	0.620	1.086	196	367	10.7	MVP-1
1912	140	553	119	226	30	23	7	83	61	43	30	0.409	0.456	0.584	1.040	200	323	9.2	MVP-7
1913	122	429	70	167	18	16	4	9	51	58	31	0.389	0.466	0.534	1.000	194	229	7.4	
1914	98	345	69	127	22	11	2	57	35	57	22	0.368	0.466	0.513	0.979	190	177	5.6	
1915	156	563	144	208	31	13	3	99	96	118	43	0.369	0.486	0.487	0.973	185	274	9.5	
1916	145	543	113	201	31	10	5	68	68	78	39	0.370	0.451	0.492	0.943	179	267	8.0	
1917	152	588	107	225	44	24	6	106	55	61	34	0.383	0.444	0.570	1.014	209	335	11.3	
1918	111	421	81	161	19	14	3	62	34	41	21	0.382	0.440	0.515	0.955	194	217	6.5	

Things to note:

1907 – Led MLB in H, RBI, BA, and TB, and AL in SB, SLG, OPS, OPS+. Oh yeah, he's only 20 years old.

1908 – Led MLB in 3B, and AL in H, 2B, RBI, BA, SLG, OPS, OPS+, and TB.

1909 – Yes, he only hit 9 HR, but it was good enough to lead MLB as he also did in H, RBI, SB, BA, OBP, SLG, OPS, OPS+, TB; led AL in R and WAR. Maybe you noticed he won the MLB triple crown while leading MLB in SB, but not the MVP (blame Christy Mathewson).

1910 – Led MLB in OBP, SLG, OPS, OPS+, and the AL in R and BA.

1911 – Led MLB in R, H (248), 2B, RBI, SB (83), BA (.419), SLG, OPS, OPS+, TB, and WAR; led AL in 3B and won the MVP.

1912 – Led MLB in H, BA (.409), SLG, OPS, OPS+.

1913 – In 122 G, led MLB in BA, SLG, and OPS+.

1914 – In just 98 G, led MLB OBP, and OPS+; led AL in BA, SLG, and OPS.

1915 – Led MLB in R, H, SB (long-standing record of 96!), BA, OBP, OPS, OPS+, and AL in TB.

1916 – Led MLB in R, and SB. Hit a pathetic .370 with 201 hits.

1917 – Led MLB IN H (225), 2B, 3B, SB, BA, OBP, SLG, OPS, OPS+, and TB; led AL in AB. His 11.3 WAR didn't match Eddie Cicotte's 11.9, but it's not exactly terrible.

1918 – In 111 G, led MLB in BA, OBP. and OPS+.

How dominant was he:

Led MLB in R three time and AL twice more.

Led MLB in H six times and AL once. Had more than 200 hits 7 times in 12 years.

Led MLB in 2B twice and AL once; led MLB in 3B twice and AL twice.

Led MLB in RBI three times and AL once.

Led MLB in SB five times and AL once more. Stole more than 50 bases nine times in 12 years.

Won the AL batting title 11 times in 12 years! Led MLB eight of those years. Hit .400 twice, above .380 six times and hit below .350 only once in 12 years.

Led MLB in OBP seven times in 12 years.

Led MLB in SLG five times and AL twice more. Led MLB in OPS six times and AL three times.

Led MLB in OPS+ nine times (including seven in a row) and AL once more.

All together he led the AL in BA *and* SLG *and* OPS *and* OPS+ SIX YEARS IN A ROW!

Led MLB four times and AL twice more in TB.

Led MLB and AL in WAR once each.

For what it's worth, if take the number of league or MLB leads these guys have per seasons played (for the specific period covered in each analysis), it looks like this:

Musial/Williams = 7.47

Cobb = 7.17

Ruth/Hornsby = 6.46

Finally, while looking at Cobb I noticed that Walter Johnson dominated AL pitching in a somewhat similar way. Food for thought...

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF BASEBALL KILLED THE SHIFT?

Jayson Stark

Once, there was a time when a hitter could fire a laser beam up the middle and not see the shortstop standing there, ready to scoop it up and turn it into routine old out fodder.

Once, there was a time when a left-handed hitter could drill a line drive over the second baseman's head and not spit cursified phrases into the wind because the third baseman was waiting for it in short right field, in that evil, shifting way of his.

Once, there was a time when groundballs were actually hits. Not all of them, but many of them. Groundballs between first and second. Groundballs between short and third. We have video evidence of this — and not even from, say, 1912. Would you believe from 2012?

Yes, once there was a time when shifts had not yet taken control of the entire baseball earth. You know who misses that time? Hitters. Lots of them. Most of them. Especially if they hit left-handed for a living.

"I get the defensive strategies," noted shift target [Joey Gallo](#) told us last summer. "I do. I'm 100 percent not against that. But I think at some point, you have to fix the game a little bit. I mean, I

don't understand how I'm supposed to hit a double or triple when I have six guys standing in the outfield."

He has excellent reasons for making that point. We'll let him make more later. But let's stick with this one first.

Are Joey Gallo and his shift-weary friends right? Is it time to "fix the game?" And if so, are we sure Step No. 1 should be: Kill the shift?

We're here to explore that question. It's a big one. It's one that Theo Epstein and [his rule-experiment patrol](#) have looked at extensively, in fact. We're grateful they have. They've given us real, helpful data to think about, even though you should know that much of it is likely to surprise and confuse you.

But the numbers don't tell us everything. So for the last six months or so, we've also listened to the thoughts of baseball people with every conceivable view of the shift. Hitters. Front-office geniuses. Double-A managers who now have spent a season living with rules that dramatically limit shifts. A player-coach in the Atlantic League, baseball's rule-change test lab.

We even picked the brains of commissioner Rob Manfred and union chief Tony Clark last summer. We came away thinking that — miracle of miracles — this someday might be something they kind of agree on. Sort of. So with the help of all of those folks, we're here to try to answer a pivotal question for [the future of baseball](#):

What would happen if baseball killed the shift?

1. Is it true teams now shift on every pitch?

Hey, good news. *Not* true. But if it seems like it, there's a good reason. In the big leagues, there were nearly *nine times* as many shifts last season as there were in 2013 ... and *almost 25,000* more balls were hit into a shift in 2021 than as recently as 2018.

Shifts by season*

2013	6,882
2014	13,299
2015	17,826
2016	28,130
2017	26,705
2018	34,669
2019	49,390
2021	59,062

(* full seasons only)

(Source: Sports Info Solutions / "The Bill James Handbook," 2022)

That means more than 51 percent of all balls put in play last year (not counting home runs) were hit into a shift. Incredible. And that's just balls in play.

Baseball Prospectus' Russell Carleton [broke this down](#) by pitches thrown, and he found that for the first time in any full season, left-handed hitters saw more pitches *with* a shift than without one. Guess what? Those left-handed hitters have noticed!

JOEY GALLO: "I think most hitters are pretty adamant on the shift, that they have to do something with it. I don't really see many hitters going, 'The shift is pretty awesome, man. They need to keep that.' I think people understand that hitting is hard enough — but when you have guys standing in different positions where it makes it almost impossible to get hits, that makes it even harder, obviously."

Obviously. But we should still be asking ...

2. Do shifts actually work?

Hahaha. Really? Does anyone honestly think these modern front offices roll out all their funky defensive looks just because they're jealous of [NFL](#) defensive coordinators? Of course shifts work. They work better every year, in fact, as defensive positioning gets more precise.

Bill James just wrote about this in "The Bill James Handbook." He found:

- There were 22 percent more hits taken away by the shift than given away by the shift last season.
- The league-wide batting average dropped by four points last year based solely on hits turned into outs by the shift.
- A staggering 4,802 hits were taken away by balls hit into the shift in 2021. That far outweighed the 3,946 outs given away by what James described as defenses that shifted and got "too clever for their own good," allowing hits on balls that likely would have been outs with no shift.

But those are just the big-picture numbers. If we home in on only left-handed pull hitters like Gallo or [Anthony Rizzo](#), it's easy to understand why they've seen enough shifts to last them a lifetime.

- According to Sports Info Solutions, pull-heavy shift candidates — most of them left-handed — batted just .219 last year on groundballs and short line drives when they faced a shift. Against no shift, that average jumped all the way to .247.

- And according to Baseball Prospectus, on groundballs hit by left-handed hitters, the shift crushed batting average on balls in play by 35 points — versus only three points for right-handed hitters (who, not coincidentally, actually saw fewer shifts per plate appearance than in 2020).

So when baseball began trotting out its anti-shift rules in the minor leagues last season, guess who the biggest fans of those rules happened to be? Ding-ding-ding. Right! Pretty much every left-handed pull hitter on the continent.

OFFICIAL OF ONE DATA-DRIVEN TEAM: *“If you ban the shift, the hitters who benefit the most are those left-handed Three True Outcomes types. There’s a reason Joey Gallo loves this idea.”*

There’s also a reason that particular executive *doesn’t* love this idea. But there’s a surprising twist coming in this saga, as we ask ...

3. Are front offices fighting to save the shift?

There are so many intelligent, creative humans powering major-league front offices these days that you might think they would never, ever agree to any rule that would limit their intelligent, creative, shift-deployment powers. Well, we’ve got stunning news for you:

Nope!

CLUB OFFICIAL NO. 1: *“Let me put on a different hat and say I think we all have a responsibility to look out for the best interests of the game. Anything that they believe increases the entertainment value of the sport deserves our consideration.”*

CLUB OFFICIAL NO. 2: *“My position is always, tell me what the rules are and we’ll play by those rules. The NFL and NBA change their rules all the time. Why shouldn’t baseball be able to do that if it makes our game a better product?”*

Surprised to read those takes? They used to be exceedingly rare. But now we hear them all the time when we ask about shift-banning. Not so long ago, there was fierce pushback from nearly every data-heavy front office. That pushback has softened notably.

You don’t even have to take a sportswriter’s word for it. We asked the commissioner himself last July if he was getting the same message.

ROB MANFRED: *“I think you’re 100 percent correct in terms of where the clubs are on the idea of regulating the shift as a concept. I think the reason for that is really simple. Unlike some of the other things that we’re talking about ... let’s just say you regulated the shift by requiring two infielders on each side of second base. What does that do? It makes the game look like what it looked like when I was 12 years old ...*

“So it’s not change. It’s kind of restoration, right? That’s why people are in favor of it. And they do believe — I think front offices in general believe — it would have a positive effect on the play of the game.”

But would it? Are we sure about that? That’s what the on-field division of [MLB](#) — a group that includes two former presidents of baseball operations, Epstein and former [Marlins](#) president of baseball operations Michael Hill — began testing out last year.

In Double-A leagues, the rule changes worked like this: In the first half, infielders were no longer allowed to stand in any part of the outfield when the pitch was thrown. In the second half, that rule was expanded — to require two infielders on each side of second base, with the first-half outfield ban still in effect.

Meanwhile in the Atlantic League, they also employed both of those shift limits, but in reverse order. So we know what you’re thinking next ...

4. How’d those minor-league shift limits work?

Rob Manfred had a vision — that with one shift-zapping rule change, baseball would look once more the way it did when he was 12. Can’t blame him for dreaming, but that is *not* what happened.

The numbers show that. But before you digest those numbers, listen to the view of two former big leaguers who lived with those rule changes last season: Morgan Ensberg, manager of the Rays’ Double-A team, the Montgomery Biscuits, and Lew Ford, who’s still hitting .300 as a player-coach for the Atlantic League’s Long Island Ducks eight years after his last big-league at-bat.

ENSBERG: “It looked different. It just didn’t feel different.”

FORD: “My first thought is, it hasn’t changed the game. ... It’s hard to take a side that it’s causing much of a difference in play, really — especially at the level that we’re at, where we’re not seeing drastic shifts like they do in Major League Baseball. And we’re also not seeing the amount of shifts that they do.”

For Major League Baseball, there was no bigger challenge in trying to make sense of these experiments than that last fact. The way minor-league teams shift and the way major-league teams shift are as different as you driving 12 miles over the speed limit on the freeway versus Hélio Castroneves driving 190 miles per hour as he’s winning the Indy 500.

So the Double-A numbers we’re about to present don’t have the same meaning you might expect. And MLB has acknowledged it isn’t using them to project what would happen if the same rules were used in the big leagues. Nevertheless, what transpired in Double A told a story that MLB is still trying to make sense of.

Groundballs were still outs: Sports Info Solutions examined the Double A “out rate” on all groundballs and bunts. The percentage of groundballs/bunts that were turned into outs did drop, but not by a lot.

2019 (last full season)	71.5%
2021 (full season total)	70.5%
2021 (first half only*)	70.2%
2021 (second half only**)	70.8%

(* no infielders in outfield)

(** two infielders on each side of 2B)

Hit rate on balls in play barely changed: Baseball America looked at the shift rules’ impact on overall offense. It found that, if you just measure that impact by the average of all hitters on balls in play, the effect was insignificant and virtually imperceptible.

2018 BABIP	.309
2019 BABIP	.305
2021 BABIP	.307
2021 first-half BABIP	.307
2021 second-half BABIP	.308

So is that really all there is? Hard to say yet. But when I asked one person studying this data if the two-infielders-on-each-side rule showed any promise of fulfilling Manfred’s dream of “restoring” the ground-ball hit, his reply was: “This rule is not going to accomplish that.”

All right, so the heck with the commissioner’s dream (for now). Why don’t we move along to the dream of the hitters affected most? Why don’t we just ask ...

5. Would this make left-handed hitters’ dreams come true?

What do left-handed hitters hate most about the shift? Turns out, they don’t all hate the same stuff. Imagine that. There’s one group that has big trouble with this ...

FREDDIE FREEMAN: *“That rover in right field ... it’s very rare that I hit one into that shift. It’s just the one up the middle is the one that gets me. I’m like: You’ve been taught your whole life to hit a line drive up the middle — and now you’re out ... So maybe if they eliminate that, and they keep the shortstop on the left side of the bag, I might get some more hits.”*

MAX MUNCY: *“The guy that’s all the way in the hole in the outfield, I don’t get as mad about that one. It’s when the shortstop is right up the middle — that’s the one that gets me the most ... If I roll a ball over into the 4-hole (between first base and second base) and it gets*

caught, that's fine. That's a bad swing. I don't deserve that hit. But when I smoke one that the pitcher is jumping out of the way of and the shortstop's just sitting there, that's the one that gets me."

So what about those identical gripes from those two prominent representatives from the left-handed non-Joey Gallo sector? Freeman tied [Matt Olson](#) for the honor of most shifted hitter in the sport last year, facing shifts on an unfathomable 580 plate appearances, according to Sports Info Solutions. Muncy faced the seventh-most shifts, with 505. Both had a batting average more than 60 points higher when they saw no shift. So they're worth listening to.

Most shifted batters, 2021

Matt Olson	580
Freddie Freeman	580
Kyle Seager	572
Ozzie Albies	565
Yordan Alvarez	533
Shohei Ohtani	509
Max Muncy	505

Most hits lost to the shift, 2021

Jeimer Candelario	33	13	-20
Max Muncy	29	13	-16
Joey Gallo	29	14	-15
Yordan Alvarez	33	18	-15

(Source: Sports Info Solutions / "The Bill James Handbook," 2022)

The rule Freeman and Muncy favor is the one banning three infielders from setting up on the right side. But would that really have helped them get more hits on rockets up the middle? Sorry! Not much evidence of that. Here's the Sports Info Solutions out-rate data on groundballs/bunts hit up the middle by left-handed hitters in Double A.

2019 (last season before shift rules) 66.1%
2021 second half (2 IFs on each side) 64.6%

MORGAN ENSBERG: "The key infielder, for that left-handed batter, is the second baseman, because we can statistically put him directly in line with where the batter hits the ball the vast majority of the time. We literally wouldn't even need to have another infielder on that side. We know where you're going to hit it on the ground, so that's where that fielder will be. And

the balls that go up the middle — the fact that the shortstop would be pinching towards the middle is good enough. The shortstop will be able to make those plays.”

So much for those dreams of Freddie Freeman and Max Muncy. But we probably need to check back with Joey Gallo, even if we already know what rule he’d favor. After all, he’s the man who hit the ball in 2020 where this happened.

JOEY GALLO: “I think (that no-infielders-in-the-outfield rule) would be huge for the league. You can still shift, but you can’t put multiple guys in the outfield. And at the end of the day, I think extra-base hits are important. And line drives to the outfield should be hits.”

