

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

1.16.2022

Good morning baseball fans.

Freaking cold in Maine. The Billionaires and the millionaires don't seem to be making serious progress on the CBA. But there is lots of fun stuff to enjoy. A woman manager, interesting analysis – does playing mostly for one team (Ortiz) have an advantage over playing for many teams (Sheffield) in making the Hall of Fame? Enjoy.

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

Exclusive club—400 HRs and 10 Gold Gloves:

Mays

Schmidt

Griffey Jr.

Andruw Jones

Last player to lead either league in home runs the year his team won the World Series--the Yankees' Mark Teixeira in 2009 (his 39 homers tied for the AL lead with the Rays' Carlos Peña).

Robbie Ray led MLB in strikeouts in 2021. The last Mariners pitcher before that was Randy Johnson (294 strikeouts in 1995).

Winner of the first Outstanding DH Award was Boston's Orlando Cepeda (1973).

Buster Posey became a two-time winner of the Comeback Player of the Year Award. The only other player to win it twice -- and in different leagues was Pitcher Francisco Liriano (2010 with Minnesota, 2013 with Pittsburgh).

The first shortstop with at least 200 hits, 40 doubles and 30 home runs in one season was the Orioles' Cal Ripken Jr. (210 hits, 46 doubles, 34 home runs in 1991).

The only pitcher to win both the Cy Young Award and MVP unanimously in the same season was Detroit Tigers' Denny McLain in 1968

The only pitcher to strike out 200 or more in nine consecutive seasons was the Mets' Tom Seaver (1968-76).

The youngest Rookie of the Year winner was the Mets pitcher Dwight Gooden (19 years, 319 days old on final day of 1984 regular season).

The first player from a last-place team to win an MVP Award was Andre Dawson (1987 Cubs).

The record for most consecutive Gold Gloves to begin a career--Ichiro Suzuki (10, 2001-2010).

Four Padres have won the NL Cy Young Award--Randy Jones (1976), Gaylord Perry (1978), Mark Davis (1989) and Jake Peavy (2007).

In his first inning for the Mets Tom Seaver faced two HOFers—Roberto Clemente and Willie Stargell. In his last inning as a Met he faced two HOFers—Tim Lincecum and Andre Dawson.

Bill Melton in 1971 was the first Chicago White Sox to lead the league in HRs – Melton hit 33.

Harmon Killebrew TWICE tied for the American League lead in homeruns, most notably in 1967 when Carl Yastrzemski won his Triple Crown. Both swatters hit 44. Less newsworthy was 1959, when he tied Rocky Colavito. Both hit 42.

But the tie with the most HRs—Ruth and Gehrig each hit 46 in 1931.

CBA DISCUSSIONS

There is plenty of work to be done if the sides are to reach an agreement and avoid postponement of the originally scheduled February start to spring training. The first slate of games is scheduled for Feb. 26, and players typically report to major-league camps two to three weeks ahead of the first game.

PAYROLL

From mlbtraderumors.com, Here's a quick shorthand version of where each team is at, comparing their projected 2022 Opening Day payroll to their previous record outlay for Opening Day. The following numbers are actual dollars, not luxury tax calculations. *(2022 projections courtesy of Jason Martinez of Roster Resource. Payrolls from previous years from Cot's Baseball Contracts.)*

Angels: \$10MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$172MM, previous high was \$182MM in 2021.)

Astros: \$18MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$170MM, previous high was \$188MM in 2021.)

Athletics: \$7MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$85MM, previous high was \$92MM in 2019.)

Blue Jays: \$23MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$140MM, previous high was \$163MM in 2017.)

Braves: \$9MM over. (Current projected payroll of \$140MM, previous high was \$131MM in 2021.)

Brewers: \$2MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$121MM, previous high was \$123MM in 2019.)

Cardinals: \$14MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$150MM, previous high was \$164MM in 2021.)

Cubs: \$89MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$114MM, previous high was \$203MM in 2019.)

Diamondbacks: \$46MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$86MM, previous high was \$132MM in 2018.)

Dodgers: \$45MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$227MM, previous high was \$272MM in 2015.)

Giants: \$75MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$126MM, previous high was \$201MM in 2018.)

Guardians: \$86MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$49MM, previous high was \$135MM in 2018.)

Mariners: \$71MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$87MM, previous high was \$158MM in 2018.)

Marlins: \$46MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$69MM, previous high was \$115MM in 2017.)

Mets: \$68MM over. (Current projected payroll of \$263MM, previous high was \$195MM in 2021.)

Nationals: \$79MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$118MM, previous high was \$197MM in 2019.)

Orioles: \$103MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$61MM, previous high was \$164MM in 2017.)

Padres: \$25MM over. (Current projected payroll of \$199MM, previous high was \$174MM in 2021.)

Phillies: \$10MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$181MM, previous high was \$191MM in 2021.)

Pirates: \$61MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$39MM, previous high was \$100MM in 2016.)

Rangers: \$38MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$127MM, previous high was \$165MM in 2017.)

Rays: \$7MM over. (Current projected payroll of \$84MM, previous high was \$77MM in 2014.)

Red Sox: \$45MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$191MM, previous high was \$236MM in 2019.)

Reds: \$12MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$115MM, previous high was \$127MM in 2019.)

Rockies: \$41MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$104MM, previous high was \$145MM in 2019.)

Royals: \$57MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$86MM, previous high was \$143MM in 2017.)

Tigers: \$83MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$117MM, previous high was \$200MM in 2017.)

Twins: \$38MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$91MM, previous high was \$129MM in 2019.)

White Sox: \$51MM over. (Current projected payroll of \$180MM, previous high was \$129MM in 2021.)

Yankees: \$14MM under. (Current projected payroll of \$214MM, previous high was \$228MM in 2013.)

It clearly shows the delta between the small spenders (10 teams under \$91 million—Twins, Royals, Rays, Pirates, Orioles, Marlins, Mariners, Guardians, Diamondbacks, A's) and the big spenders (9 teams over \$170 million – Yankees, White Sox, Red Sox, Phillies, Padres, Mets, Dodgers, Astros, Angels)

INTERNATIONAL SIGNING PERIOD STARTED YESTERDAY

MLB's 2021-22 International signing period opens today, making it possible for teams to consummate deals with international amateurs from countries outside of the United States and Canada.

Some agreements have been in place for years, but today is the day that players can finally sign on the dotted line. Not all players will actually sign today, but many of the player agreements should come to light. [Baseball America's Ben Badler](#) has put together the list of international free agent signings for every team thus far, with more expected to pour in throughout the day.

Let's refresh the international signing period basics. Though the signing period has traditionally opened on July 2, the pandemic delayed the opening of the 2020-2021 signing period. This is the [second consecutive season](#) that international signings have opened on January 15th instead. Teams have an 11-month window to sign international amateurs, with this year's signing period set to close on December 15, 2022.

Prospects aged 16 and up – born after Sept. 1, 2005 – are eligible to sign minor league contracts with teams for signing bonuses that fall within the constraints of a league-allotted bonus pool. [MLBTR's Mark Polishuk](#) recently posted each team's pool allotment, with smaller market clubs typically having the largest available pools. This year, the Diamondbacks, Cardinals, Guardians, Orioles, Padres, Pirates, Rockies, and Royals each with \$6,262,600 to spend.

MLB's international signing period opened Saturday, and the New York Yankees boosted their farm system by agreeing to sign shortstop Roderick Arias, according to multiple reports. Arias, a 17-year-old native of the Dominican Republic, is the top-ranked international prospect of 2022 by [MLB Pipeline](#) and agreed to a \$4 million deal with New York, MLB.com reported.

The international signing period typically starts in July, but MLB and the Players Association agreed to push it back due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2021-22 signing period closes on Dec. 15. Not all players who agree to deals with teams during the signing period will sign their contracts immediately.

The [Washington Nationals](#) followed the Yankees by landing Cuban outfielder Cristhian Vaquero, the No. 2 international prospect by MLB Pipeline, with a \$4.9 million deal, a source confirmed to *The Athletic*.

Vaquero is a switch hitter who can play all three outfield positions. He picked up switch hitting after leaving Cuba for the Dominican Republic, according to MLB.com.

Ricardo Cabrera (No. 3 prospect, [Reds](#)), William Bergolla (No. 4, [Phillies](#)) and Oscar Colás (No. 5, White Sox) round out the top five prospects who agreed to sign with teams on Saturday, per reports. The rest of the top-10 prospects who have agreed to deals include Anthony Gutierrez (No. 6, [Rangers](#)), Samuel Munoz (No. 7, [Dodgers](#)), Lazaro Montes (No. 8, [Mariners](#)), Ryan Reckley (No. 9, [Giants](#)) and Diego Benitez (No. 10, [Braves](#)).

YANKEES NAME RACHEL BALKOVEC AS MANAGER OF LOWER-A AFFILIATE

(a longer piece on Balkovec is at the end of this week's issue)

The Yankees have made a groundbreaking hire in their minor league ranks, as The Athletic's Lindsey Adler ([Twitter link](#)) reports that Rachel Balkovec will manage the organization's lower-A team in Tampa next season. Balkovec will become the first woman to ever manage an affiliated minor league club.

This is the latest of several barriers broken over the course of Balkovec's decade-long career in baseball. Beginning as a strength and conditioning coordinator in the Cardinals' farm system from 2011-15, she then moved to a similar role with the Astros from 2016-18, working with both Houston's Latin American prospects and then the Astros' Double-A affiliate. She has spent the last two seasons working within the Yankees' minor league system as a hitting coach, following some time spent working with Driveline and in the Netherlands working with the Dutch national teams.

Along the way, Balkovec has routinely been noted as the first woman to be hired in these positions, whether in her strength/conditioning jobs or as a hitting coach. The 34-year-old will now take yet another step forward managing some of the Yankees' top young prospects, and Balkovec is undoubtedly already familiar with many of these players due to her coaching work.

As Balkovec told [The Associated Press' Ronald Blum](#) in 2019, "*I have aspirations of being in a more leadership role from a broader standpoint,*" mentioning the possibility of one day being hired as a "*director of baseball operations or farm director or GM.*" Such goals aren't as remote as they once seemed for women in baseball, considering that Kim Ng is the Marlins general manager, Eve Rosenbaum is the Orioles' director of baseball development, and Sara Goodrum was recently hired as the Astros' director of player development. As for on-field personnel, Alyssa Nakken is a member of the Giants coaching staff, while Bianca Smith (Red Sox) and Rachel Folden (Cubs) have worked coaching jobs in the minor leagues for their respective teams.

Balkovec coached in the Australian Baseball League after the COVID-19 pandemic canceled the 2020 Minor League season, and was named to the coaching staff for the 2021 All-Star Futures Game at Coors Field prior to last season's Midsummer Classic.

Balkovec has an extensive background in cutting-edge analytics, researching eye tracking for hitters and hip movement for pitchers at Driveline Baseball, a data-driven performance center in Washington State. She also has a pair of master's degrees in the science of human movement.

With the FCL Yankees, Balkovec worked closely with several of New York's top prospects, including the franchise's [No. 2 prospect](#) (and [No. 17 overall](#)) per MLB Pipeline, center fielder Jasson Dominguez. Dominguez was promoted midseason last year to Low-A Tampa, the club Balkovec will reportedly be managing.