Turns out, that rule was huge in Double A. At our request, Sports Info Solutions zeroed in on the out rate in those leagues on what they categorized as “pulled line drives.” When the infielders were stationed back on the infield dirt, the out rate dropped significantly.

2019 (no shift rules)	12.3%
2021 (first-half shift rules*)	8.7%
2021 (second-half shift rules**) 8.0%	
2021 (full season totals)	8.3%

(* no infielders in outfield)

(** two infielders on each side of 2B)

MORGAN ENSBERG ON THE IMPACT OF THE SECOND BASEMAN IN THE OUTFIELD: “When you have the second baseman in short right field, the amount of range that they have is so big. And the throw they have to make is still really short. So that guy really covers a lot more ground than any infielder in any other situation. By bringing that second baseman in and making sure that the second baseman’s feet are on the (infield) dirt, they no longer have that range. So the left-handed hitter really has a shot to get a base hit.”

ENSBERG ON LINE DRIVES CAUGHT BY INFIELERS IN THE OUTFIELD: “That’s the part where it’s just a travesty. I mean, where a guy literally does everything correctly, hits the ball hard on a line, and you’re blown away by the fact that the second baseman is standing right (there). That’s as frustrating a play for a hitter, I think, as any play in baseball.”

So the impact of keeping those infielders in the infield was maybe the most important lesson MLB absorbed from those experiments. Which brings us to one final, critical question ...

6. What should baseball do now?

Like everything else on the bargaining table, the rule-change negotiations aren’t going so hot these days. So it’s clear now these CBA negotiations will come and go without 10 seconds spent debating whether to ban or limit the shift.

But one of these days ... this is one idea that might actually have a chance. Hitters want to obliterate the shift. A whole lot of pitchers still aren't sure if they like it or hate it. Front offices aren't fighting to save it as hard as they used to. And the commissioner has been talking up trying to rein in shifts for years.

And then there's the Players Association. I know this union and MLB seem to fight about everything. But here's a thought: Isn't it in everyone's best interest to make baseball as entertaining as it can be?

Somewhere, buried deep inside the usual labor rhetoric, you can find evidence that both sides are worried that when it comes to style of play, analytics may have pushed a little too far. And the shift is a prime example. So when we asked the guy who heads the union about this last summer, he sounded as open to this change as he is to any idea Rob Manfred has ever liked.

TONY CLARK: "I had the pleasure of being a switch hitter. So you could shift me if you wanted, but it didn't really matter as much. But I recognize, too, that there is more shifting now ... Analytics, data, as you know, has always been in the game. There's more of it now, and it's manifesting itself differently in the game than it has previously ... For me, the question isn't old school versus new school. That's not the question. The question for me is: What type of game do we want to have? ... That's a conversation that I think we all are interested in having."

Well, if he's interested and the players are interested, let's have it! There is so much support on all sides for limiting shifts in some way, maybe the question now shouldn't be *whether* to do it. It should be *how* to do it.

If only there were a simpler answer to that question ...

FROM ONE CONFLICTED CLUB OFFICIAL: "My big concern is the downstream consequences of any change — the intended consequences versus the unintended consequences. I'd like to try to understand them as best I can before we take action ... My concern is, we want more action. We want more balls in play. But the people who benefit the most are not the hitters you want to have more value in the game."

He makes a great point. What the game seems to need is more DJ LeMahieus, [whose specialty](#) is the ability to control at-bats and put the ball in play. The trouble, this club official said, is: "You don't incentivize that by limiting shifts."

Instead, he went on, the hitters who benefit most are "the hitters you least want to see in the game" — those pull-happy left-handed hitters whose goal in life has nothing to do with slapping singles through a less crowded right side of the infield. On their road to 30 bombs and 175 strikeouts, they have no motivation to level their swing. Why would that change?

THAT SAME CLUB OFFICIAL: *"We can either create rule changes to incentivize players to play the game slightly differently, or we can create rule changes that incentivize teams to build their teams differently. If you want more high-contact punch-and-judy types, you don't incentivize that by limiting shifts. The singles hitter who shoots the ball the other way is not helped by this. I know left-handed hitters are frustrated by the shift. But in terms of how you incentivize competition, I do struggle with that. Banning the shift is not going to take the ball out of the air."*

So that rule that keeps those pesky, hit-eating infielders out of the outfield — that's the only one that clearly does what it's intended to do. But if Rob Manfred still has illusions of "restoring" the single up the middle, simply putting two infielders on each side of second base won't do that, not if the shortstop or second baseman can still stand practically behind the bag.

MORGAN ENSBERG: *"To really make that effective, you'd have to do more than just say, 'Two infielders on each side.' You'd actually have to say the second baseman and shortstop can't be within 10 or 15 feet of the bag. It would have to be like a pie slice up the middle somehow, where no infielders are allowed, if you wanted to really see an impact, where the ball up the middle wasn't caught."*

But that Pie Rule has never been tested anywhere, and it's not one we've ever sensed a whole lot of passion for. It's probably worth exploring in an independent league. But the odds of ever seeing it at Yankee Stadium seem more remote than the odds of Joey Gallo ever leading the league in singles.

There is one proven way to disincentivize shifts, you know: If the defense lines up one way and you keep hitting the ball some other way, then sooner or later, they'll stop shifting. But the shift explosion started eight years ago, and we're still waiting for the hitters to do that. At this rate, we might be waiting for another 80.

FREDDIE FREEMAN: *"Everyone's like, 'Just hit the ball the other way.' Um, so I'm trying to cover five pitches. They're all moving. One is like 98 mph. And I'm just going to be able to do whatever I want and hit a ball to the left side? It's not that easy. I wish it was, or I'd do it more often."*

MORGAN ENSBERG: *"A lot of times, the arguments are: 'Well, why don't you let the ball get a little bit deeper and then hit it the other way?' And the simple answer is, it's too difficult. Your swing is based on how your body organizes. And your contact point is really what it's been probably for your whole life, because that's what's found you success. Your arms are always going to be as long as they are. And you're going to be holding the bat the same way. So it's very difficult to all of a sudden become a spray hitter."*

OK, then what should baseball do now? Our guess is that one of these years, some sort of anti-shift rule is coming. Don't ask us what. Don't ask us when. But there's not enough opposition anymore to stop it, and there's not much downside to trying it.

How many singles will it add? How many more Joey Gallo doubles can it create? How much more contact, action and entertainment value can grow out of it? It all depends on how daring baseball is willing to be and how carefully and thoughtfully that new rule (or rules) is written. But whatever it produces, there's one thing we can predict it will never do:

It can't possibly make baseball look like it did when Rob Manfred was 12.

UNSETTLING THOUGHTS FROM PETER ABRAHAM OF THE BOSTON GLOBE

Baseball will survive, but its prominence continues to take a dive

The longer the MLB lockout continues, the more toxic my inbox becomes.

"This really is a disaster," wrote Michael.

"Sad to see baseball go the way of the dinosaurs," said Hector.

"Why should I buy tickets?" asked Ray.

"Nobody cares about baseball anymore," opined one anonymous emailer.

Respectfully, I don't believe any of you.

Google "baseball is dead" and you get 1.89 million results. This has been going on for decades.

Baseball was declared dead in the 1970s when players won the right to become free agents. It wasn't.

The coroner was summoned again when the 1994 World Series was canceled because of the players' strike. It took a few years, but baseball got back to normal.

Then it was widespread steroid use that dealt a supposedly fatal blow early this century. But that wasn't the case, either.

Now baseball supposedly has another cleat in the grave thanks to the latest labor impasse. It will survive like it always has. The season will start and people will most definitely come, Ray.

The same Red Sox fans who were crushed by the trade of **Mookie Betts** were captivated by the Wild Card Game against the Yankees 20 months later.

Baseball doesn't have to fear death. But it should be terrified of creeping irrelevance.

That spring training this year did not start on time is another example of how blind the people who run baseball have become to the outside world. They take too much for granted.

But even if a collective bargaining agreement is reached and the regular season starts as scheduled March 31, baseball is marching down the wrong path.

The NFL and NBA are far better television products with younger, more diverse fan bases. Both sports do a masterful job of marketing their star players and have become entrenched in popular culture.

Baseball is dropping closer to the second tier where hockey, soccer, and other sports with regional popularity exist. The longer the lockout continues, the wider that gap will grow.

For fans of the Red Sox, Yankees, Dodgers, and other popular teams, it's hard to notice. Games routinely sell out, payrolls are high, and the local television ratings flourish. But it's a constant struggle in many markets. Baseball doesn't work in Florida. The Rays and Marlins have abysmal attendance to a point where Tampa Bay hatched a plan to play half its home games in Montreal. (The other owners rejected it.)

Baseball really is dying in Baltimore and Pittsburgh, the two latest teams trying to lose their way to the top by accumulating high draft picks.

In Atlanta, Cincinnati, Kansas City, Seattle, and Toronto, the local MLS franchises draw big crowds and command nearly equal amounts of attention.

Even the flagship teams are experiencing a new reality. There were once 10 media outlets that covered the Red Sox on the road. Only three regularly did last season and one of them was MLB.com.

There were three times as many reporters from the Boston area who covered the Patriots' joint practice sessions and exhibition game with the Eagles in Philadelphia last August as there were in New York at the same time where the Sox played the Yankees in a weekend series.

Three times as many for practices and an exhibition game.

Then there are the aesthetics. Baseball's devotion to data has led to a game that moves at a plodding pace with increasingly less action.

Smart executives have done their job well, mining the numbers to create small advantages that could win a game. That's their job, to win.

But if winning is a product of reducing the game to a series of strikeouts, walks, and ground outs into a shift with an occasional home run, who do you expect to watch? Or to want to play?

Game 3 of the World Series, a 2-0 victory for the Braves against the Astros, lasted 3 hours, 24 minutes, and 11 pitchers were used. There were 68 plate appearances and 25 of them ended with a walk or a strikeout.

That improving the game as an entertainment product hasn't been part of the current labor negotiations is difficult to understand. Any financial gains the players or owners make now won't matter if baseball is a niche sport in 10 years.

The pandemic provided a laboratory for what will draw viewers. There are more streaming services available with increasingly better content. First-run films sometimes show up in your living room right away. European soccer matches, which always end in less than two hours and have no commercials, are growing in popularity.

People came back to baseball before because where else were they going? Now baseball has more competition than ever.

It's also notable that as part of the CBA talks, the owners have proposed having the ability to cut the number of minor leaguers per organization from 180 to 150 as soon as 2023. The owners also have cut the draft from 40 rounds to 20, and limited signing bonus payments.

To what degree fewer — and less lucrative — opportunities to play professional baseball will have on the amateur levels won't be known for years. But the effect certainly won't be positive.

Still, baseball will survive because it always does.

MLB has canceled spring training games through March 4, although there are plans for the sides to meet every day starting Monday in hopes of reaching a deal. Several owners will be personally involved and that could be what finally breaks the impasse.

There will be an agreement eventually and most of the same fans who are angry now will watch the games when they do.

But how long will that continue if the real issues aren't solved?

BASEBALL'S GREATEST THREAT ISN'T THE LOCKOUT

The sport's place in popular culture and the entertainment landscape is in danger not because of its economic structure, but because of how it is played.

Tom Verducci in Sports Illustrated

What will Major League Baseball look like over the next five years? That is one of the major challenges for players and owners as they negotiate a collective bargaining agreement. A CBA is not just a snapshot in time but also an assessment of the future.

Expectations of rising revenues—and how to split them—traditionally have been at the heart of CBA talks. [These talks are no different](#). But the greatest threat to the health of the sport is not

even being discussed as players and owners [meet this week in Jupiter, Fla.](#), with a Monday deadline to save Opening Day.

It is not money. It is the product.

Baseball's place in popular culture and the entertainment landscape is [threatened by how it is played](#), not its economic structure. In a steady decline that largely goes unchecked, [baseball gives fans less action over more time](#).

In the expired CBA, which was signed in 2016, the players agreed to increases in the Competitive Balance Tax and minimum salary of 3.2% and 5.4%, respectively. This time around they are asking for bumps of 16.7% and 35.8%.

What happened? The players are now fighting to recover from a system they didn't see coming in 2016: [an analytics-driven, risk-averse, youth-leaning game](#) that is built on [keeping the ball out of play](#). Their beef should be framed less against "greedy owners" and more against the front-office efficiency experts who over the length of this CBA usurped from field personnel the power to determine how baseball is played.

When Rob Manfred was named commissioner in 2015, he declared himself "a fan of the pitch clock" and put pace of play near the top of his agenda.

When the last CBA was signed, MLBPA executive director Tony Clark admitted the two sides never discussed pace of play during negotiations. "I anticipate there being dialogue," he said. Five years passed and whatever little dialogue there was led to nothing.

MLB wanted to introduce the topic into these labor discussions last July. An MLB source familiar with the talks said the owners offered to present to the union its findings from minor-league pace of play initiatives, to form a joint committee with the players to study the issue and to begin dialogue. The players "rejected it out of hand," the source said.

However, a union source said the players later asked multiple times for owners to bring on-field issues into the current CBA talks. The owners did not, the first source said, because the players did not signal unanimity on the issue in July, leading owners to fear further complicating negotiations already bogged down by a multitude of economic issues.

Slight progress was reported in the labor talks Monday. "It felt like actual bargaining," one source said. Owners added another \$5 million to their pre-arbitration bonus pool (now at \$20 million) and bumped the size of their draft lottery system from three teams to four. In another new wrinkle, owners proposed that any high-revenue team that pays into the revenue-sharing system cannot take part in the lottery for a second consecutive year—which would mean picking no higher than fifth even if that high-revenue team finishes with one of the four worst records again.

But like most proposals, those represented incremental steps. The two sides are likely to continue such shadow boxing until the end of this week when a "soft deadline" of Monday

injects the most urgency yet. Every day past Monday without an agreement likely takes games off the regular-season calendar.

The game has never been slower. It takes, on average, three hours and 11 minutes, a record, to play a game—with fewer balls in play, fewer hits, more shifts and [more pitching changes](#).

These trends can be reduced to one statistic that should worry both sides: Just since the past CBA was signed, the average wait to see a ball put in play increased from three minutes, 40 seconds to 4:07. That's 13% more dead time. (Over 25 years dead time is up 29%.) Baseball turned over its raison d'être to efficiency experts.

"When you base the game on probability and efficiency," says one veteran club executive, "it comes at the cost of entertainment value. And that's what we've done to the game."

In the blink of the last CBA, efficiency drained from the game almost 3,000 hits, more than 7,000 balls in play and much of the beauty of the triple, the stolen base and the pitchers' duel—while adding more than 1,000 pitching changes and 3,000 strikeouts. The traditional equilibrium of the game flipped. A CBA that began with 2,111 more hits than strikeouts ended with 2,661 more strikeouts than hits. Active yielded to passive.

Players should care because it is about more than aesthetics. It is also about jobs and pay. Analytics conspired against older players, left-handed pull hitters, veteran bench players, pitchers with options and speed players without power.

Under the last CBA, analytical efficiency:

- Built a game that pivots on home runs because playing base by base is too difficult with how pitching and [defenses evolved](#).

Only three players stole 100 bases and hit fewer than 35 home runs over the past CBA (Dee Strange-Gordon, Billy Hamilton and Mallex Smith, none of whom are on a 40-man roster). Ten years ago in a similar five-year window, there were 11. Thirty years ago, there were 19. Forty years ago, there were 25.

- Valued future wins over current wins in some scenarios. Teams in "rebuild" mode have no interest in adding even mid-level established players. They follow the "winning" formula of the Cubs and Astros, who checked out for a five-year span in which they were the two worst teams in baseball (2010–14), then won the World Series in '16 and '17.

- Created a [gig economy that added 167 pitchers to the majors](#) and yet somehow reduced overall pay to players to its lowest level since 2015.

- Increased by almost 50% the number of pitchers who can throw 100 mph.

- Cut by 22% the playing time for hitters age 31 and older.

“Everybody got into the aging curve,” the executive said. “There was a wholesale shift toward younger players. Far fewer teams are buying in to the idea that older free agents are worth it. That’s partly because the young players are far better developed. The quality of programs is exceptional—not just college programs, but travel teams and third-party independent entrepreneurs. They’re doing cutting-edge stuff. Now players at 21, 22 and 23 are just more advanced. The development process is just so much shorter than it used to be.”

Someday there will be an agreement. Much energy will be spent on breaking down the [minimum salary](#), [luxury tax rates](#), [bonus pools](#) and such. But here are the numbers that tell you where the game is going: how much the game has changed since the last CBA was signed—nearly all of it on the side of less exciting.

What’s Up

	2016	2021	Difference	% Increase
Pitches w/Defensive Shifts	97,451	219,446	+121,995	125.2%
100-mph Pitchers	39	57	+18	46.2%
5+ Pitching Changes*	1,430	1,867	+437	30.6%
Pitchers	742	909	+167	22.5%
All Players Used	1,247	1,373	+126	10.1%
Pitching Changes	15,305	16,687	+1,382	9.0%
Strikeouts	38,982	42,145	+3,163	8.1%
Three True Outcomes	59,680	63,883	+4,203	7.0%
Home Runs	5,610	5,944	+334	6.0%

**Per team, games 9 innings or fewer*

What’s Down

	2016	2021	Difference	% Decrease
Triples	873	671	−202	23.1%
PA By Age 31+	53,671	41,655	−12,016	22.4%
Starting Pitcher Wins	1,628	1,346	−282	17.3%
Stolen Bases	2,537	2,213	−324	12.8%
Hits	42,276	39,484	−2,792	6.6%
Balls in Play	122,183	114,995	−7,188	5.9%
Batting Average	.255	.244	−.011	4.3%

Other sports move quickly to rebalance offense and defense in the name of entertainment. The NFL restricted defensive backs after New England cornerbacks stuffed receivers from getting off the line and into their routes. The NHL allowed two-line passes to mitigate the neutral zone trap.

The NBA this year outlawed the practice of shooters leaning into defenders for the sole purpose of drawing a foul, which disrupts game flow.

MLB does little to address aesthetics, in part because hitters and pitchers view the game differently. In Manfred's term as commissioner, even with pace of action on his to-do list, dead time has soared 17%. Owners and players can't get on the same page.

The use of defensive shifts is a good example of what happens when you let efficiency experts rule. What began as a competitive advantage by teams such as the 2008 Rays over time ceases being a competitive advantage because everybody is using it—including the Braves, a late adopter who won the World Series last year [after getting onboard in May](#). Instead, it becomes a nuisance that sucks hits out of the game. Pull-side ground-ball batting average dropped 20 points over the last CBA, from .213 to .193.

Baseball should have adopted a pitch timer and outlawed the shift years ago. Those two changes alone—even with the same three-true-outcome game—instantly would improve the pace and aesthetics of the game.

Owners and players have not agreed on any major issue over the past three years, unless you count COVID-19 safety protocols that were needed to get the 2020 season off the ground. These negotiations have been so contentious that we are headed toward an agreement that will be more of a ceasefire than a partnership.

And here is the hidden danger of what will follow [months of labor bickering](#) that has turned off fans: The two sides will put the same product on the field. Except for advertising patches on uniforms and the [DH in the NL](#), baseball will look the same. (The DH factor is vastly overrated. AL teams scored on average 23 more runs than NL teams last year; the equivalent of less than one run per week. Because of so many pitching changes and interleague play, NL pitchers took only 49% of plate appearances in the No. 9 spot.)

As part of a new CBA, owners and players are likely to form a committee to once again “study” how to improve pace of play. Good luck. Manfred should appoint to this group former players Derek Jeter, Chris Young and Raúl Ibáñez to join Theo Epstein, [the former Cubs president who has been assisting MLB in this regard](#), and Michael Hill, the senior VP of on-field operations. The voice of former players is especially important in talks with the union about on-field changes. If nothing gets done again, Manfred can implement changes for the 2023 season, which may be necessary but fosters more acrimony.

The reason these negotiations have turned nastier and longer from the previous three CBAs is because how players and front offices view competition diverged wildly in the past five years. Players see a world in which teams should compete as hard as they do: Give it your level best all the time. Never concede. Believe in yourself with a short-term focus. It is the Old World order.

Front offices have efficiency down to such a science they know too well their chances to compete for a playoff spot. They can be brutally realistic.

Consider this Rorschach test. In 2014, the White Sox were 73–89. They ranked eighth in runs and 13th in ERA in the AL. Outscored by 98 runs, they were the equivalent of a 71-win team. In short, they were not close to being a playoff team.

They responded that winter in Old World form, the way the players would advise. The White Sox spent \$132 million on seven free-agent veterans: Melky Cabrera, 30; David Robertson, 30; Emilio Bonifacio, 30; Zach Duke, 32; Geovany Soto, 32; Adam LaRoche, 35; and Brad Penny, 37.

The result? The 2015 White Sox improved by three wins. They finished 19 games out instead of 17 games out. Attendance improved by 1,296 fans per game, which still put them 13th among the 15 AL teams.

In the post–CBA New World, front offices look at the 2015 White Sox as foolish. They don’t see the wisdom of adding \$132 million worth of older players to a 71-win-equivalent team. Better, they believe, to fold in young players, especially because young players develop faster than they did back then. (The Twins, a 73-win, 71-equivalent-win team last year, have not signed a major league free agent this offseason.)

It is a clash of cultures. Front offices are motivated by efficiency. Players are motivated by competition. That’s not to say the motives don’t intersect. In fact, over the life of the past CBA, half of the top eight teams in baseball never carried a payroll in the top of half of spenders.

Best Record in MLB, 2017–21

	Winning Pct. (MLB Rank)	Payroll Rank by Years
Rays	.573 (4th)	28, 28, 30, 27, 26
Guardians	.566 (5th)	18, 16, 19, 23, 29
Brewers	.557 (7th)	29, 26, 16, 19, 21
Athletics	.552 (8th)	27, 30, 25, 21, 24

Efficiency works. How are the Rays not considered successful? They do the most with the least; they have won two straight division titles and have won more pennants than the Yankees over the past 18 years. [They are masters of efficiency](#). During the last CBA, they never had an age 31+ player hit 25 home runs; they allowed just four pitchers to throw enough innings to qualify for the ERA title and they used 97 pitchers.

But that’s not enough for the players. As reliever Andrew Miller told ESPN, “The Rays have won, but we’re not necessarily happy with the way that they have always operated. They are large recipients of revenue sharing and the way they use that money, is that best for baseball? This is what we debate.”

If the players want more teams to be the 2015 White Sox, that’s not happening. Front offices are too smart. The information is too good. The good news is that neither side is arguing there is not enough money to go around. Baseball is healthy. The root of the argument is in distribution—

especially about rewarding young stars, who get caught between caps on draft bonuses and data-based bias against older players.

What threatens the continued flow of money, however, is not being discussed this week in Jupiter. For baseball to thrive over these next five years, it must look different. Faster. More active. Less passive. And that is why when this CBA fight ends, the next fight will be even bigger. It will be a fight for the future of the game.

Our recent piece on Bill White generated several emails. Here is my favorite:

Always liked Bill White. After being traded to Phillies, his Summer/Fall residence in Phila was the Marriot Hotel where I worked in the Hotels' maintenance dept during summer breaks from school. Always kept tabs on the whereabouts of his Cadillac with Missouri plates to see if he was at the hotel during my day shift. Very approachable as I remember. In addition to White, the Cardinals sent Dick Groat and Bob Uecker(!) to the Phillies primarily for Alex Johnson who they envisioned as the next superstar. Like Dick Allen, Johnson was an incredible hitter, but a real "head case". He would wear out his welcome with any club regardless of his incredible talent as the following explains--

A CAUTIONARY TALE – 1970 AL BATTING CHAMP ALEX JOHNSON

By Mark Armour, published by the Society for American Baseball Research

In an era when baseball players, collectively and individually, began to clash with management as never before, it is likely that no one clashed more than Alex Johnson. Though he was blessed with much-coveted talent, teams that employed him tired of him fairly quickly. The winner of a batting title, his emotional disability was at the center of one of the landmark cases in the early days of the players' union.

Alexander Johnson was born December 7, 1942, in Helena, Arkansas, and moved to Detroit as a small boy. Alex grew up with his parents, two brothers, and two sisters. His father, Arthur Johnson, Sr., worked in an auto plant, and later started his own truck repair and leasing company, doing a lot of work for the city's public-school system. Ron Johnson, five years younger than Alex, was an All-American football halfback for Michigan and an All-Pro for the New York Giants.

Alex played football and baseball on the Detroit sandlots, along with future major leaguers Bill Freehan, Dennis Ribant and Willie Horton. At Northwestern High School, Alex was an offensive lineman, and earned a football scholarship to Michigan State University. A prep teammate of Horton's, Johnson starred in baseball as well, and chose that sport because, as he put it, "I

figured I could do better quicker in baseball.” Tony Lucadello, a scout for the Phillies, signed him in the fall of 1961.

Johnson sped through the minor leagues, starring in three venues along the way. He began his apprenticeship in 1962 playing for Miami in the Class D Florida State League, hitting .313 to win the league batting title and leading the circuit with 19 outfield assists. The next year he starred for Magic Valley (Twins Falls, Idaho) of the Class A Pioneer League. He was voted the league’s MVP by hitting 35 home runs with 128 RBIs (both league-leading totals) to go along with a .329 batting average. In 1964 Johnson was hitting .316 with 21 home runs for Triple-A Little Rock when Philadelphia recalled him in late July. He was just 21.

By this time Johnson had developed a reputation for his defensive struggles (in spring training the Phillies’ players had kidded him by calling him “Iron Hands”) and it is likely his defense kept him from getting promoted earlier. The first-place Phillies, who had been vulnerable to left-handed pitching, platooned Johnson with Wes Covington in left field. Nicknamed Bull for his powerful physique, Johnson hit close to .400 for his first six weeks, before cooling off to .303 as Philadelphia ultimately folded in late September.

Johnson was modest about his early success: “I’ve been lucky. I’ve been hitting mostly against left-handers and you don’t see many of those in the minors.” About his problems in the outfield, Alex allowed, “I see a fly ball coming and I hear all those people yelling, and I get a little tense. When you get tense ... it’s easy to drop a fly ball.”

After the season Johnson played ball in Puerto Rico, which he later claimed caused him to wear down late in the 1965 season. He platooned again with Covington, and lost his .300 batting average over the last weekend of the season, settling for .294. As Johnson continued to hit, he began to play against an occasional right-hander, so that he ended up garnering 262 at-bats in 97 games. His defense improved enough that manager Gene Mauch played him in center field nine times. However, Mauch had also grown increasingly frustrated by Johnson’s perceived lack of effort and poor attitude.

In October 1965 the Phillies dealt Johnson, pitcher Art Mahaffey, and catcher Pat Corrales to the St. Louis Cardinals for first baseman Bill White, shortstop Dick Groat, and catcher Bob Uecker. Since White and Groat were both regular players for a team only a year removed from a World Series title, and since both Mahaffey and Corrales were marginal players, this swap was an indication of how highly regarded Alex Johnson was. The Cardinals compared this deal to the one they made in 1964 that had landed Lou Brock, envisioning Johnson on the verge of stardom. He had certainly impressed the Redbirds in 1965, hitting .424 against them. Manager Red Schoendienst vowed to play him every day. General manager Bob Howsam was all praise: “He has all the pluses to be an outstanding hitter. He can run, throw, and hit for both power and average. He is also powerfully built. He has a bright future ahead of him.”

To make room for Johnson, Schoendienst moved Brock to right field, and installed Johnson as the team’s new cleanup hitter. Unfortunately for the Cardinals, Johnson did not live up to these

lofty expectations. He began the season with 16 hits, only three for extra bases, in 86 at-bats. In May Johnson was demoted to the team's Tulsa farm club in the Triple-A Pacific Coast League, where he remained for the rest of the season.

At Tulsa, manager Charlie Metro said, he "just put Alex in the starting lineup and told him he would stay there." Johnson hit .355 with 14 home runs in 80 games. Chief Bender, the Cardinals' farm director, was impressed: "(Johnson has) real good baserunning instincts and terrific speed. He's a pretty good fielder now, too. In fact he did a pretty good job in center field at Tulsa," Bender said. Johnson appeared to be back on track.

Back in St. Louis, Johnson began 1967 in a platoon with newly acquired Roger Maris in right field. He started the season in a slump again — 3-for-29, a .103 clip — and by the end of the season (.223 with one home run in 175 at-bats) was playing little. He did not get off the bench in the 1967 World Series, in which the Cardinals defeated the Boston Red Sox. Not only was Johnson's production inadequate, but he had once again worn out his welcome.

Dick Sisler, the Cardinals' batting coach, was at the end of his rope: "He easily could have become a great Cardinal player, but he showed no interest, even at clubhouse meetings. He doesn't seem to want to improve. He has tremendous speed, but he is not a good baserunner. We tried everything to bring out his potential. I was disappointed in not being able to get through to him." Johnson would ignore teammates who motioned to him to shift his position in the outfield. He did not run out groundballs. He supposedly walked out during the clubhouse meeting to divide World Series shares. Late in the season he had a brief tussle with Bobby Tolan, a young teammate.

In January 1968 the Cardinals decided they had had enough, and dealt Johnson to the Cincinnati Reds for part-time outfielder Dick Simpson, just two years after Johnson had landed former All-Stars Bill White and Dick Groat. Schoendienst was ready to move on: "Alex just might put everything together one of these days and become quite a ballplayer." Johnson was happy for the change, saying of the Cardinals: "We disagreed on the way I should hit." When asked how the team wanted him to change, Johnson admitted, "You'll have to ask them. I didn't pay any attention to what they told me."

Johnson flourished with the Reds and manager Dave Bristol. Though he still did not smile or talk much, he hit .312 (fourth in the league), though with little power (two home runs) or plate discipline (26 walks spread over 634 plate appearances). *The Sporting News* named him its Comeback Player of the Year. Bristol had only glowing reports about his new left fielder: "All I can say is that I've found him to be one of the most cooperative players on the club. When I'm talking in a clubhouse meeting, there's Alex looking me straight in the eyes. On the field, you never see him sitting down."

Most baseball people figured that Alex just needed to be left alone. If you told him to hit a certain way, or field a certain way, he might ignore you or even do the reverse. If you said nothing, he might just figure it out himself. If his attitude was criticized, he retreated further.

Bristol left him alone. When asked by a writer how Bristol differed from his previous managers, Johnson responded, "Basically, all those blankety-blanks are the same." Or words to that effect.

Gene Mauch, one of the "blankety-blanks," was always convinced of Johnson's abilities: "There's nothing Johnson cannot do in a baseball uniform that isn't major league. If a manager can find a way to do it, he's got a great player." Also, "I told Alex one day that he should be making \$40,000. And you know what he told me? He said, 'Skip, I don't need that much money.' "

Johnson was a fearsome-looking hitter. He was a big man (6 feet, 205 pounds) who looked larger than he was because he was muscular, stood right over the plate, and glared out at the pitcher. His bat speed was legendary. While hitting against a pitching machine, Johnson often stood 20 or 30 feet in front of the plate and hit line drives as his teammates watched in awe. Mauch believed he was the fastest right-handed hitter in baseball from home to first. In the field, he was a speedy outfielder with a powerful throwing arm.

In 1969 Johnson finally began to hit with the power long predicted for him, blasting 17 home runs while hitting .315. His teammates were not only impressed with his strength, but also with his incredibly calm demeanor no matter how he was hitting. Pete Rose commented, "You can almost bet Alex will never have ulcers. Nothing ever worries him. If he goes hitless a couple of times, he just changes bats and keeps swinging." In fact, he was known to change bats constantly, wielding a club as large as 43 ounces.

On November 25, 1969, the Reds dealt Johnson, infielder Chico Ruiz, and pitcher Mel Queen to the California Angels for pitchers Jim McGlothlin, Pedro Borbon, and Vern Geishert. General manager Howsam was reluctant to give up Johnson, but felt that his team had a surplus of hitting, especially right-handed hitting, and needed help on the mound. In the event, McGlothlin won 14 games, rookies Bernie Carbo and Hal McRae split Johnson's old job in left field, and the Reds won 102 games.

The Angels were delighted to acquire Johnson, as the 1969 team had finished dead last in the league in runs. Lefty Phillips, the Angels' manager, beamed, "We have taken the first step in the right direction to strengthen our hitting, and I believe we made a fine deal." General manager Dick Walsh was "elated to get a hitter of Johnson's caliber." They would both change their tune soon enough.

In 1970 Johnson was all the Angels could have hoped for offensively, as he hit .329 to win the American League batting championship. He captured the title by getting two hits on the last day of the season to pass Red Sox star Carl Yastrzemski, .3289 to .3286. Johnson was removed from the game right after he got the hit that put him in front – an event that caused some controversy, especially in Boston. Nonetheless, his 202 hits were a franchise record until Darin Erstad topped it in 2000, and his batting title remains unique in team history.