"It's no secret, but Mr. Dominguez has been a fun one to work with," Balkovec said when she and Dominguez were both named to the Futures Game roster. "He is incredibly intelligent, and his aptitude is high. I would consider him a leader among the group here. He's very young, obviously, but he carries himself in the right way. I've been able to work with him pretty closely, and he's just a joy to work with as far as his mannerisms and the way he acts."

As she has ascended through the Yankees' organizational ranks, Balkovec has received rave reviews from colleagues, including senior director of player development Kevin Reese and Minor League hitting coordinator Dillon Lawson, who strongly recommended Balkovec to general manager Brian Cashman for the FCL hitting coach position.

"[Lawson] was extremely impressed about her background in strength and conditioning and the biomechanics side," Cashman said at the time. "When I had Kevin Reese and Dillon rave to such a level about her as they did, that was all good enough for me."

Balkovec was asked in a [Jan. 2020 Q&A with MiLB.com](#) what challenge she was looking forward to most about becoming the FCL Yankees' hitting coach.

"Swing mechanics are right up my alley; this is something I feel very confident in," Balkovec said. "So what I'm looking forward to is sitting next to the manager and also leaning on the other hitting coaches that will be there for game strategy and approach."

Now, Balkovec will have a chance to fill out the lineup card herself.

"I'm having a blast," she said in July. "I'm being pushed here, and hopefully pushing some people along the way."

TORONTO BLUE JAYS MAKE HISTORY WITH MNORS COACH

Jaime Vieira will become the first woman in a coaching role in the Blue Jays organization, after the club hired her Monday to be a Minor League hitting coach ahead of the 2022 season.

Vieira was most recently working in the Blue Jays' baseball operations department as a research and development intern, a position she held since last February. Prior to that, she was a programs specialist and coordinator for the Jays Care Foundation, which has since 1992 used baseball to teach life skills and create social change for youth in marginalized communities across Canada.

Vieira studied kinesiology and exercise science at the University of Guelph-Humber in Toronto, where she also played softball and later returned as a coach, then earned a master of science degree from York University.

Vieira will be the most visible woman in an on-field role for the Blue Jays since former head athletic trainer Nikki Huffman (2018-2019), who was the second woman to hold that title for a team in one of North America's four major sports leagues.

JON LESTER RETIRES WITH 200 WINS, 3 WORLD SERIES RINGS

[Jon Lester](#), a three-time World Series champion with the [Cubs](#) and Red Sox, a 200-game winner and one of the best free-agent signings in Chicago sports history, announced his retirement Wednesday on ESPN.com.

Known for his consistency and composure in the biggest games and biggest markets, Lester made 30-plus starts in 12 consecutive seasons between 2008 and 2019. Lester posted a 2.51 ERA in 154 career postseason innings, cementing his reputation as one of the best big-game pitchers from his era and making a case for serious Hall of Fame consideration.

Originally selected by the Red Sox in the second round of the 2002 draft out of Bellarmine Prep in Tacoma, Wash., Lester became a fixture in the Fenway Park rotation, a homegrown left-hander who excelled in that high-pressure environment and celebrated World Series titles in 2007 and 2013. He won three World Series rings with two iconic franchises, taking a pair with the Red Sox and helping the Cubs end 108 years of misery in 2016.

Lester was a key piece for the Red Sox in winning both the 2007 and 2013 World Series, but perhaps his most memorable moment with the club was [his no-hitter on May 19, 2008](#). Lester had missed much of the 2006 and 2007 seasons receiving treatment for lymphoma, but returned triumphantly late in 2007, starting the clinching game in the World Series.

It was his no-hitter the following May against the [Kansas City Royals](#) that put him on the map as one of the league's best pitchers. He struck out nine and walked two that day, going on to make 33 starts with a 3.21 ERA that season.

Lester made his major-league debut in 2006, a hot-shot prospect for a Red Sox team still finding its footing among the most reliably successful organizations in the sport. He was solid as a rookie, but Lester's season was cut short in August when doctors [discovered a treatable form of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma](#). He underwent treatment at Dana-Farber in Boston and the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Clinic in Seattle — he'd grown up in Washington state — and returned in 2007 to make 11 regular-season starts. The Red Sox won nine of them. He went on to pitch twice out of the bullpen in the ALCS before making his first career postseason start in Game 4 of the World Series, delivering 5 2/3 scoreless innings to finish a sweep of the [Rockies](#).

For the next 11 years, from 2008 to 2018, Lester made five All-Star teams and finished top five in Cy Young voting three times. During that time, he also pitched in three World Series and won them all, finishing with a 1.77 World Series ERA and a 2.51 career postseason ERA.

TWINS TO RETIRE JIM KAAT'S NUMBER RETIRED

The [Minnesota Twins](#) will retire Jim Kaat's No. 36 at a ceremony in July, the club said Wednesday, about a week before the former pitcher and longtime broadcaster is inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame. Kaat will be the ninth Twins player to have his number retired.

Kaat, 83, was elected to the Hall of Fame in December by the Golden Days Era Committee, along with Gil Hodges, Minnie Miñoso and Tony Oliva. The Early Baseball Era Committee elected Bud Fowler and Buck O'Neil. They will be inducted in Cooperstown, N.Y., on July 24.

On July 16, before a game against the White Sox in Minneapolis, the Twins will retire Kaat's number alongside Harmon Killebrew's No. 3, Rod Carew's No. 29, Oliva's No. 6, Kent Hrbek's No. 14, Kirby Puckett's No. 34, Bert Blyleven's No. 28, Tom Kelly's No. 10 and [Joe Mauer](#)'s No. 7. Mauer was the last Twins player to have his number retired in 2019.

Kaat pitched for 25 years in the major leagues, starting with his rookie season with the Washington Senators in 1959. He retired after the 1983 season, after a stint with the [Cardinals](#). He won 283 career games with a 3.45 ERA, hurled 180 complete games with 31 shutouts and 2,461 strikeouts.