Unfortunately, hitting heroics were not the whole story for Johnson in 1970, as he was fined several times for failing to run out groundballs and for lazy play in the outfield. In September Phillips commented, "It's as if he doesn't consider it a hit unless the ball reaches the outfield. It's as if he has zones marked off in his mind, and unless the ball goes into one of these zones, he's just not going to run hard to first base."

As if that weren't enough, Johnson also repeatedly screamed obscenities at teammates and media members who tried to speak with him. Writers, having long given up dealing with Johnson, sent a letter to Walsh asking that the slugger be kept away from them so that they could interview his teammates. Johnson's wife reportedly apologized to the other players' wives for the way Johnson was treating their husbands.

When asked to compare Johnson with Richie Allen, the controversial NL star of the time, Phillips scoffed: "Once you get Richie Allen on the field, your problems are over. When Johnson gets to the field, your problems are just beginning." Phillips tried to discipline him further, but Walsh, who liked Johnson's bat and feared exacerbating the team's anti-black reputation, failed to back him up.

Perhaps the most frustrating thing with Johnson was that he seemed utterly unaffected by disciplinary actions. The players had a "kangaroo court," which held mock trials to fine a player for offenses like not wearing a hat properly or being late for batting practice. Johnson, not wanting to be bothered with such nonsense, simply wrote a check for \$500 and asked that it be applied to future abuses. One Angel player commented that "Alex wouldn't be good for us if he was hitting .400." Nevertheless, Phillips believed that Johnson had begun to lighten up in the final weeks of the season and hoped the batting title, and its accompanying acclaim, would help Johnson see that the world was not all aligned against him.

The 1970 Angels finished 86-76, an improvement of 15 wins from the year before. After the season the Angels made several big trades and landed outfielder Tony Conigliaro, who had driven in 116 runs for the Red Sox; Ken Berry, a fine defensive center fielder; and Jim Maloney, one of the premier pitchers in the National League over the previous several years. The national media were predicting big things for the 1971 team.

Team harmony began unraveling in spring training. In a March 20 exhibition game, Johnson spent a hot day in left field by moving with the shadow of a light tower rather than assuming his proper defensive position. When he failed to run out a groundball in the first inning the next day, Phillips removed him from the game. Since it was only an exhibition game, the Angels hoped it was an isolated incident. Johnson was also unconcerned, reasoning, "I don't really like to play in the spring-training games. ... I go down the batting cage because that's the only way I can get the type of batting practice that I want."

Johnson began the season hitting well, and was named the team's player of the month for April. This proved an illusion. Over the next several weeks, he was fined every few days, a total of 29 times by late June, and was benched five separate times. Phillips later said that he could

have fined Johnson every day, but he began to look the other way to avoid confrontations. Phillips told the press: "He did things differently last year. He gave about 65 percent. Now it's down to about 40 percent."

Johnson was completely unconnected with the rest of the team; he sat alone on the bench, neither shaking hands with nor speaking to his teammates. Outfielder Billy Cowan claimed: "We've had meetings, we've pleaded with him. We've asked if it's anything we've done. He doesn't say anything." The contradiction with his nature outside of the ballpark was bizarre. As team owner Gene Autry said, "Off the field, you can not find a nicer guy. He doesn't drink, smoke, or carouse at night. It just seems that when he gets into uniform he is a different guy entirely."

In a game in Chicago, Johnson allowed a blooper to fall in front of him in left field. When asked about it later, Alex said, "The average guy in the league couldn't have had it. Me, I could have – if the circumstances had been right. I have nothing to defend myself against." When asked repeatedly to offer any sort of excuse for his attitude, he demurred, once saying, "I would have to cut some people. I don't want to do that. Baseball is a team game."

Johnson was benched on May 15 for failing to hustle, and again on May 21. Two days later, he jogged after a fly ball that landed in front of him, and then did not run out a groundball. Exasperated, Phillips finally called a clubhouse meeting without Johnson and told the team that Johnson would never play for the Angels again as long as Phillips was manager. The players applauded. Veteran pitcher Eddie Fisher told the press: "I won't make excuses or protect him any more. ... The whole thing just leaves you disgusted."

In the meantime, general manager Walsh talked to Johnson, defended him to reporters, and asked Phillips to put him back in the lineup. Johnson was reinstated on May 26. Jim Fregosi later commented: "Lefty gained one player and lost the other 24 on that day." After playing well over the next week, on June 4 Johnson failed to run out a groundball and was benched for four more days.

The handling of Johnson severely undermined the morale of the team. During one heated exchange, Ken Berry charged after Johnson in the clubhouse. In another, Clyde Wright raised a stool at him and had to be held back by his teammates. Johnson let it be known he was willing to fight anyone who wanted a piece of him.

After another benching a few weeks later, Johnson blamed the team for his attitude: "The club needs mental discipline and that involves a lot of things, but that's all I am going to tell you about it." When asked specifically about his pregame nonchalance, he defended himself: "Sometimes I take fielding practice instead of standing around the batting cage waiting to hit. Sometimes I have other things to do before the game, like working on my glove." Responding to the charge that he didn't hustle: "A person is supposed to run out groundballs. If I don't, I just don't."

Chico Ruiz, a popular utility infielder for the Angels, had been great friends with Johnson while they were teammates in Cincinnati, and Ruiz was the godfather to Johnson's daughter. At some point during the previous 12 months, Johnson had begun to torment and abuse Ruiz, screaming vile profanities at him whenever they crossed paths. Ruiz and his teammates claimed complete ignorance as to what had caused the rift. Oddly, Dick Walsh thought Ruiz was good for Johnson: "If Ruiz were not there for him to kick around, I don't know what he'd do."

On June 13 Johnson accused Ruiz of pulling a gun on him in the clubhouse during a game. (Both players had been used as pinch-hitters and removed from the contest.) According to Johnson, Ruiz had a gun in his locker and waved it threateningly. Ruiz denied the story and said he did not even own a gun. Nonetheless, a teammate was heard to comment, "If Chico did anything wrong, it was that he didn't pull the trigger." The next day, Walsh held a press conference to let everyone know that there was no evidence of a gun. The national media, already decidedly anti-Johnson, ridiculed him further.

In a rare interview, Johnson was blunt: "Hell, yes, I'm bitter. I've been bitter ever since I learned I was black. The society into which I was born and in which I grew up and in which I play ball today is antiblack." Johnson blamed all of his problems on the insensitivity of his teammates, the "hypocrisy" of Walsh and Phillips, and Ruiz, who was the "cause of the dissension. ... I never knew a man to be so determined in a negative way." When pressed to elaborate, he went no further. Johnson also claimed that he ran out groundballs the way he had his whole career. This may have been true.

Johnson also acknowledged the effect he had on his team: "The pitchers don't pitch well when I'm in there. ... When I'm playing, the spirit is down." On the other hand, he had "justifiable reasons for not being in the spirit of playing properly. There was an indifference on the whole team in working together. I felt the game of baseball wasn't being played properly – so my taste wasn't there."

When Johnson did not run out another groundball on June 24, Phillips benched him again. Finally, perhaps even mercifully, on the following day the Angels suspended Johnson indefinitely without pay for "failure to give his best efforts to the winning of games." Most of his teammates thought that the suspension was long overdue. Jim Fregosi claimed: "He was given every opportunity." Fred Koenig, a coach, was more direct: "I like Alex personally, but I despise him professionally."

Remarkably, no one connected with the team seemed to consider that Johnson might need help. Conigliaro came the closest, saying, "He's so hurt inside, it's terrifying." Dick Young, writing in the *New York Daily News* in late June, felt that Johnson was emotionally imbalanced, although Young stopped short of suggesting that he ought to be treated. In a fairly sympathetic column, Young was puzzled that Johnson could be "the most jovial, pleasant man you would care to meet" one day, and the next day "explode into plain nastiness. These are not moods, not in the accepted sense of normality. He is two people." Nonetheless, Young's advice was merely that Johnson right his own ship.

The Major League Baseball Players Association, led by Marvin Miller, filed a grievance on Johnson's behalf, seeking to overturn the suspension and the fines. Miller suggested that Johnson was emotionally disabled, and ought to have been treated like someone who broke his leg. When Johnson's 30-day suspension (the maximum length the Angels could dole out) was up, Commissioner Bowie Kuhn placed him on the restricted list, effectively suspending him for as long as Kuhn wanted.

The grievance was heard by Lewis Gill, an impartial arbitrator hired by the union and the commissioner's office. Gill found for Johnson, determining that he should have been placed on the disabled list rather than being suspended. Two psychiatrists examined Johnson, one each selected by the union and the Angels, and they agreed that Johnson had been emotionally disabled, and therefore not able to give his best efforts. They were both of the opinion that, with treatment, he would be able to resume his career. (Oddly, although Gill found that Johnson was owed back salary by the Angels, he ruled that Johnson would still have to pay all of his fines, totaling \$3,750.)

During his testimony at the hearing, Walsh admitted for the first time that Ruiz did wave a gun at Johnson back in June, feebly noting that it was not loaded. The general manager claimed that he withheld the information in the best interests of the team, and of Ruiz, who was not an American citizen and therefore could have had problems with immigration officials. Walsh's deceit, which included calling up Johnson's pregnant wife to tell her that her husband had become delusional, allowed the national media to ridicule his disturbed player for three months. Walsh also admitted in the hearing that he had told several Angels players that the players' union requested that they testify. This, too, was a lie.

Marvin Miller later wrote extensively of these events in his memoir *A Whole Different Ballgame*. Miller interviewed Johnson at length during his suspension, and believed that Johnson was obviously emotionally disabled. In Miller's view, Johnson had justifiable grievances (including racism) and was incapable of dealing with those grievances effectively. Miller did not hide his disdain for Dick Walsh. An enlightened baseball establishment, in Miller's view, would have dealt with Johnson much more humanely. Miller said he believed this case was a watershed for the union, as it showed the black players that their issues would be dealt with just as a white player's would be.

In early October 1971, Johnson was traded to the Cleveland Indians with catcher Jerry Moses for pitcher Alan Foster and outfielders Vada Pinson and Frank Baker. Gabe Paul, the Indians' general manager, acknowledged, "Every trade is a gamble and we know the risks involved in this one. But if we can win on it, we can win big."

On February 9, 1972, Chico Ruiz was killed in an automobile accident near San Diego. Alex Johnson was one of the few ballplayers to attend his funeral.

Johnson started off well for the Indians, but slumped dramatically in the second half to hit just .239 as the team's left fielder. Graig Nettles, Cleveland's third baseman, was not happy with his

teammate: "He tried the first half of the year, but it seemed halfway through the year he just quit. Toward the end of the year, he bunted about eight times in a row, no matter what the situation. It looked like he didn't have any pride in himself. ... Everyone was just kind of disgusted at the whole thing."

In March 1973 Johnson was traded again, this time to the Texas Rangers for pitchers Vince Colbert and Rich Hinton. Whitey Herzog, his new manager, was practical about the deal: "I don't promise anything with Johnson but what we want him to do is come in here and hit. If he does that, we figure we got a good deal. ... If he doesn't come in and shape up in a hurry, we'll release him."

Herzog later wrote that he liked and admired Johnson. He acknowledged that Johnson was a terrible outfielder, but the AL had adopted the designated hitter rule, allowing Johnson to DH in 116 of his career-high 158 games. He rebounded with a .287 average and 179 hits, a new franchise record for the team that had started in Washington in 1961.

In 1974, under manager Billy Martin, Johnson was the regular left fielder for much of the year, and hit .291, though with his typical mediocre power (just four home runs) and plate discipline (just 28 walks). By early August he was mainly sitting on the bench, and on September 9 he was sent on waivers to the New York Yankees. Martin was candid when asked about Johnson: "I like him personally and I like him as a player. We never had a cross word. But I do make one demand of my players and that's to run out all groundballs."

The Yankees were in first place at the time, and were looking for another bat as they tried to hold off the Orioles and Red Sox. In Johnson's first game, on September 10 in Boston, he hit a home run off Diego Segui in the 12th inning to beat the Red Sox and extend the Yankees' lead to two games. In the end, Johnson was just 6-for-28 for the Yankees, mainly as a pinch-hitter, as New York finished two games behind the Orioles.

The next season Johnson was back in New York, but was only a part-time player – 119 at-bats, mainly as a pinch-hitter or designated hitter – and hit just .261 with one home run. Late in the season the Yankees hired Billy Martin to be their manager, and soon thereafter placed Johnson on waivers. When asked about his relationship with Martin, Johnson was typically evasive: "You'll have to ask him. He was the one who waived me. I didn't waive him."

In the offseason, Johnson signed with his hometown Tigers, a move that everyone hoped would finally motivate the rapidly aging 33-year-old. Detroit general manager Jim Campbell, overseeing the worst team in baseball, felt his team had nothing to lose: "We're banking on the fact Alex is now playing in his home town. That was something I noticed about him anytime he came here to play – he'd always bear down." Johnson played in 125 games for the 1976 Tigers, 90 of them in left field, and hit a fairly hollow .268. The Tigers were an old team that was about to undergo a dramatic youth movement. Johnson was let go at the end of the season.

Johnson played a season for the Mexico City Reds of the Mexican League, hitting .321 in 54 games, before leaving baseball behind. By 1978 he was back in Detroit running his ailing father's truck repair and leasing company. When his father died in 1985, Alex took over the company.

Alex married Julia Augusta on February 2, 1962, when he was still in the minor leagues. They adopted Jennifer in 1969 and had Alex Jr. in 1972. Alex and Julia divorced after his career in baseball ended.

Dick Allen, a teammate of Johnson's in Philadelphia when they were both breaking into the major leagues, and another player given the reputation of being surly and uncommunicative, wrote of Johnson in his 1989 autobiography, *Crash*: "Why don't you hear his name today? I'll tell you why. Because he called everyone dickhead. To Alex Johnson, baseball was a whole world of dickheads. Teammates, managers, general managers, owners. ... Alex would say, 'How ya doin' dickhead?' Just like that. The front office types would take it personally. But then again, maybe Alex hit a nerve."

In 1998 *Sports Illustrated* sent Jeff Pearlman to check on Johnson and see how he was doing. Alex was still angry about his baseball career, and how his managers and teams had treated him. He was glad it was all behind him. "Do I enjoy my life? I enjoy not being on an airplane. I enjoy not having to face everything I did. I just want to help people with their vehicles. It's a nice normal life – the thing I've always wanted."

Postscript

Alex Johnson, 72, [died on February 28, 2015](#), in Detroit due to complications from cancer, according to the *Detroit News*.

A NERDY BASEBALL STAT IS GOING MAINSTREAM. THE WONKS AREN'T HAPPY

When the lockout ends, some players' pay might be partially determined by their WAR, raising questions from the websites that calculate it

Jared Diamond, Wall Street Journal

As the [labor dispute](#) between Major League Baseball team owners and players [drags on](#), the two sides are seeking help in settling things from an unlikely source: the data nerds who have marshaled the game's statistics revolution.

One idea for helping resolve [the ongoing lockout](#), which began more than two months ago, involves creating a performance-based bonus pool of money for young players who don't yet qualify for salary arbitration. The additional funds are meant to ensure that these players are

compensated more commensurately to their value on the field, one of the union's top priorities in these negotiations.

The concept currently on the table would partially tie payouts to a player's "wins above replacement." WAR, as it's known, is meant to distill a player's full value into one easily digestible number. It was devised independent of MLB by the generation of data obsessives who have made a career out of analyzing numbers in new ways to determine player usefulness.

WAR bursting into the mainstream is in some ways a remarkable victory for the wonks who have forever changed baseball. Once an esoteric stat limited to the fledgling analytics community in the nerdiest corners of the internet, WAR being used in this way is proof that it is now part of the fabric of the game.

But while the ascension of WAR might seem like validation, the people who compile the stat aren't so sure about the plan—especially if the data from their websites will be used as a component of player pay. It's yet another complication to the work stoppage that has already delayed spring training and now threatens to affect opening day on March 31.

"It's great that people understand that this is something that's valuable and useful, but if they understood the limitations of it they wouldn't be coming up with this kind of idea," said Harry Pavlidis, the director of research and development at Baseball Prospectus.

WAR is different from stats like batting average and on-base percentage in that there isn't an agreed-upon way to calculate the metric, and the methodology behind it is frequently tweaked.

As a result, WAR has become a frequent point of contention throughout baseball's data era. Websites like Baseball-Reference and FanGraphs each have their own version of it, and they sometimes produce wildly different results.