His lasting impression came with the Twins, the club he pitched with for 15 years. He holds the Minnesota record for wins (190), starts (433) and innings (3,014 1/3).

Kaat also won seven Emmy Awards as a broadcaster, working the booth for the Twins and [Yankees](#), along with national coverage of the World Series, American League Championship Series, College World Series and Summer Olympics.

He's the Twins' all-time leader in wins (190) and innings (3,014), and the runner-up in both categories, Bert Blyleven, had his number retired at Target Field in 2011. Kaat last pitched for the Twins in 1973.

Blyleven's turn finally came after he was voted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame on the 14th and second-to-last try in 2011, nearly a decade after he was inducted into the Twins' team Hall of Fame. Kaat has been in the Twins' team Hall of Fame since 2001, but now that the 83-year-old is joining Blyleven in Cooperstown this summer — elected by a special committee last month, along with former teammate Oliva — there was extra motivation for the Twins to also retire his number.

Kaat began his career with the Washington Senators and was an unproven 22-year-old when they moved to Minnesota and became the Twins in 1961. For the next 13 seasons he anchored the Twins' rotation, topping 200 innings 10 times, including a 305-inning, 25-win season in 1966. Kaat has also remained part of the Twins organization in retirement, broadcasting games and appearing often at spring training and TwinsFest.

IMMACULATE INNINGS (3 UP, 3 DOWN, 9 PITCHES, 9 STRIKES, SEE YA)

A subscriber/baseball coach chipped in with these:

Sloppy Thurston did it in 1923 for the White Sox. What a name! Love it.

Calton Fisk was on the wrong end of an immaculate inning twice and was the last out both times: 1967 against Al Downing and again in 1972 against Nolan Ryan.

And the few pitchers who did it 3 times? Sandy Koufax, Chris Sale, Max Scherzer.

Scherzer and Nolan Ryan are the only pitchers to have one in both leagues.

[Danny Jackson](#) has the only postseason immaculate inning in Major League history: [October 24, 1985, Game 5](#) of the [1985 World Series](#) for the Royals (the lefty pitched in 3 World Series—'85 Royals, '90 Reds, '93 Phillies).

Some well-known names are on the list (baseballalmanac.com) including Lefty Grove, Jim Bunning, Ron Guidry, Mike Mussina, Pedro Martinez, AJ Burnett, Felix Hernandez, Robin Roberts, Bruce Sutter, David Cone, Orel Hershisier, Josh Hader.

All time it has been done 40 times in the AL and 63 in the NL.

METS TO RETIRE KEITH HERNANDEZ NUMBER 17

Beloved by millions for his contributions to a championship, his memorable left-handed swing, his defensive prowess and his decades-long career as a broadcaster, Keith Hernandez is about to receive the most exclusive honor the Mets can bestow. The team announced Tuesday that it plans to retire Hernandez's No. 17 during a July 9 ceremony at Citi Field.

Hernandez will become the fourth player and the sixth individual to have his number retired by the Mets, joining Tom Seaver (No. 41), Mike Piazza (No. 31), Jerry Koosman (No. 36), Gil Hodges (No. 14), and Casey Stengel (No. 37). In addition, No. 42 is retired across baseball for Jackie Robinson.

Although Hernandez spent only seven of his 17 big league seasons with the Mets, he continues to have a significant impact on the organization to this day. Coming to the team in a 1983 trade, Hernandez gave the Mets instant credibility as a former National League MVP. He was one of the catalysts behind New York's rapid rise to contention in the mid-1980s, then one of the anchors of their 1986 World Series championship team.

Over his seven seasons in Queens, Hernandez made three All-Star teams and won five Gold Gloves and a Silver Slugger, slashing .297/.387/.429 with 80 homers and 159 doubles. He became the franchise's first captain in 1987 and entered the Mets Hall of Fame at Shea Stadium a decade later. Between the Mets and the Cardinals, who inducted him into their team Hall of Fame last summer, Hernandez amassed a record 11 Gold Gloves at first base.

Since 1999, he has served as an analyst during Mets games, doing so alongside Gary Cohen and Ron Darling on SNY since 2006. Hernandez is also well-known for his role on a "Seinfeld" episode in 1992

Others, such as Dwight Gooden, Darryl Strawberry, Gary Carter and David Wright, could follow in subsequent years.

Hernandez, of course, was not the last player to wear No. 17. Since he left the Mets after the 1989 season, 15 players have worn No. 17 — the most recent being Fernando Tatis in 2010. Hernandez had worn No. 37 with the [Cardinals](#) because No. 17 had already been retired for Dizzy Dean. When he came to the Mets, Casey Stengel's No. 37 had been retired. no Met has worn Gary Carter's No. 8 since 2002. No one has worn [David Wright](#)'s No. 5 since he finished playing in 2018.

Hernandez is remarkably close to the average numbers for a Hall of Fame first baseman, according to FanGraphs' Jay Jaffe. Hernandez's 60.3 career wins above replacement rank 20th all-time at the position, his WAR over his peak seven seasons ranks 21st, and his JAWS score (Jaffe's method of combining those and other metrics) ranks him 20th. That's just behind Hall of Famers Eddie Murray, George Sisler and Hank Greenberg and ahead of Hall of Famers like Joe Torre, Tony Perez, Orlando Cepeda and Hodges — and David Ortiz, who has the best chance of being inducted this year.

CONFESSIONS OF A HALL OF FAME VOTER—I'VE CHANGED MY MIND AT TIMES, AND THAT'S OK

Dan Connolly, Orioles writer for The Athletic

Whenever I reveal my annual National Baseball Hall of Fame ballot, [as I did two weeks ago](#), there is inevitably a faction on board with my reasonings and another that thinks I'm a moron who should lose his voting privileges for choosing any combination of the 10 candidates I ultimately selected.