Last year, for instance, Milwaukee Brewers ace Corbin Burnes had the second-highest FanGraphs WAR in the major leagues at 7.6, only trailing the Los Angeles Angels' two-way phenom, Shohei Ohtani. On Baseball-Reference, Burnes was tied for 23rd at 5.7.

The Major League Baseball Players' Association, people familiar with the matter said, has proposed using a composite of FanGraphs and Baseball-Reference's publicly available WAR figures to help determine who would qualify for payouts from the bonus pool.

When the news leaked last month, the response from the analytics community was swift. Baseball-Reference president Sean Forman tweeted he was "not really interested" in his company's WAR being part of player compensation. Meg Rowley, FanGraphs' managing editor, posted, "Using a public-facing value metric for player compensation isn't the best idea." Russell Carleton of Baseball Prospectus, another site with a version of WAR, called it a "terrible idea."

"If MLB and the union were to say, 'Yeah, we're going to take the values off the public sites and use them,' that would be problematic," said David Appelman, FanGraphs' founder. "That puts a lot of pressure on us."

The MLBPA isn't married to that idea. More recently, the union updated its proposal to say that the parties would further discuss the possibility of forming a committee to jointly develop the WAR calculation for the bonus pool.

The people at FanGraphs and Baseball-Reference would much prefer that the sides devise their own WAR rather than using theirs. There are several reasons for the reluctance, most of which revolving around the experimental and imprecise nature of WAR.

As researchers uncover better understandings of how to evaluate player performance, WAR is refined to reflect those breakthroughs. For example, how to weigh and evaluate defense is constantly evolving. The same goes for measuring the impact of issues such as specific ballparks, catchers' "framing" of pitches and the increased reliance on relief pitchers versus traditional starters, among many other areas of the game.

Sometimes, WAR is adjusted retroactively to reflect those changes, raising obvious questions: What happens, for instance, if a player's WAR falls short of qualifying for a bonus payment, only for it to increase a year later?

"I would shudder to think, are we going to get sued by somebody for something because of that, if we're literally costing somebody a million dollars by making that change?" Forman said in an interview. "I can imagine circumstances where people get pretty angry with us."

At this point, most in baseball say WAR is the best publicly available metric to judge a player's full body of work. Still, it isn't perfect, especially when used at a granular level. For example, Atlanta Braves shortstop Dansby Swanson compiled 3.2 WAR on FanGraphs last year. Seattle Mariners shortstop J.P. Crawford had 3.1. Not even the biggest proponents of WAR would argue that Swanson undoubtedly had a better season than Crawford.

In a potential bonus pool situation, however, that tiny difference in WAR could matter significantly.

"I guess from a business standpoint I should just take this as validation that WAR is a very good metric that people in Major League Baseball understand as having significant value," Forman said.

Inside baseball, WAR has long been accepted. Teams have their own versions that they use to determine how much money to offer free agents. WAR has become a crucial part of arbitration hearings. Now it is on the verge of graduating to something more.

There is a long way to go before the bonus pool actually becomes part of the collective bargaining agreement. The union has proposed putting \$115 million into the pool. The league on Monday upped its offer to \$20 million from \$15 million. It's one of many signs that demonstrate how far apart the sides still are as they try to end the work stoppage in time to still stage a full season.

The sides are currently meeting in Jupiter, Fla., in an attempt to reach an agreement. MLB has told the union that a deal must be done by the end of the month for opening day to happen on time.

FROM MLB.COM (THEY NEED SOMETHING TO WRITE ABOUT) FUN WALK THROUGH BALL PARKS

No professional sport offers a greater variety of venues than baseball. From the Green Monster in Boston to the waterfront views in San Francisco to the railway in Houston, each Major League Baseball stadium has its share of special characteristics that make it a unique backdrop for the game.

Here's a guide to the 30 active MLB parks, listed from oldest to newest based on the date of each park's first regular season game. (Date of the park's first homer specified if it didn't happen the same day as the first game.)

Fenway Park -- Boston Red Sox

First game: April 20, 1912

First HR: Hugh Bradley; April 26, 1912

All-time HR leader: Ted Williams, 248

The Red Sox played at the Huntington Avenue Grounds from 1901-11 before moving into Fenway Park, which opened just days after the sinking of the Titanic. The park features a 37-foot, 2-inch high left-field wall known as the Green Monster, as well as other quirks such as [Pesky's Pole](#) in right field and The Triangle in center. Fenway Park has played host to 11 World Series, with the Red Sox winning six of them and the Boston Braves winning one. (The Braves played at Fenway Park in the 1914 World Series because it had a larger capacity than their regular home park, the South End Grounds.)

Wrigley Field -- Chicago Cubs

First game: April 23, 1914

First HR: Art Wilson

All-time HR leader: Sammy Sosa, 293

Known for its ivy-covered brick outfield walls and often referred to as "The Friendly Confines," Wrigley Field initially opened in 1914 as Weeghman Park, the home of the Chicago Whales/Federals of the short-lived Federal League. The Cubs moved into the park in the 1916 season, and it took on its current name in 1927, six years after William Wrigley Jr. became the team's majority owner. In 1988, Wrigley Field became the last Major League park to have lights installed for night games. It was designated a [National Historic Landmark](#) in 2020.

Dodger Stadium -- Los Angeles Dodgers

First game: April 10, 1962

First HR: Wally Post

All-time HR leader: Eric Karros, 130

After moving from Brooklyn to Los Angeles in 1959, the Dodgers played three seasons at the Los Angeles Coliseum while waiting for their new park to be built. In their first season at Dodger Stadium, the team set an MLB attendance record of 2,755,184 fans, topping the previous record of 2,620,627 set by Cleveland in 1948. The Dodgers improved upon their mark in 1977, 1978 and 1982 and held the record until the Blue Jays broke it in 1990.

Angel Stadium -- Los Angeles Angels

First game: April 19, 1966

First HR: Rick Reichardt

All-time HR leader: Tim Salmon, 160

Located in Anaheim, The Big A has been the Angels' home since the franchise's sixth season in 1966. The Halos played their home games at Los Angeles' Wrigley Field in their 1961 inaugural season, then rented Dodger Stadium from 1962-65. Originally a baseball-only venue, Angel Stadium was later remodeled to accommodate the NFL's Los Angeles Rams, who moved into the park in 1980. The newly configured stadium was fully enclosed. The Rams moved to St. Louis after the 1994 football season, and after the Walt Disney Company took control of the Angels several years later, [Angel Stadium was renovated again](#). The section behind the outfield wall was demolished, giving fans a restored view of the local mountain ranges and the 57 freeway, and a distinctive rock fountain was added in left-center field.

Oakland Coliseum -- Oakland Athletics

First game: April 17, 1968

First HR: Boog Powell

All-time HR leader: Mark McGwire, 166

In 1968, the Athletics relocated from Kansas City to Oakland and began playing at the Coliseum, then the home of the NFL's Raiders, who shared the stadium with the A's until leaving for Los Angeles in 1982. In order to bring them back, the city of Oakland made a deal with the Raiders in 1995, agreeing to increase the capacity of the Coliseum via a new section. Known colloquially as Mount Davis after late Raiders owner Al Davis, the section obstructs the view of the Oakland Hills, which were previously visible behind the outfield grandstands during A's games. The Raiders have since moved on to Las Vegas, but the A's remain at the Coliseum, which has more foul territory than any other MLB stadium due to its origins as a multi-purpose facility.

Kauffman Stadium -- Kansas City Royals

First game: April 10, 1973

First HR: John Mayberry

All-time HR leader: George Brett, 136

Although it was constructed during an era when multi-purpose “cookie-cutter” stadiums were en vogue, Kauffman Stadium (originally Royals Stadium) is a baseball-only venue. The park’s “Crown Vision” video board, which was added during the extensive renovations the park underwent from 2007-09, is one of the largest of its kind in Major League Baseball.

Rogers Centre -- Toronto Blue Jays

First game: June 5, 1989

First HR: Fred McGriff

All-time HR leader: Carlos Delgado, 175

Rogers Centre (originally known as SkyDome) opened in 1989, becoming the world's first stadium with a fully retractable roof. A prominent part of the Toronto skyline, the ballpark includes a hotel with 70 rooms overlooking the field and provides a clear view of the iconic CN Tower when the roof is open. The Blue Jays set a Major League Baseball attendance record when they drew 3,885,284 fans in 1990, and they became the first MLB team to draw 4 million spectators the following season.

Guaranteed Rate Field -- Chicago White Sox

First game: April 18, 1991

First HR: Cecil Fielder

All-time HR leader: Frank Thomas, 263

Succeeding the original Comiskey Park, home of the White Sox from 1910-90, Guaranteed Rate Field (known as Comiskey Park from 1991-2003 and U.S. Cellular Field from 2003-2016) was the last MLB park built before the “retro-classic” design wave took over. In response to fan criticism, the park underwent significant renovations beginning in 2001.

Oriole Park at Camden Yards -- Baltimore Orioles

First game: April 6, 1992

First HR: Paul Sorrento; April 8, 1992

All-time HR leader: Adam Jones, 146

Credited with starting the trend of retro-classic ballparks that became popular around the Majors in the 1990s and early 2000s, Oriole Park at Camden Yards is located within walking distance of Baltimore’s Inner Harbor. The former B&O Warehouse was incorporated into the architecture of the stadium, adding to Oriole Park’s unique charm. An eight-story brick building constructed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the warehouse looms over the right-field wall. No player has hit the building on the fly with a home run during a game, though Ken Griffey Jr. famously did so in the 1993 Home Run Derby.

Progressive Field -- Cleveland Guardians

First game: April 4, 1994

First HR: Eric Anthony

All-time HR leader: Jim Thome, 190

The Cleveland baseball franchise moved from Cleveland Stadium to Progressive Field (originally Jacobs Field) after the 1993 season. The team set a then-MLB record (since broken by the Red Sox) when it sold out 455 straight home games from 1995-2001, and No. 455 was subsequently retired in honor of the streak. Progressive Field features distinctive toothbrush-shaped light towers, a 19-foot high wall in left field and the largest video board in MLB -- a 59-foot high, 221-foot wide display that looms over the left-field bleachers.

Coors Field -- Colorado Rockies

First game: April 26, 1995

First HR: Rico Brogna

All-time HR leader: Todd Helton, 227

The Rockies played their first two seasons at Mile High Stadium, setting an all-time MLB attendance record with 4,483,350 fans in their inaugural campaign, before moving to Coors Field. The Rockies opened their new digs in style, winning their first game at the stadium on Dante Bichette's walk-off homer in the bottom of the 14th inning. Due to Colorado's high elevation and dry air, Coors Field has earned the reputation as a hitter's paradise, to the point where baseballs used in games at the stadium are now stored in an on-site humidor.

Tropicana Field -- Tampa Bay Rays

First game: March 31, 1998

First HR: Luis Gonzalez

All-time HR leader: Evan Longoria, 129

Tropicana Field opened in 1990 as the Florida Suncoast Dome, but it didn't host Major League Baseball action until the expansion Rays (then known as the Devil Rays) joined the AL in 1998. The Trop, as it's commonly called, is MLB's only venue with a non-retractable dome, and the park has special ground rules for batted balls that strike any of the four catwalks that hang from the ceiling. The stadium also includes a 10,000-gallon tank behind the right-center field fence that houses cownose stingrays, part of a [touch exhibit](#) for fans.

Chase Field -- Arizona Diamondbacks

First game: March 31, 1998

First HR: Vinny Castilla

All-time HR leader: Paul Goldschmidt, 101

When the D-backs debuted as an expansion team in 1998, they did so at a brand new retractable roof ballpark -- the first of its kind in the United States -- in downtown Phoenix. Chase Field (originally Bank One Ballpark) includes a swimming pool in right-center field that provides a unique viewing experience for fans. The park played host to the 2001 World Series in its fourth season of existence, with the D-backs walking it off on Luis Gonzalez's bloop single in Game 7 against the Yankees.

T-Mobile Park -- Seattle Mariners

First game: July 15, 1999

First HR: Russ Davis; July 17, 1999
All-time HR leader: Kyle Seager, 94

Relocation was on the table before the Mariners revitalized baseball interest in Seattle with their 1995 run to the postseason and thrilling win over the Yankees in the ALDS. The M's secured the necessary funding for a new retractable roof stadium on Oct. 23, 1995, and less than four years later they left the Kingdome -- the team's home since its 1977 inaugural season -- for their current residence, now known as T-Mobile Park.

Minute Maid Park -- Houston Astros

First game: April 7, 2000
First HR: Scott Rolen
All-time HR leader: Lance Berkman, 157

After 35 seasons at the Astrodome, the world's first multi-purpose domed sports stadium, the Astros got a new retractable roof park in 2000, with the building that was once Union Station serving as its main entrance. As a homage to the history of the location, the park features an upscaled replica of a 19th century locomotive, which moves along an 800-foot track atop the exterior wall beyond left field. The stadium also initially included a unique on-field quirk -- a 90-foot wide incline in straightaway center field named Tal's Hill, after former Astros president Tal Smith. After the 2016 season, Tal's Hill and the flagpole that stood on it were removed and the center-field distance was shortened from 436 feet to 409.

Comerica Park -- Detroit Tigers

First game: April 11, 2000
First HR: Juan Gonzalez; April 14, 2000
All-time HR leader: Miguel Cabrera, 184

After calling Tiger Stadium home from 1912-99, the Tigers moved into a new park in downtown Detroit. Notable characteristics include a massive scoreboard in left field, fountains behind the batter's eye, a 50-foot ferris wheel and the park's 420-foot distance to straightaway center field. Initially, the flagpole in left-center field was in play as a homage to Tiger Stadium, but the fences were brought in prior to the 2003 season, shortening the left-center power alley from 395 feet to 370.

Oracle Park -- San Francisco Giants

First game: April 11, 2000
First HR: Kevin Elster
All-time HR leader: Barry Bonds, 160

Situated along San Francisco Bay, Oracle Park offers views unlike any other in Major League Baseball. The waterfront venue has been the Giants' home since 2000, replacing Candlestick Park. During games, it's common to see fans in kayaks or boats take to McCovey Cove -- the unofficial name of the area just beyond the right-field wall, in honor of Giants legend Willie

McCovey -- with fishing nets to try to snag home run balls. Homers hit into McCovey Cove by Giants players are tallied as “Splash Hits” on an electronic counter on the right-field wall.

American Family Field -- Milwaukee Brewers

First game: April 6, 2001

First HR: Michael Tucker

All-time HR leader: Ryan Braun, 173

When the expansion Seattle Pilots relocated to Milwaukee after one season and became the Brewers, the club moved into the former home of the Braves, Milwaukee County Stadium, where they remained until American Family Field (originally Miller Park) opened in 2001. The stadium is characterized by its red brick exterior, large glass-paned windows and unique [fan-shaped roof](#) that can open or close in 10 minutes, and it features a giant slide in left field that mascot Bernie Brewer rides after every home run and victory by the home team.

PNC Park -- Pittsburgh Pirates

First game: April 9, 2001

First HR: Sean Casey

All-time HR leader: Andrew McCutchen, 92

PNC Park opened in 2001, replacing Three Rivers Stadium as the home of the Pirates. Located along the Allegheny River, the park is known for its dazzling views of downtown Pittsburgh and the Roberto Clemente Bridge.

Great American Ball Park -- Cincinnati Reds

First game: March 31, 2003

First HR: Reggie Sanders

All-time HR leader: Joey Votto, 182

Constructed on the banks of the Ohio River, Great American Ball Park has been the Reds' home since 2003, replacing Cinergy Field, originally known as Riverfront Stadium. The “Power Stacks” in right-center field, which emit flames and launch fireworks, are reminiscent of the steamboats that commonly traversed the Ohio River in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Petco Park -- San Diego Padres

First game: April 8, 2004

First HR: Marquis Grissom

All-time HR leader: Adrian Gonzalez, 65

The Padres left Qualcomm Stadium for the newly constructed Petco Park after the 2003 season. The stadium's signature element is the Western Metal Supply Co. building, a four-story brick structure that was built in 1909 and declared a historic landmark by the city in 1978 before being [incorporated into Petco Park's design](#).

Citizens Bank Park -- Philadelphia Phillies

First game: April 12, 2004

First HR: Bobby Abreu

All-time HR leader: Ryan Howard, 198

The Phillies bid farewell to Veterans Stadium at the end of the 2003 season and moved into their new park in South Philadelphia the following year. Unlike The Vet, Citizens Bank Park has a natural grass field and is a baseball-only venue. The stadium features a 52-foot tall, 35-foot wide mechanical replica of the Liberty Bell that lights up and "rings" after every Phillies home run and home win.