I'm OK with both sentiments. It is a privilege to choose who should be in the hallowed halls of Cooperstown. And my ballot is never 100 percent right. No one's is. That's kind of the whole point, why [hundreds of veteran baseball writers](#) are commissioned to vote and why those who are named on 75 percent of submissions get the call from the Hall.

I carefully consider each candidate each year, make my checks and then write about it, so you can follow my thinking even if you don't agree with it. I look at this as an honor, as do most of my fellow voters.

That, to me, is one of the widespread fallacies of the voting process: That voters don't take it seriously. That we view it as a personal platform and choose who we like or who was nice to us and screw over those who were nasty.

Maybe that's old-school thinking. But I've talked to a lot of current writers throughout this process, and no one has ever made that point to me. It's about statistics and role and impact and, yes, character — as is stated on the ballot.

Those who don't vote for Barry Bonds don't do it because he was insolent; they don't vote for him because they believe he cheated the game. Curt Schilling and his borderline candidacy is a different situation; he's going to lose votes this year, including mine, because he specifically stated he didn't want to be put in by the writers. I, for one, had plenty of others to choose from and didn't want to waste my vote on someone who vowed to refuse induction. Otherwise, I would have had him checked, again, for his final year.

Every voter — and every fan — looks at these complicated situations slightly differently.

There is something, however, that I think is lost in translation between those of us whose votes count annually and the fans who are simply invested in the process.

The most common criticisms I hear (besides "why do you support cheaters?") is "How does a player get worse or better after he retired? How can you vote for a guy one year and not the

next or vice versa? Why do you need extra time to consider someone who finished his career five-plus years ago? Shouldn't you do that his first year of eligibility?"

Before I was a voter, I shared the same skepticism. All of these guys are retired. Make your call and stick with it for 10 years. A player is or isn't a Hall of Famer. Simple as that.

But it's not that simple when you put that pen in your hand and make a call on an excellent player's legacy. Plenty of gray area here. And a responsibility to get it as right as possible.

Having only 10 spots on each ballot, especially during the recent logjam due to "Steroid Era" players, requires many voters to put together a list of the 10 most worthy candidates instead of who is and who isn't a Hall of Famer (otherwise, I might have 12 to 14 this year).

Due to additions and subtractions on each ballot, I choose to evaluate every candidacy anew. Sometimes a guy falls off my list because there are others I think belong more. Sometimes a guy falls off my list because he is borderline and something has occurred that has made me switch a positive into a negative (such as allegations against Omar Vizquel, someone I previously voted for but understood was on the cusp and needed those good character marks).

Sometimes I have added a guy who has been borderline because either a spot opened on my ballot or because arguments made by others I respect just made enough sense to me to shift from maybe to yes. Fred McGriff, in his final year, is an example of this. He didn't get better in that decade; I just changed my mind after reviewing his career for the 10th time.

Again, he was always in my thoughts as a Hall of Famer. I just finally said yes for the Top 10.

And that brings me to, perhaps, the biggest bone of contention readers had with my ballot this year. In voting for shortstop Jimmy Rollins, I wrote that his offensive contributions, strong defensive play, base-running abilities and leadership qualities made him the whole package for me, which fits my mold of a Hall of Famer.

But I also wrote that I wanted Rollins, a first-year candidate, to remain on the ballot for another year so other voters can have more time to consider his candidacy. I did the same for Torii Hunter last year — made sure I voted for him as a way to help him get to 5 percent and stay on for another year. And another review.

I didn't do it for Kenny Lofton in 2013 — which saw arguably the most crowded ballot in history since the first or second year of voting — and a truly worthy, all-around candidate dropped off after one attempt. I'd still probably be voting for Lofton had he made it through that first year.

And that's what fans don't always understand about this process.

Lofton should have had more than one shot, but the 10-candidate limit torpedoed his candidacy — nine members of that 2013 ballot are in the Hall now, and that doesn't include Bonds, Roger Clemens or Schilling.

The question that year wasn't whether Lofton was worthy. It was "Is he more worthy than 10 others on a given voter's ballot?"

And that's a different question.

As a player remains on the ballot, voters tend to listen more to the arguments as to why his name should be checked. After all, no one wants to whiff on a guy who really deserves to be in, right?

Tim Raines Sr. is the ultimate example of that. He received just 22 percent of the vote in 2009, his second year on the ballot, but the total increased every year after that until he received 86 percent in his 10th year, toppling the 75 percent required.

Raines didn't get better in retirement. A lot of people just came around to the thinking that his skill set made him unique and underrated. And they changed their minds as they researched more and more.

That's not a flaw in the system. That's one of the beauties of it.

There should be no shame in reevaluating. How we view baseball production and statistics has changed dramatically in the past two decades. In fact, it has changed several times.

So, examining players through evolving prisms as we continue to evaluate them is fair game.

Certainly, the system is far from perfect. And I often hear from baseball fans who feel Cooperstown has been watered down. But their specific complaints almost always include the inductions of players who were rejected by the Baseball Writers' Association of America but approved by various veterans' committees.

Appearing on 75 percent of ballots is not easy. There are plenty of factors that go into the final numbers each year.

One of them is the voters' prerogative to reevaluate and change their minds. To add and subtract. To look at each candidate each year and make sure you aren't missing anything.

That's one aspect that may not make sense when you are on the outside. But, trust me, it's part of the weighty responsibility of trying to get it right when you're voting.

JIMMY ROLLINS HALL OF FAME CASE—IS THERE A PLACE IN COOPERSTOWN AND THE 2008 PHILLIES?

Jayson Stark in *The Athletic*

“We’re talking about big-time players. ... And they were a big part of baseball.”