Busch Stadium -- St. Louis Cardinals

First game: April 10, 2006

First HR: Bill Hall

All-time HR leader: Albert Pujols, 112

The Cardinals moved into their current residence, the third St. Louis park to carry the Busch Stadium name, after 40 seasons at their old venue. Unlike its predecessor, which was enclosed on all sides, new Busch Stadium has a more open design concept and features a clear view of the St. Louis skyline, including the Gateway Arch. The Cards won the World Series in the park's inaugural season, clinching the title at home in Game 5.

Nationals Park -- Washington Nationals

First game: March 30, 2008

First HR: Chipper Jones

All-time HR leader: Ryan Zimmerman, 116

After the Montreal Expos moved to Washington, D.C., and became the Nationals, the club played its first three seasons at RFK Stadium, the former home of the Washington Senators. The Nats moved into their new stadium, situated about a mile south of the U.S. Capitol, in 2008 and won their first game at the park on a walk-off homer by Ryan Zimmerman.

Citi Field -- New York Mets

First game: April 13, 2009

First HR: Jody Gerut

All-time HR leader: Lucas Duda, 71

One of two new MLB parks to open in New York in 2009, Citi Field replaced Shea Stadium as the Mets' home park in Queens. The stadium's appearance, with its red brick exterior and arched windows, is reminiscent of Ebbets Field, the home of the Brooklyn Dodgers before they moved to the West Coast. Citi Field also pays homage to the Mets' former residence with the Shea Bridge, a pedestrian bridge in right-center field, and the [Home Run Apple](#), a motorized apple sculpture in the batter's eye that rises whenever the Mets hit a homer.

Yankee Stadium -- New York Yankees

First game: April 16, 2009

First HR: Jorge Posada

All-time HR leader: Mark Teixeira, 113

The Yankees said goodbye to their longtime Bronx home after the 2008 season, moving to a new venue with the same name across the street. Many of the aesthetic features of the park, such as the limestone exterior and the iconic white frieze that lines the roof, evoke the original look of its predecessor. The new stadium also has the same field dimensions, including the 314-foot “short porch” in right field. Like they did in 1923, the Yankees christened their new home with a World Series championship in the park’s inaugural season.

Target Field -- Minnesota Twins

First game: April 12, 2010

First HR: Jason Kubel

All-time HR leader: Brian Dozier, 80

The Twins played home games at Metropolitan Stadium (now the site of the Mall of America) from 1961-81 and the Metrodome from 1982-2009 before moving to Target Field, an open-air stadium characterized by its earth-toned limestone facade and view of downtown Minneapolis.

loanDepot park -- Miami Marlins

First game: April 4, 2012

First HR: J.D. Martinez; April 13, 2012

All-time HR leader: Giancarlo Stanton, 112

For their first 19 seasons, the Marlins shared a stadium with the NFL's Miami Dolphins. But the team ushered in a new era in 2012, changing its name from Florida to Miami, introducing a new color scheme and uniform set and moving into a sleek new retractable-roof ballpark.

Truist Park -- Atlanta Braves

First game: April 14, 2017

First HR: Ender Inciarte

All-time HR leader: Freddie Freeman, 70

After 20 seasons at Turner Field, which was converted into a baseball park following the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, the Braves moved to Truist Park (originally known as SunTrust Park) in 2017. The park hosted Games 3-5 of the 2021 World Series, which saw the Braves defeat the Astros in six games to win their first championship since 1995.

Globe Life Field -- Texas Rangers

First game: July 24, 2020

First HR: Joey Gallo; July 26, 2020

All-time HR leader: Gallo, 20

Globe Life Field's grand opening was delayed several months by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Rangers played the entire 2020 season without fans, although the park did host that year's neutral-site NLCS and World Series with a limited number of spectators. The retractable-roof venue replaced Globe Life Park, an open-air stadium that opened in 1994.

FENWAY PARK AND WRIGLEY FIELD ARE LIVING MONUMENTS TO BASEBALL'S PAST. HOW LONG CAN THEY BE PART OF ITS FUTURE?

From The Athletic

[Fenway Park](#) was on its way out 20 years ago. That seemed to be the consensus. A cramped, archaic, 90-year-old building could not survive in the era of modern ballparks, and so the Red Sox would have to move, probably to a corporate-named facility in Boston's seaport district, while Fenway was left to wither among the empty parking lots of the Back Bay Fens. The old ballyard was beloved, but its expiration date was fast approaching.

Two decades later, though, Major League Baseball's oldest ballpark has been granted new and seemingly indefinite life. It has been rejuvenated throughout the most successful era in Red Sox history, and the franchise is no longer thinking of playing anywhere else.

"Fenway Park has only gotten better over the years," Red Sox principal owner John Henry said. "We have taken exhaustive efforts over the past 20 years and spent several hundred million dollars to make Fenway viable for future generations to enjoy. There is no design nor desire to play anywhere else. With the annual improvements we make each offseason, it just gets more exciting every year to go to work there. We deeply feel its history every day."

History is more important to baseball than to any other American sport, and Fenway's past is at the very root of its appeal. Baseball trades heavily on nostalgia and a sense of intergenerational connection to market its game, but the reality is that most of its famed old ballparks are gone. Many MLB stadiums are built to look like they are a century old, but only Fenway (1912) and Wrigley field (1914) can actually claim that distinction; the next-oldest park is 1962's Dodger Stadium, and only six parks total were built before 1989.

Nowadays, fans come to Fenway and Wrigley specifically because of their connections to the past. The brick-and-mortar concourses, the small and sometimes awkward-facing or obstructed-view seats, Wrigley's ivy and Fenway's iconic left field Green Monster are all remnants of another time, connecting generations of fans and ballplayers who have come to these places to celebrate this game for more than 100 years.

How much longer will that be possible? The original Yankee Stadium is gone. Ditto Tiger Stadium. Camden Yards, built to resemble old-time parks, is now baseball's seventh oldest park. Everyone understands that Fenway and Wrigley will not last forever. But how long will they realistically be around to serve as a living connection to the sport's past?

As recently as 2014, [Henry said Fenway Park had a structural shelf life of perhaps 30 more years](#), but the front office now talks about the stadium as a building without such constraints. Annual renovations have modernized the facility, and underlying maintenance has, according to the team, kept structural concerns at bay.

“We don’t view Fenway Park as a place that has an expiration date,” executive vice president and chief operating officer Jonathan Gilula said. “There has never been discussion of playing anywhere else. We have made concerted efforts and invested several hundred million dollars over the past twenty years to preserve, protect and enhance Fenway Park. That significant investment has been made and will continue to be made with the intention of Fenway Park remaining viable for generations to enjoy.”

The goal is the same for Wrigley. While envisioning their franchise’s future, [Cubs](#) officials repeatedly looked to the Red Sox for ideas and inspiration, seeing the parallels between Wrigley and Fenway as sentimental favorites and economic engines. The Cubs hired Theo Epstein away from his hometown team after the 2011 season to run baseball operations and try to break another “curse” while the business side of the organization focused on preserving Wrigley. By the time VIPs gathered for the groundbreaking ceremony and photo op that would kick off renovation work in October 2014, the Cubs were on the verge of hiring star manager Joe Maddon, signing former Red Sox pitcher [Jon Lester](#) to a six-year, \$155 million contract and unveiling the No. 1 farm system in the game heading into the 2015 season. After making investments in the stadium and the neighborhood that totaled roughly \$1 billion, the Ricketts ownership group and team executives believe that Wrigley will remain an anchor for generations of Cubs fans to come.

According to baseball historian and author [Glenn Stout, who literally wrote the book on Fenway Park](#), there will be specific challenges for these buildings to maintain their mortality — modern comforts, revenue opportunities, and even climate change could come into play — but a design quirk might have left Fenway, in particular, unusually equipped for longevity. Ultimately? It probably comes down to business, and business says that for the moment, these parks are viable, and safe.

“I doubt this ownership group will do anything (to replace it),” Stout said. “When they decide to sell, they’ll leave it to the next person to deal with, and the same with the Ricketts (family) and Wrigley (Field in Chicago). ... If you’re spending upwards of \$2 billion on each team, your sentiment is not going to go very far. You’ll start looking about how you can make money.”

When Henry and his partners purchased the Red Sox after the 2001 season, Boston was bracing itself for change, and Henry’s group was well positioned to start with a new ballpark.

Their incoming team president was Larry Lucchino, who previously had overseen the construction of Camden Yards in Baltimore and Petco Park in San Diego. If anyone knew how to

build a modern baseball stadium from scratch, it was Lucchino, but he also considered Fenway Park to be a source of inspiration for all of those new ballparks dotting the country. Of all the prospective Red Sox buyers, Henry's group was the only one that wanted to give Fenway a chance.

"One size doesn't fit all," Lucchino said. "One solution doesn't fit all."

Lucchino believed the Red Sox could rehabilitate Fenway Park in a way that would keep its charm while updating its amenities; make it more comfortable and accessible, while remaining unmistakably a ballpark of Tris Speaker and Smoky Joe Wood, of [Ted Williams](#) and [Carl Yastrzemski](#).

"It wasn't, for us, whether we should stay at Fenway Park ... or build a new ballpark in the Seaport," Red Sox chairman Tom Werner said. "It was, how do we make Fenway Park a cathedral, and how do we take advantage of the footprint we have and create more opportunities for fans to see the game?"

Although they began renovating right away, it took years for the new ownership group to feel certain it would work. Increased cooking capabilities added variety to the concession stands, renovated bathrooms became more usable and accessible for fans, additional seats made the most of the park's relatively modest square footage, and corporate sponsorships and advertising increased revenue. Investments in the area surrounding Fenway Park allowed ownership to effectively enlarge its revenue-generating, fan-interacting footprint without sacrificing its on-the-field intimacy.

"John, Tom and Larry, they understood the historical significance of the ballpark," Gilula said, "and what it means to the city of Boston, the region and New England, but more importantly the country and [Major League Baseball](#) as a whole. It's a jewel to be sure. They thought it would be shame to give up on it without fully exhausting every opportunity to breathe new life into it. Which, looking back, I think we've been successful in doing."

Throughout the process — whether it was the color of the advertisements, or the limited capacity of the Green Monster seats, or the toned-down programming of the video board — Lucchino instructed those working on the renovations to take a Hippocratic oath of sorts: do no harm.

"I think you always were holding your breath a little bit because you want to make sure what you're doing is right and appropriate," said Gilula, who helped spearhead the renovations from the beginning. "We felt we were guided by the right things, but we were anxious to see how they would be received by Red Sox Nation. I'm really pleased, looking back on the last 20 years — whether it's the Green Monster seats, the fan deck, the right-field roof seats, other amenities, concourse expansion, restrooms, concession stands — that they've all been overwhelmingly positively received, but most importantly, that they've fit. That they look like they've always been there."

At Wrigley, the Cubs went underground to build a state-of-the-art clubhouse that covers more than 30,000 square feet. Where pinch-hitters used to get ready by hitting off a tee into a net in the old narrow, cramped clubhouse, Cubs players gained access to batting tunnels, a modern weight room and other amenities. As part of the multiphase renovation, the Cubs expanded the bleachers, installed two large video boards in the outfield and created patio/party spaces just beyond the ivy. The Cubs catered to their wealthy fans and corporate clients by building four private clubs. A new plaza adjacent to Wrigley became a family-friendly feature, a kind of green space where parents can take their kids to run around, play catch and still watch the game on another big video board. In a 2020 survey of Cubs fans conducted by *The Athletic*, almost 93 percent of the nearly 2,000 responses graded the Wrigley renovations with an A or a B.

Fenway Park was built in a rush by one of the franchise's earliest owners, John I. Taylor, who gave himself [less than seven months](#) to complete the project before the Red Sox home opener in 1912. [His construction crew's haste might have created some good fortune more than a century later.](#)

"The only thing that's allowed Fenway to last as long as it has," Stout said, "is when it was first built, they made the foundation strong enough to one day support a second deck which was never built. ... That's the only reason they could do anything with it (today) is back in 1912 they put in these super foundations thinking, oh, one day maybe we'll build a second deck."

When the current ownership group purchased the team in 2002, it commissioned a feasibility study that projected a 30-to-40-year timeframe for Fenway Park's existence. That's what Henry has frequently referenced in various interviews over the years, Gilula said, but the team's stadium upgrades have not been limited to the seats and concession stands that are easily visible and recognizable.

"In many areas of the ballpark, new infrastructure has been put in place over the past 20 years for things that fans don't necessarily see," Gilula said. "(These include) important items like electrical vaults, mechanical systems, and chiller plants. While these things lie beneath the surface and go largely unseen, they are critical to the ballpark's continued operation and vitality. Our facilities team would tell you that Fenway Park is a demanding building that requires continual and almost constant care."

Because of those upgrades, Gilula said, the Red Sox "have every reason to believe" Fenway Park can continue to be the Red Sox's home for multiple generations, and he said there have been no discussions about preparing for an alternative. Ownership continues to update and upgrade Fenway for the long haul, adding a Bleacher Overlook section for the 2022 season, a new MGM Music Hall which will open in the fall of this year, and a massive, multi-faceted development project that eventually will add millions of residential and retail square footage in the area surrounding the ballpark.

But surely a ballpark cannot truly live on forever. Stout envisions Fenway will one day turn into a space that commemorates the history of the park while also taking advantage of its prime real

estate for condos. While several potential pitfalls may threaten those optimistic statements that Fenway can be a multi-generational home for the Red Sox, most are admittedly so far in the future it's hard to imagine this ownership group needing to tackle them.

One potential problem is space. Limited parking around Fenway Park — like at Wrigley Field — creates a problem of both access and revenue, “but the thing that screws them up long term is the size of the seats,” Stout said. “People aren’t getting any smaller, and it’s increasingly uncomfortable, and I don’t think there’s an appetite now to cut back on the number of seats at Fenway (to make each individual seat larger) because if you do that, it cuts back on everything else you spend.”

To that end, Gilula noted the Red Sox have updated all of the seats at Fenway Park in the past 20 years, and even the old wooden seats in the grandstand have been restored to a minimum of 18 inches with self-rising mechanisms.

Another down-the-road problem, Stout said, could be financial viability. If efforts to increase revenue finally hit a point of diminishing returns, it might no longer be financially justifiable to keep these old ballparks operational, at which point infrastructure investments could wane and deterioration could become a convenient excuse for owners in Boston and Chicago to build elsewhere.

“It’ll be unfortunate when you won’t be able to look out there and say, ‘Hey, that’s where Ted Williams played, that’s where Babe Ruth pitched, that’ll be unfortunate,” Stout said. “But (both Fenway and Wrigley) are already so different from what they were, it’s really the field that’s the only thing that’s truly historic.”

An unexpected challenge for Fenway, according to Stout, is rising water levels in and around the Back Bay Fens area. The Red Sox have installed elaborate systems to drain the field of rainwater over the past 20 years, but keeping Fenway Park dry, Stout said, is a challenge that will not get any easier with time. [A recent study found that water levels in coastal areas in the Northeast could rise as much as 21 inches by 2050.](#)

“What finally might do Fenway in is climate change,” Stout said.

Making guarantees about Wrigley seems foolish in the middle of MLB’s lockout, especially after two seasons disrupted by COVID-19 and against the backdrop of a climate crisis. There’s also the question of baseball’s place in American culture, how the sport’s slow pace and barriers to access will impact the young fans of the future. You don’t even have to go back to 1914; there are so many more entertainment options out there since the Cubs broke ground on their restoration project in 2014.

Yet all the fundamentals still remain in place: a prime location in one of the city’s most expensive neighborhoods; easy access to the Addison Red Line train station and a network of Chicago Transit Authority buses; proximity to bars, restaurants and shops that add to the vibes

on gamedays; and the emotional attachments to Wrigley that people feel. All of those factors made it an empty threat when the Cubs once briefly flirted with the idea of moving to Rosemont during a difficult stage of negotiations with local officials. Moving out toward O'Hare International Airport made no sense. The franchise and its satellite businesses continue to make long-term plays in Wrigleyville, investing in real estate and hoping to turn it into a year-round destination for tourists and locals. Between Hotel Zachary, the retail spaces at the base of the team's offices, Marquee Sports Network's headquarters and the buildings with rooftop views into the stadium, the Cubs are betting that generations of fans will continue paying top dollar to watch a team that went 108 years between World Series titles and just began another rebuild in baseball operations.

The future of baseball undoubtedly will see new stadiums with technologies and amenities we can't imagine today, but it might also include the old ballyards on Jersey Street and Addison Street, where history is front and center, and the imagination is captured the old-fashioned way.

AS BASEBALL EVOLVES, WHERE DO MANAGERS FIT IN MLB'S FUTURE?

By Fabian Ardaya, Cody Stavenhagen and Will Sammon in The Athletic

Think of what it means to manage a major-league baseball team, and perhaps some images jolt into the mind. Earl Weaver screaming in an umpire's face. Tommy Lasorda going on a rant. Jim Leyland puffing on a Marlboro. Lou Piniella kicking dirt over home plate. Billy Martin feuding with George Steinbrenner.

For generations, there was a perception of managers as hot-tempered, chain-smoking, bar-fighting red asses. They were supposed to be grizzled men with gray hair who lived and breathed the rhythms of a daily sport, men who believed the hit-and-run and the sacrifice fly were divine arts.

Those days, it's fair to say, are all but gone. The image of an MLB manager has changed with the times.

In San Francisco, Gabe Kapler is one of the prototypes for a modern manager. He's young and intelligent, as well as a former player who has front-office experience, loves data and is passionate about social issues. He has six-pack abs instead of a beer belly. His [Giants](#) also happened to win 107 games last year, making Kapler the National League Manager of the Year.

While managers were once best envisioned talking in smoke-filled rooms with fluorescent lighting, Kapler's office features a scotch bar and an upscale coffee maker. A copy of Kurt Cobain's journal sat on the coffee table during the postseason, and he works at a standing desk

under the glimmer of Edison-style lamps. It's supposed to be a calming environment, inviting players and staff members to come and chat.

Kapler's style has evoked a new, growing cliché: The modern manager as a clean-cut quant prone to running the game while staring at a spreadsheet. There's a growing idea that for some teams, everything trickles down from the Ivy League executives upstairs, that the manager is an outdated institution. But how true is that, really?

Kapler spent time with two fellow managers this offseason. The trio started discussing their organizations and their roles.

"Two of us felt like we had a ton of autonomy and almost all that we could ask for," Kapler said in a recent phone interview. "The other manager felt like he didn't have quite as much."

Even in what tends to be a copycat league, it would be a mistake to paint any two managers or any two organizations as the same. It would be misguided to fully feed into the stereotypes of managers new and old.

"I think the manager position was variable 20 years ago," Kapler said. "I think it's highly variable now."

A few decades ago, managers tended to operate as monolithic entities, guys who worried about the major-league roster and had complete say over what happened in the game.

There's no disputing this has gradually shifted over the past few decades. Even in the most traditional organizations, front offices are more involved than ever. In the most progressive of organizations, each decision can be a collaborative effort. There's more data and more information and thus more preparation going into decisions big and small.

"I get tons of great, welcome feedback from people in our organization," Kapler said. "I think we have thoughtful conversations, I think we have productive conversations, and sometimes I think we have heated conversations. However, I've never felt like I couldn't make what I believed to be the best decision for either the Giants or the [Phillies](#). I can't remember one time that I felt like that."

So in some ways, this job has changed. In some ways, it hasn't.

What's still coming into focus: How much does the manager actually matter? And what will the job look like in an uncertain future?

"I think the manager is not some puppet down there that just has a bunch of numbers," said Leyland, who still works as a [Tigers](#) special assistant. "People, in my opinion, underestimate the role of the manager in today's game."

You can point to examples in the modern game that suggest the manager is becoming a diminished role. Teams have assistant coaches direct shifts based on information passed down from the analytics department. Batting orders and pitching decisions can come with input from the front office.

In the most high-profile example of numbers running the game more than the old-fashioned idea of “feel,” [Rays](#) manager Kevin Cash was largely roasted after he removed starting pitching [Blake Snell](#) — who had allowed only two hits — [after 5 1/3 innings during Game 6](#) of the 2020 World Series. The Rays are undoubtedly an organization driven by numbers and efficiency, but Cash is also the two-time reigning AL Manager of the Year. He, too, is believed to have autonomy over in-game decisions. (With MLB’s labor dispute ongoing, the Rays were one of several teams who did not make team personnel available to talk for this article).

“I get tired of reading that managers are middle managers,” [Angels](#) manager Joe Maddon said, “although I think some teams treat them as such.”

But just when you think the significance of the manager is fading in a sport increasingly driven by three-true-outcomes styles of play, just take a look at who contending teams hired in the past two offseasons. The White Sox turned to 77-year-old Tony La Russa before the 2021 season. The [Mets](#) hired 65-year-old [Buck Showalter](#) this offseason, and 60-year-old Bob Melvin left the A’s to manage the rising [San Diego Padres](#). In addition to running the game, managers talk to the press at least twice a day during the season. They’re often the face and voice of an organization.

“It’s gotten into a hefty balance between analytics and makeup, traditional-type baseball things,” Melvin said last season. “I learned a lot about the analytics in Oakland. It was a little painful at times early on based on the fact that I grew up looking at the game a little differently. But I think it’s made me better, it’s opened my eyes that any information that you can get ... you can marry that.”

Fans and writers can obsess over microscopic in-game decisions, but the art of managing the clubhouse filled with 26 distinct personalities remains part of the manager’s mystique. Getting the most out of players, one club executive said, is still the core mission of a manager.

“So much of a manager’s value still derives from his ability to motivate his players and staff to perform each day,” the executive said. “There’s so much that occurs behind closed doors that most people aren’t privy to but that affects the on-field product. I don’t see that changing significantly in the short or medium term.”

And it dates back decades.

“At the end of the season people would say, ‘Man, you look tired. You look exhausted,’” Leyland said. “I’d always say, ‘Show me a manager at the end of the season who looks like Paul Newman, and I’ll show you a guy who didn’t do a very good job.’”

“You put your heart and soul into this stuff. When you do that, it’s supposed to take its toll on you.”

A.J. Hinch was [one of the forerunners](#) of the modern manager mold. In 2009 he was hired midseason to manage the [Arizona Diamondbacks](#), transitioning from the team’s director of player development to running the big-league club. It was a surprising hire at the time — Hinch initially thought he was being asked to manage a minor-league affiliate — and ended up being something of a disaster.

Hinch went 89-123 in his time with the Diamondbacks. But after a stint in the Padres’ front office, he reemerged to lead the [Astros](#) to a World Series. Even after Houston’s sign-stealing scandal cost Hinch his job and damaged his reputation, he was rehired to manage the Tigers before the 2021 season.

Detroit improved its winning percentage by 73 points in one year under Hinch and went 68-61 after May 8 of last season. In Detroit, Hinch has reinvigorated the idea that a manager can be a difference-making presence.

“He can tell an analyst, ‘You’re wrong, we’re going this way,’ and he can tell a baseball guy, ‘You’re wrong, we’re gonna use this data,’” Tigers general manager Al Avila said after hiring Hinch. “And that’s what I was looking for. ... I was looking for a difference-maker.”

Hinch and Red Sox manager Alex Cora — who was also suspended for one season in the wake of the Astros scandal — are both viewed as young, intelligent managers with an innate blend of baseball feel and people skills. Both were allowed back in the game, and both are considered among the best managers in the sport.

“They believe,” Red Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom said as Boston stormed to a first-round upset over Tampa last postseason, “in part, because (Cora) believes.”

But as young, sharp and data-driven managers continue to rise in organizations across the league, others such as [Braves](#) manager [Brian Snitker](#) continue to prove there’s no one-size-fits-all approach to managerial success. Snitker spent parts of four decades in the Braves system before finally becoming an MLB manager in 2016. At the time, he was the oldest rookie manager since Bobby Mattick took over the 1980 [Blue Jays](#) at 64.

The Braves have come around to baseball’s data revolution, but Snitker [is far from an analytics guru](#). That did not stop the Braves from winning last fall’s World Series.

“When you’re looking at big-league coaches or managers, forget the knowledge and content and whatever: If you don’t have the ability to connect, you don’t get through the door,” Braves executive Alex Anthopoulos once said. “It’s similar to being a teacher. Just because you have the knowledge and the content and the work ethic, can you deliver it?”

“At the major-league level, you need to earn the respect and the buy-in. If you don’t have that, you can throw all of the other stuff in the trash.”

As Showalter put it, “Are you data-informed or data-driven? There’s a big difference. If you’re data-informed, you let the data act as a check on your intuition. The players pick up on it in a hurry, too, if you’re completely data-driven.”

It’s become the latest talking point for old-school and new-age managers alike — the concept not just of alignment with the organization’s front office, but with its players and how they prefer to communicate. Connectivity is what it takes to get a player to be honest about an injury, to properly take a demotion or reduction of role, and to translate to a roster that extends even beyond the 40-man.

“If the player knows that you care, if the player knows that you’re prepared, and you have your thoughts organized when you approach them, and you can make them better, they listen to you,” new [Cardinals](#) manager Oli Marmol said when hired this winter.

Even managers such as Kapler — who was fired after two seasons with the Phillies before leading the Giants to 107 wins last season — still place a great deal of emphasis on intangible aspects of the job. For Kapler, that becomes clearer with experience.

“In 2018, I came in with a game plan and tried to fit the game into that game plan at times,” he said. “And I think more and more I’m just sort of watching and experiencing the game in real-time, being present in real-time and noting more things about what’s happening in the dugout, what’s happening with our coaching staff, things like facial expressions with our players and body language on the field.”

Kapler’s coaching staff, though, is one more example of baseball’s changing infrastructure. The 2021 Giants had 13 coaches on staff, a drastic increase in what Kapler called the “pupil-to-teacher ratio.” Kapler also took pride in finding coaches from a variety of backgrounds and experience levels. The Giants staff features coaches from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Japan and the Bahamas. Assistant coach Alyssa Nakken became the first female coach in MLB history.

“I believe that makes for a better decision-making process, both in-game but also from a problem-solving perspective and a critical thinking perspective,” Kapler said. “I think we think better critically when we have a diverse group of coaches on our staff.”

Still, baseball faces a diversity problem that is highlighted in the manager’s chair. Houston’s [Dusty Baker](#) and the [Dodgers’](#) Dave Roberts are the league’s only Black managers. In a game where more than 28 percent of players were born outside the United States, only Cora, Toronto’s Charlie Montoyo, St. Louis’ Marmol and Washington’s [Dave Martinez](#) are of Latin descent. Only two managers of Asian descent — Don Wakamatsu and Roberts (whose father is Black and mother is Japanese) — have ever held the role of manager.

But while the sport struggles for more diverse representation among managers, the traditional path to the job is undergoing its own metamorphosis.

Kapler's first managerial role came after spending time in the Dodgers' front office overseeing the organization's player development, a shift from front office to on-field personnel that has become so typical as the differences between people hired in those roles have diminished.

His immediate replacement in that chair was a fellow former player, [Brandon Gomes](#), who in the coming years would elicit interview requests for on-field roles such as big league pitching coach as well as high-level front office openings. This winter, he was named the Dodgers' general manager. Another recent GM hire, the Phillies' [Sam Fuld](#), got the gig in the same cycle in which he interviewed for the Red Sox managerial opening.

"I think the gap between the requisite skill set to be a really high-level front office member, and a really high-level manager in uniform personnel, I think that gap is shrinking," Fuld said last month. "I think a lot of the same criteria apply to both.

"There's a lot of ways to challenge yourself on an individual level to develop yourself and the lines between those in-uniform and out-of-uniform positions I think have blurred a bit, in a good way."

Dave Roberts understood the baggage he carried with him as he strode to the mound in late October 2020.

The Dodgers manager's walks to grab the baseball from that game's pitcher have long been a focus, intentional or not, as was the case when a miscommunication saw [Rich Hill](#) removed from a game early in the 2018 World Series. This time, Roberts took the baseball from a franchise icon [Clayton Kershaw](#) after the future Hall of Famer had quickly dispatched the first two batters of the sixth inning and the Dodgers led Game 5 of the World Series, 4-2. The less-than-capacity crowd at Globe Life Field booed.

Two days later, Roberts was raising the World Series trophy, capping off the most successful five-year run in the franchise's storied history and snapping a title drought that lasted more than three decades.

Yet by the next October, Roberts was not immune to criticism on the most visible sliver of his job even as the Dodgers stormed to 106 regular-season wins. As the Dodgers were eliminated in this last fall's NLCS, much of the focus centered on the organization's decision to use starter Julio Urías in relief as the Dodgers' rotation was already thinning due to injury and overuse.

"A leader takes the criticism, all that stuff, the blame, to shelter, take care of the people you work alongside of," Roberts told *The Athletic's* Andy McCullough [this month](#). "I have no problem taking the heat for decisions in game or things that happen in games that we lose."

The variety of responsibilities within and outside of the manager's job description are typically focused on a select number of public decisions, even though Sabermetric studies tend to [indicate managers ultimately have minimal impact](#) over the course of a season.

Roberts has been lauded for his optimism and communication, massaging a roster full of stars and getting them to acquiesce into different roles; yet the undying criticism he has received has centered around one of the few parts fans do actually get to see.

"If a bullpen guy comes in and gets hit, you get skewered," Maddon said, "and if he comes in and does a good job, you're bright. Nobody ever credits the other team for being good or bad ... it's a very non-sophisticated way of looking at the game."

As Mets general manager Billy Eppler puts it, it's the "art within the science." The game plans presented to managers before or after a game are not always presenting a complete picture. If it were a map, Eppler said, it would be a basic template that leaves open the variance of a forest fire, animals or other maladies that suddenly cause a manager to veer off-course and adjust.

"That map might not have had an injury on the opposing team versus your team, and now you have to make adjustments," Eppler said. "It might not have had information that, maybe their starting pitcher just all of a sudden wasn't throwing any sliders anymore, and you're kind of wondering why. Maybe it's because you got a blister. That's where the art comes in."

Eppler's new manager, Showalter, sounds ready to adjust, when necessary. He's new to the Mets, and that's why he spent his first days at his spring training office studying biographies of his players. Maybe it will help. Maybe it won't. But he'll at least be prepared. And, more importantly, he'll know who he's working with.

"When the teleprompter breaks and the game goes off script, that's when good managers really shine," Showalter said. "I don't think many people realize how fast the game moves in the dugout. There will always have to be a human element to that."

Perry Minasian was a clubbie's kid who always had an eye for more. In between cleaning lockers and shining shoes at the Rangers' spring training complex, he would often find himself running mail from the front office, down the stairs and into manager Bobby Valentine's office. He'd stumble in on conversations between Valentine and Texas' general manager, Tom Grieve. And his first job in baseball came as an assistant under Showalter, who was the manager in Texas, when the current Angels general manager came to understand the communication dynamic that is so crucial to his job now.

They're conversations that have become routine throughout the sport, be it a front-office member entering the manager's office postgame to discuss how the game played out, to calls on the drive home previewing the next day's roster decisions, to meeting up at the ballpark the following afternoon to rehash some of the earlier conversations and disagreements.

“From a general manager and manager standpoint, to me, that’s a really, really important relationship,” Minasian said. “You’re almost married to a certain extent, right? You’re attached to constant communication and on decisions that need to be made.

“(That’s why) I think honesty is really important. ... Sometimes you’ll have an idea and it might not be the best idea and maybe not a lot of people will tell you it’s not the best idea – but the manager will.”

These conversations also happen at the minor-league level, a place where not just players are developing; managers are, too. Just differently than they were decades ago, when managers like Showalter in the late 1980s in the Yankees’ system were told two things from the organization’s leaders upon breaking camp: “We want you to win your league and develop players.” That was largely done through helping pick players on rosters, creating batting orders and making in-game decisions. Now, a lot of it is a collaborative approach with player development staffers.

Managers are still being promoted from the minor leagues. They just have to do well in working with others. Matt Erickson is one of the latest examples. He managed Class-A Wisconsin for 10 years in the Brewers’ organization before getting promoted this offseason to major-league assistant hitting coach.

“You have to keep an open mind to that stuff,” Erickson said. “And be able to listen and learn and continue to grow as a manager because certain things that you felt was the best way may not be the best way and the ability to adapt to those things and listen to specialists in those fields and learn how to apply those two is hugely important if you’re going to stay in the game. People that have stayed in the game a long time have that ability to connect with people and the ability to adapt and grow with what they’re teaching.

“What they think is important in research and development may not be important to an experienced, traditional on-field guy, but when you get them together and you can talk it through and communicate with a group, those things, and both sides get a chance to express their views and each side listening, I think you get the best of both worlds.”