— Former Phillies manager Charlie Manuel on Jimmy Rollins, Chase Utley, Ryan Howard and the Hall of Fame credentials of his 2008 World Series champs.

It’s been two weeks since I dropped off my 2022 Hall of Fame ballot at the post office. (*Hey, we’re keeping the Postal Service in business. Somebody has to!*) I’ll reveal next week which names were on that ballot.

But on the [newest “Starkville” edition](#) of *The Athletic* Baseball Show, I admitted something to Charlie Manuel and my co-host, Doug Glanville: There were 30 names on this Hall ballot. And for me, the most complicated case of all of them didn’t belong to Alex Rodriguez, Curt Schilling or Manny Ramirez.

Nope. The guy I couldn’t stop thinking about was Manuel’s longtime shortstop, Jimmy Rollins.

Is there a place in Cooperstown for Jimmy Rollins someday? I honestly don’t know the answer to that.

Is there a place in Cooperstown for any of the 2008 Phillies — for Chase Utley, for Ryan Howard, for Cole Hamels, for a team that won one World Series and then fielded even better teams in the three years that followed? I honestly don’t know the answer to that, either.

But those are questions I’ve heard almost nobody else write about, talk about or think about in the weeks leading up to Hall of Fame election day on Jan. 25. Maybe it’s because I’m a Philadelphian that I find these former Phillies so fascinating. But we’re also talking about historically significant figures on a historically significant team.

So if nobody else is going to take on this topic, it might as well be me, especially in a week in which Doug and I spent an hour picking Manuel’s brain on all of this. Ready? Here we go.

The case for Jimmy Rollins

Is there still a place in the Hall of Fame for players whose skill sets don’t fit into how modern metrics define “greatness” in the 21st century? The more I thought about this, the more I decided that Jimmy Rollins is the latest, most intriguing test case of whether that’s still possible.

In a moment, I’ll get into the data that drives so many voters to conclude he isn’t a Hall of Famer. But first, check out the reasons I think he deserves a long, thorough look on this ballot.

Start with this: There has never been a shortstop, in the history of baseball, who had the career Jimmy Rollins had. Not Jeter. Not Ripken. Not Honus Wagner. Not anybody, in more than a century of professional baseball. This man's Hall of Fame credentials are his alone.

So was this the career of a Hall of Famer? You decide:

- He's the all-time hits leader in the history of the Phillies, his 131-year-old franchise.
- He is still the only National League shortstop to win an MVP award (2007) in the last 25 years.
- He's the only shortstop (ever) in the 200-homer, 400-stolen base club.
- He ripped off nine seasons with at least 50 extra-base hits and 30 steals, more seasons that fit that description than any shortstop who ever lived.
- His 857 extra-base hits are more than any shortstop in history not named Jeter or Ripken.
- Rollins, Jeter and Ripken would also be the only shortstops ever with at least 200 homers and 2,400 hits.
- And then there's the other side of the ball – where Jimmy Rollins won four Gold Gloves and, according to FanGraphs, accumulated 141.1 Defensive Runs Above Average, more than any NL shortstop in the 25 seasons since the retirement of a guy named Ozzie Smith.

So, let's add up that whole package. Because there hasn't been a shortstop in the history of the game who did all of this:

An MVP award ... *and* four Gold Gloves ... *and* more than 2,400 hits ... *and* more than 200 homers ... *and* those 857 extra-base hits ... *and* the most hits in the history of his primary franchise.

Not to mention that we are talking about a player who ... strung together the longest hitting streak by a shortstop (38 games) *since 1894* ... is one of four players who ever fired off 20 homers, 20 doubles, 20 triples and 20 steals in the same season ... is the only NL shortstop in nearly half a century to start all 162 games in a season ... was durable enough to play at least 140 games at short in 12 different seasons, a total reached in the expansion era by only Smith, Jeter, Ripken and Omar Vizquel ... also started an All-Star Game ... and was the clear energizer centerpiece of a team that won the World Series.

So are those the credentials of a Hall of Fame shortstop? His longtime manager (obviously) needed no convincing.

"Without a doubt," Charlie Manuel said on "Starkville, "I think Jimmy Rollins is a Hall of Famer ... because Jimmy Rollins was a 5-8, five-tool player. I mean, he could win the game for you in any way that you can imagine. ... I don't see how we could replace him on our team at shortstop and actually have the success that we had, just because of who he was.

“He happened to come along at the right time and be on the right team and things like that. And his personality, his talent and the fact that he was a big-moment (player). He was a big moment in the game. You want him up there.”

OK, allow me to translate. That’s the “Charlie-speak” way of saying Rollins just had That Thing. He had that unquantifiable ability to elevate everyone around him. I know there are people who don’t believe That Thing exists. But I was there. I saw it. And Jimmy Rollins had it.

Every player on his team wanted the ball hit to him. Every player on his team wanted him at the plate in those moments that mattered. Didn’t matter what the decimal points said. He believed. He made others believe.

There’s no metric that measures that. But hey, Ted Lasso could explain it to you — or so could Charlie Manuel: “It’s all about winning,” the ex-manager said, “(or) it should be.”

The case against Jimmy Rollins

But wait. I said this was complicated. And the reason it’s complicated is the other side of the story.

When people ask me what I look at to formulate my Hall of Fame votes, the answer is: *Everything!* So no need to tell me what the cold, intangible-free data tells us about Rollins’ career. I’ve seen it.

- A below-league-average OPS+ of just 95. Only one Hall of Fame shortstop in the division-play era had a lower career OPS+ — a fellow named Ozzie Smith (87). And he had, shall we say, other attributes.
- A career batting average of only .265. Once again, the only Hall of Fame shortstop in the division-play era with a lower average is Ozzie (.262).
- A back-end-of-his-career decline. That showed up both on offense (.247 average/91 OPS+ in Rollins’ 30s, versus .277/99 in his 20s) and defense (minus-23 Defensive Runs Above Average in his 30s, plus-66 Defensive Runs Above Average in his 20s).
- And a total Wins Above Replacement, for his career, of 47.6, which would rank above just one shortstop elected by the writers: Rabbit Maranville (44.0) — who played his last game 87 years ago!

Even defensively, the data tells a different story about Rollins’ leatherwork than the eye test. Baseball-Reference computes Rollins’ Defensive WAR, over a 17-year career, at a surprisingly low 15.9. That places him in a neighborhood populated by shortstops such as Clint Barmes (16.1), Bucky Dent (16.5) and Tim Foli (16.5) — and far below the likes of Ozzie (44.2), Ripken (35.7) or Vizquel (29.5).

Even those FanGraphs Defensive Runs Above Average numbers I cited could be viewed as misleading. They're a counting stat, for one thing. And if you look deeper — at Rollins' [Ultimate Zone Rating](#), for instance — it places him well behind the likes of J.J. Hardy and Jack Wilson, and suggests he was more comparable to shortstops like Alexei Ramirez and Orlando Cabrera than to the elite glove men of his time.

But men like Charlie Manuel have trouble accepting those metrics. They would rather believe their eyeballs, after years of watching a defender with a spectacular feel for the moment and off-the-charts baseball I.Q.

"In all the years I had him," Manuel said, "I never had anyone ever tell me something that he did wrong on defense. Jimmy Rollins had a tremendous arm on cutoffs and relays, (and he understood) the way you play the game, everything about how to play the game."

I generally believe that numbers don't lie. But I also recognize that defensive numbers are the least reliable numbers in the game — and that the defensive metrics of Rollins' prime were also far less precise than the data of today.

It's those metrics that drag down his WAR numbers. And it's those WAR numbers that drive away voters who don't believe in eye tests.

So is there a path to 75 percent, a scenario in which Rollins gets the 300 votes or so it would take to send him to Cooperstown? It's hard to see that path now. But it also seems clear his time on the ballot won't end with this election, as Ryan Thibodaux's [Hall of Fame Tracker](#) shows him closing in on the 20 or so votes he'd need to reach 5 percent of the vote. So let this conversation continue. Meanwhile ...

What about the rest of the 2008 Phillies?

They won a World Series. They played in two World Series in a row. They won five straight division titles — and won more games in every one of those seasons than they'd won the year before.

So how dominant were the 2007-11 Phillies? They were so obviously the best team in their league over those five seasons that only one other NL team was even within *50 wins* of them.

2007-11 NL heavyweights

Phillies 473 wins

Cardinals 431

Dodgers 423

But other than Roy Halladay, who came along for only the final two years (2010-11) of that run, those teams have produced no Hall of Famers. So if that doesn't change, if nobody from the 2008-09 World Series teams makes it to Cooperstown, here's what that would mean:

- Among the 101 teams that won the World Series from 1903 through 2005, only two — the 1997 Marlins and 2002 Angels — still lack a Hall of Fame player or manager. And if Gary Sheffield, Jim Leyland or Mike Scioscia ever make it, they could knock both of those teams off that list.

- But also, in the World Series era, from 1903 through the Phillies' 2008-09 seasons, 25 teams went to at least two straight World Series and won at least one of them. Every one of those teams has at least one Hall of Famer player or manager — except those Phillies.

So when I informed their manager that his Phillies could end up as the only team in that group with zero Hall of Famers, Manuel found that hard to comprehend.

"Yeah, that definitely surprised me," Manuel said. "I would think that our guys would get talked about more and get more attention. You know, when I think about it, especially (with) players like 'J-Roll' and Ryan Howard, we're talking about big-time players. If you set there, day in and day out, and get to watch them play like I did, I know exactly what they could do and how valuable they were to our team. And they were a big part of baseball."

So is there a Hall of Famer in that group? It will come down to these four players.

RYAN HOWARD: It's his first year on the ballot, and his peak years (2005-11) were monstrous. He led the entire sport in home-run ratio in those years. And in the four seasons from 2006-09, he *averaged* 143 RBIs and a tick under 50 home runs a year. Only three other players in history did that in any four-year period: Babe Ruth, Ken Griffey Jr. and Sammy Sosa.

But from the moment Howard blew out his Achilles on the final swing of the 2011 NLDS, he was never the same in any aspect of the game. So with "only" 382 homers and just 14.7 bWAR, that fiery peak won't be enough to save him from the Hall of Fame's one-and-done club — not that there's any shame in hanging out with anybody in that club.

CHASE UTLEY: He's still two years away from the ballot. But if I were setting the Vegas odds, I'd made Utley the clear favorite from this group to get elected. He was on a no-doubt Hall of Fame path through his age-30 season, ranking third in the sport in WAR over that span, behind only Albert Pujols and A-Rod. But from 2010 on, that path got rockier, as Utley tried to will himself to play through knee and hip issues.

Still, from 2005-14, his 10 best seasons, guess who led all second basemen in WAR? Right. Chase Utley. So unlike his double-play partner, Utley's case is built for every data-driven voter in North America. And unlike Rollins, Utley has the metrics *and* That Thing that pushed everyone he played with to try to match his [legendary intensity](#).

“For me,” Manuel said, “he’s a Hall of Famer. You can maneuver numbers any way you kind of want to. But now, when we talk about Chase Utley, we’re talking about the most prepared person (to play baseball) that I’ve ever been around.”

COLE HAMELS: Over Hamels’ first 14 seasons (2006-19), he was so consistently good, he ranked fourth among all pitchers in the sport in WAR (58.4), behind only Justin Verlander (72.3), Clayton Kershaw (65.2) and Zack Greinke (61.0.) And there was a time in October 2008, when the Phillies were winning all five of his overpowering postseason starts, when he seemed bound for greatness.