The idea of the manager as a meaningless figurehead might not be as new as it seems. In 1976, a remodeled Yankee Stadium initially featured purple carpet in the players’ clubhouse, symbolic of a return to royalty.

Martin’s office had cement-block walls and a concrete floor. There was a desk, Martin’s chair and two other chairs for visitors.

“You think,” Martin [told the New York Times](#), “they’re telling me something?”

“No one cares about the manager,” he went on to say.

As he walked out of his office and into the clubhouse, he looked at the floor.

“It’s amazing,” he said, “how the carpeting stopped right here.”

Martin was nonetheless one of baseball’s larger-than-life managers, a symbol of an era now fading into history.

Managers might look and act differently. The game might continue to evolve in its style and optics. The days of a celebrity manager might be limited, with Maddon among the few notable current examples in bringing in singular quirks and signature styles. Their roles have expanded and shrunk, depending on who you ask. But the crux of their responsibilities hasn’t changed.

“I think maybe stylistically, has the role changed?” Minasian said. “I mean, is there a Whitey Herzog or is there a Tommy Lasorda right now, that type of personality? Maybe not. But I think leadership styles have changed in general, not in just our industry, but I think throughout all industries. So you adapt over time.

“The actual role of the manager ... I think it’s going to be this way. I think it was this way 50 years ago, and I think it’s going to be this way 50 years from now. It’s having a club that buys into what you’re trying to do, treating people with respect. I think honesty is important. The good ones are really honest. They let the players know exactly how they feel and what the expectations are for those individual players. I don’t see that changing.”

THE FUTURE-AND THE PRESENT-OF BASEBALL IS IN BIOMECHANICS

Enos Saris and Alec Lewis in The Athletic

It’s uncomfortable.

It’s uncomfortable, and it’s embarrassing. Anyone who wants to take advantage of the best in current biomechanical analysis in baseball must undergo the rigors of the motion capture process. That means getting down to your underwear, getting sprayed with adhesive that won’t come off for weeks, applying the sensors, and throwing in front of the peanut gallery (and all the expensive cameras) in the lab that day.

It’s a credit to today’s baseball players that they don’t mind being embarrassed or uncomfortable in front of people. Of course, they probably throw harder than 60 when *they* strap on the tools of knowledge.

Maybe that’s why they don’t mind it. Unlike me, who was lucky enough to undergo this process at Driveline Baseball’s facility in Kent, Wash., this offseason, they’re really good at baseball — and this will help them get better.

“It wasn’t like, ‘this is weird,’” said Phillies minor leaguer Tristan Garnett at Driveline Baseball. “It was more like ‘holy cow, these guys are really going to break me down to a scientific level with no bias at all, to get to the truth.’”

Think for a second about the metrics current baseball technologies produce.

A radar gun measures the velocity of a pitch once it hits the catcher’s mitt. A Rapsodo pitch-tracking device measures a spin rate after the ball crosses the plate. A Blast Motion sensor, clipped to the bottom of the bat, measures rotational acceleration after a player swings it.

These are all outputs.

“The thing that’s been coming is the science of, ‘How do (the players) do it?’” Dr. Glenn Fleisig, the director of the American Sports Medicine Institute, said a few months ago in a phone conversation.

Fleisig was referencing the search for inputs: What does a player *do* that leads to the pitch that registers 100 mph?

We are now starting to know. New motion capture technologies are allowing teams to utilize biomechanical analyses for health, velocity and deception purposes.

“Teams have woken up to this,” Fleisig said. “The field of baseball has woken up to this. It’s the next competitive advantage. That’s what’s happening.”

The current biomechanics revolution in baseball traces its roots to the first nascent efforts in the 1980s, and it is similar to that period in this respect: Technology spurred growth. Nearly four decades ago, the inception of video cameras made high-speed motion capture possible. Utilizing multiple cameras as well as an algorithm — called direct linear transformation — researchers could compute a three-dimensional image. That ability led to the first modern-day biomechanical analysis process in the 1990s, an effort called marked motion capture.

In marked motion capture, pitchers would strip down to their underwear. They would spray on the adhesive, strap on the reflective markers and step up to the mound and unleash pitches. A dozen or so infrared cameras, focused on those reflective markers, would record frame-by-frame movements.

“It was awesome,” [Royals](#) senior director of performance science Austin Driggers said in a recent phone conversation. “Problem is, it was constrained to the lab.”

Pitching on the mound inside a facility is not the same as pitching in a playoff game in front of thousands of fans. While a lab setting does allow for controlled conditions, it does not always reflect performance in the real world, or, as scientists prefer to call it, “the field.”

Jimmy Buffi, the co-founder of biomechanics company Reboot Motion, knew this about a decade ago as he was finishing up his PhD in biomedical engineering at Northwestern. At the time, he knew he wanted to use biomechanical analysis to help baseball players remain healthy and improve. But he didn't feel it could succeed with the uncomfortable and tedious nature of marked motion capture, so instead he accepted a job with the [Dodgers](#) in 2015.

That same year, Jeff Passan reported the [Tampa Bay Rays](#) were going to install Kinatrax, which introduced new, ultra-high-speed cameras with extreme computing power, good enough to gather three-dimensional biomechanical data. No adhesive spray nor reflective markers were necessary.

Experts call this markerless motion capture. It remains the new frontier within baseball biomechanics — capable enough for Buffi to found Reboot in 2019, impressive enough that those in the business began to realize the gap between lab and field research had been bridged. Teams have built labs with specified ways of capturing biomechanical information. Coaches can utilize technologies such as ProPlayAI in bullpens.

"Markerless motion capture is probably the closest thing to a disruptive technology that we've had recently in baseball sport science," Driggers said. "This is a really big deal."

What do biomechanical analyses offer if done right? Take Phillies pitcher Garnett and [Cardinals](#) outfielder Lars Nootbaar, who have used the motion capture lab at Driveline to improve themselves.

First comes the assessment, with the sensors attached.

That produces some hard data that compares how the pitcher or hitter moves against the general population of professional and amateur hitters and pitchers that come through the facility.

"I'm not used to seeing my entire skeleton being broken down, and every single frame of my pitching mechanics," Garnett said of the experience. "It was eye-opening. It was cool to see that despite my deficiencies, where they were, I was still able to keep the velocity that I was throwing, I threw 94.9 when I got here. They said that was great because my ceiling is much higher. I learned that my hip-shoulder separation is not where it should be, and it has to do with my front side, because it broke very early."

Nootbaar had similar results, which popped when his trainer, John Soteropolus, took a look at the skeleton breakdowns.

In both cases, the players were assigned corrective drills to fix their deficiencies. For Nootbaar, it was the step-over drill, where the batter begins with his front leg behind his back leg in order to emphasize that hip-shoulder separation. For Garnett, it was something called the janitor drill, where he shows his back fully to the plate before turning and throwing home.

The brilliance here is not in the training process — which has been similar throughout time — but in the ability of these labs (and teams) to then test each drill to see if it is actually getting the desired results.

Dr. Mike Sonne, a former writer at *The Athletic* among his other pursuits, has developed a markerless motion capture application that pairs with any modern phone with a decent camera to produce these same skeleton figures and biometrics. With his app, ProPlay Ai, they were able to show that the janitor drill was effective.

“At the Baseball Development Group, they had an issue for a pitcher opening up too early, so his trunk was rotating too early into foot plant — his trunk was already facing home plate,” Sonne said. “That’s a commonly held injury factor because you can’t use your trunk energy anymore because it’s already dissipated. Our BDG guys found that this drill could delay the timing of the trunk rotation, using ProPlayAI, and now they can use that with pitchers that open up too early. And that’s important for BDG, which isn’t the biggest lab, they couldn’t afford a full mocap situation, and this gives them information with some reliability and that helps them a lot.”

The most difficult thing about player development has been having any sort of precision in the process. Consider that to know that a player has improved, one normally has to know the true talent of the player (which has some error), has to know that the process followed actually did improve that player (more error), and then know the post-coaching true talent of the player (even more error).

Now, with the proliferation of biomechanics and motion capture analysis, player development can be more precise. In these two examples, the relationship between hip-shoulder separation and the speed at which a player can move his trunk [is a known thing](#). Now, coaching that up is as simple as assessing that is actually the problem, and then using drills that have been proven to address that particular issue.

The implications are massive.

Articles like these — and reader interest in them — have actually helped push the state of biomechanics to where it is in baseball today, incredible as that seems. They may even have something to do with how many teams adopt it in the future.

“If players think they are missing something, they complain, ‘What the fuck, why don’t we have that?’” said Driveline co-founder Kyle Boddy. “Collective intelligence and awareness is important.”

Baseball executives are people, too, human beings swayed by commonly held interests. But they are people who need to know what’s possible before they can ask for it. And now that it’s becoming clear there are so many different ways to analyze the way a player’s body moves, most teams are taking part in some fashion or another.

There's the version of markerless motion capture represented by the Hawk-Eye system in each stadium, one that can provide entertainment-grade biomechanics — not necessarily good enough for rigorous analysis, but helpful in popularizing the effort. And then there's the upgrade to Hawk-Eye pro that a handful of teams have undertaken. Does that mean only a handful of teams are all the way into biomechanics? Not really.

"Nine or ten teams have Kinatrax at the big league level, they don't need to upgrade to Hawk-Eye pro. Tampa and Boston are at the cutting edge of Kinatrax, the [Cubs](#) and Tampa have been using it forever, too. You just don't hear about it, why would you hear about it?" Boddy said.

Some teams were early adopters and are going to stick with the systems they have in place, others are late adopters going with Hawk-Eye pro. A friendly assessment might say that about half to two-thirds of baseball has bought into this movement on some level or another.

That said, not all [MLB](#) organizations nor private player development outfits are utilizing the markerless motion capture. The obstacles to entry — and challenges that come with using it — begin with cost.

Ben Brewster, a former minor-leaguer who founded Tread Athletics, an online-based pitching development outfit, said the "really good" systems still cost anywhere from \$250,000 to \$2 million.

"If we could get our hands on a system we knew was accurate, and it wasn't \$500,000, we would," Brewster said in a recent phone conversation.

Even if teams or deeper-pocketed private facilities determine the cost is worth it, there's a further question for the teams themselves as they try to actually use all this data: How many of those have taken their findings from the research side and then seamlessly integrated them into their coaching, and even their player acquisition philosophies?

Answering that question is, in large part, why Buffi founded his company. A coach, he said, should not have to have a PhD in biomechanics. The onus, he believes, is on those who understand the physics to inform what they're seeing scientifically to the coaches.

"I spend a lot of time meeting with coaches explaining, 'This is how the specific physics work. This is what these reports are capturing. Here's how to use it,'" Buffi said. "My favorite meetings are player development meetings where it's a pitcher or hitter and we go, 'Hey, we want to build a plan with this pitcher or hitter.' We generate an analysis. The medical staff is in the room. The strength and conditioning staff is in the room. We have the analysis. And it's, 'Let's go through the analysis and find where a player is efficient and inefficient. Then, let's see what assessments we can do to find the root cause of the inefficiencies and work together to build a plan to address them.'"

More landmines lie within the next step. Say the analysis gleaned from a markerless motion capture assessment identifies inefficiencies. From there, a coach has to decide: Do we go ahead

and address the issue? Or, does some of that inefficiency actually relate to what the player is trying to do?

It's tricky," Driggers said. "On one hand, you're trying to make players better, and there are infinite examples of coaches making mechanical improvements to pitchers and them performing better. It's obviously possible. But there are also cases in which we've improved a pitchers' mechanics by our technical model, but it contributes to injury because the pitcher's body has adapted to those suboptimal mechanics. Measuring mechanics is getting easier, determining what's good for each player is still really difficult."

That's why, as much as motion capture analysis has become democratized, especially with technologies such as ProPlayAI, many believe there's still a major gap between the ways some clubs and private outfits are using this tool.

The technology may be new, better and faster. But implementing improvements based on biomechanical analysis still require advanced coaching expertise and high-level communication among staff.

"The publicity is, 'Yeah, we just installed this lab.' Or, 'Oh my God, that team or org is so progressive!'" Buffi said. "Little do you know, when you get inside the organization, the data is being collected and just sitting in a lab. The data people are staring at it. The coaches are doing what they do. And they're not really talking to each other."

But then there are those who are operating in a different manner. Those who are setting the standard for what the future of this space might look like.

What comes next seems straightforward. It's a matter of figuring out how to infuse all the different aspects of running a baseball team with the findings gleaned from limb-tracking technology.

"I think the next frontier in (player development) is not in applying more technology," agreed Brewster. "All of this tech has gotten here really quickly. Everyone has slow-motion videos, Rapsodo, Trackman. A lot of orgs now use biomechanical analysis. The next frontier is learning how to apply it, implement it in the most optimal way."

"Some teams are just at The Best Buy saying, 'Can you pick me up a biomechanic,'" Sonne said, laughing. "The next era is when the mathematicians and the statisticians get their hands on the biomechanical data together. This is the next wave, where human movement data is just as important as the ball flight data."

Being able to measure the physical changes in a player before and after drills selected by their coaches is one thing. It's another to then use those measurements to create benchmarks with which to judge the efficacy of the coaches and the organization in developing players. It's a third thing to actually then make organizational changes based on hitting those benchmarks. It's maybe a fourth thing to understand your organizational strengths through this lens and then acquire players who will benefit the most from your ability to help them move better.

“All this is, biometrics answer the question: Does this coach know what the fuck he’s talking about?” said Boddy. “That’s important for the coach, the coach’s boss, but it’s really important for the player. The player can see that there’s an objective number that judges the system. Marketing, sure, but in the way that’s the most honest.”

Marketing? But talk to players and you understand what he *means* by marketing.

“Coming here, I made a joke to my family that I worked out with Luke Skywalker in California, and now I need to go work out with Yoda,” Garnett said of Driveline. “Science never lies. It’s not ‘it worked for me,’ which, cool, but I’m not built like you. If they tell you $1 + 1 = 2$ and explain why $1 + 1 = 2$, it’s kind of hard to deny it.”

Is there even more to be learned from the technology? So far, most of the energy has been put into moving optimally to create velocity, and to lessen the stress on the elbow to prevent injury. League-wide velocities have increased [almost every year since baseball started tracking them](#), so there’s been a lot of success there. At the same time, injury rates seem higher than ever.

“Refer back to the fact that everyone is throwing harder,” Boddy says about that fact. “There’s a local maxima. There’s no world where everyone is healthy and throwing 100 percent. When you seek the highest performance, there are going to be injuries. We don’t have the injuries we had 20 years ago.”

“[Julio Urías](#) had the shoulder capsule tear, that injury 20 years ago, that’s it, no more pitching for you and that’s it,” Boddy continued. “We’ve done a good job of preventing that injury, which is a good thing. Return from Tommy John surgery is better than ever. Spiral fractures of the humerus ... nobody has had this injury in over a decade, and they used to have it all the time, you’d get a spiral crack down the bone, and you couldn’t lift your arm for a year. Our understanding of how to keep people from catastrophic injury has improved. Maybe it’s inevitable that a certain number of people will get injured.”

One of the last frontiers for biomechanics will come in linking the way pitchers move to actual results on the field. Deception — how different the pitcher is from what a batter might expect — has long been thought of as something we can’t put a number on. But with this sort of technology, we’re getting closer to being able to quantify how pitchers [hide the ball before release](#), or put funky, [unexpected movement on their pitches](#).

Over at Reboot, they defined deception by looking at expected movement and spin from different spine tilts and which pitchers had movement and spin deviated from that expectation. They came away with four important findings, which Evan Demchick wrote in [this post summarizing their effort](#).

- *There is a relationship between body rotation plane tilt and ball spin, which allows us to calculate a “predicted spin.”*

- *This predicted spin is similar to what batters are implicitly “calculating” prior to ball release.*
- *Pitchers that score high on the internal Reboot deception metric tend to outperform.*
- *Even if deception is not as strong of a predictor as velocity or spin rate, it still matters. And you have to measure what matters.*

That last bullet point is really a great summary for the past, present and future of biomechanics in baseball. There was the data acquisition phase in which everything was measured and tested by the early adopters in the field. Now we’re in the phase of trying to figure out what measurements matter most and how to get those measurements to the right people in the right format. Next? Democratizing the movement to give more players access; dreaming up the remaining measurements that haven’t yet been found; and building entire organizations fueled by those findings.

So where is the future of biomechanics in baseball headed? It’s not exactly clear, but one thing is for sure: We’ll measure it, even if it means doing it in our underwear.

HOUSEKEEPING

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