But despite nearly a decade and a half of dependable quality for contenders in Philadelphia, Texas and Chicago, he never had a single year of true Kershaw-esque dominance. So if you peruse [his Baseball-Reference page](#), you’ll find he had no top-four Cy Young finishes and only once landed in the top five in his league in bWAR, ERA or strikeouts. It’s hard to see how that adds up to a day on the podium in Cooperstown. But even at age 38, coming off two injury-plagued seasons, Hamels aspires to keep going. So don’t tell him that!

CHARLIE MANUEL: He managed only 10 full seasons, but Manuel won his division in six of them, reached two World Series and was a beloved figure in the game. That was enough to propel him onto the Today’s Game Era ballot two years ago. But with “only” 1,000 career wins, he wasn’t close to election.

On one hand, he proved in Philadelphia he was great at his job. On the other hand, he didn’t get a shot to manage until he was 56, so he ended up managing just 1,826 regular-season games. That would be, by far, the fewest of any Hall of Fame manager in the expansion era. So for all Manuel accomplished, this team’s hopes for a Hall of Famer won’t be resting on him.

In their time, those 2008-09 Phillies had the look, the feel, the trophies and the rings of a special team. What they’re learning now, more than a decade later, is that a place in the Hall of Fame can be more elusive than all of that. So now, what they’ll have the next decade to ponder is this:

When you’ve won a World Series, how much does Cooperstown — or anything else — even matter?

“Hey, listen,” said Charlie Manuel, “I don’t know about other people. I can only talk for myself. I’m about winning ... (because) winning takes care of everything.”

ONE TEAM, ONE HALL

By Joe Posnanski

OK, so Bill James has a fascinating new study out about the Hall of Fame. You should absolutely read the whole thing — it's called Vagabonds and Homebodies and it asks a question that has long fascinated me: How much more likely is a player who has played substantially for one team to get into the Hall of Fame than a player who has bounced around? I'm not sure I worded that sentence especially well, so let's call it the Ortiz vs. Sheffield question.

As I've written here, Ortiz and Sheffield have very similar Hall of Fame cases. They were both incredible hitters, subpar fielders, and both have steroid marks on their record. But Ortiz is widely viewed as a much better Hall of Fame candidate. There are numerous things that separate them, as I wrote, but for our purposes here one of those things is that Ortiz is almost entirely associated with the Boston Red Sox, while Sheffield played for eight teams and isn't strongly linked with any of them.

How much of a difference can that make?

Well, Bill has studied this in classic Bill James fashion, diving deep, creating new methods of study (the essay has SIX appendices) and his conclusion is that one-team affiliation has made a MASSIVE difference in Hall of Fame candidates. Absolutely massive. As he writes, a player who jumps from team to team may be reducing his Hall of Fame chances by FIFTY PERCENT compared to a similar player who is linked to one team.

Now, a couple of things before looking at Bill's conclusions: One-team affiliation doesn't necessarily mean the player played for only one team. Ortiz is a perfect example; he played 455 games for the Minnesota Twins. And yet, he's as Boston as Ted Williams or Carl Yastrzemski. This is because he was only a GREAT player for Boston. He performed all his memorable feats of strength for the Red Sox. By WAR, more than 95% of his value was in Boston. He's a one-team guy.

Also, none of this is to say that great one-team players ALWAYS get into the Hall of Fame or that great multi-team players ALWAYS don't. That's obviously not true at all. Some of the most famous non-Hall of Famers — Lou Whitaker, Dwight Evans, Don Mattingly, Thurman Munson, Dave Concepcion — were one-team players.

And plenty of those who played for numerous teams — Rickey Henderson, Goose Gossage, Robbie Alomar, Jim Thome, Ivan Rodriguez, Randy Johnson, Mike Piazza, Joe Morgan, Bert Blyleven, on and on — are in the Hall of Fame.

But the question here is: Does it help to be largely associated with one team?

And Bill convincingly shows that, yes, it helps a lot. You can look at the study itself for details, but Bill breaks it down by Win Shares and at basically every level the players who are most associated with one team are more likely to be elected to the Hall of Fame than the players who are not.

You can also see this, more often than not, in the Hall of Fame percentages. Look at the highest Hall of Fame percentages ever:

— Mariano Rivera, 100% — Yankees

— Derek Jeter, 99.7% — Yankees

— Ken Griffey Jr., 99.3% — three teams, though I think he's pretty powerfully associated with Seattle.

— Tom Seaver, 98.8% — four teams, though let's be honest: He's a New York Met through and through.

— Nolan Ryan, 98.8% — four teams, and his associations are a bit cloudier, it's not especially clear if he was more an Angel or an Astro or a Ranger (he wasn't really a Met). But he's Nolan Ryan, a brand all to himself.

— Cal Ripken, 98.5% — Orioles

— Ty Cobb, 98.2% — Did play briefly for Philadelphia, but he's all Tigers.

— George Brett, 98.2% — Royals

— Henry Aaron, 97.8% — Officially played for two franchises (Brewers at the end), but the Braves did move midway through his career, sort of splitting him up just a bit.

— Tony Gwynn, 97.6% — Padres

— Randy Johnson, 97.3% — Played for six teams, but really was connected to Seattle and Arizona.

— Greg Maddux, 97.2% — Officially played for four teams (who can forget those Padres years?) but he's a Brave with some Cub bonds.

— Chipper Jones, 97.2% — Braves

— Mike Schmidt, 96.5% — Phillies

— Johnny Bench, 96.5% — Reds

So there you go — of the top 15, almost all of them were essentially one team players.

Now, look at the 10 players on the lowest end of the percentages:

— Al Simmons, 75.4% — Played for seven franchises, and was a star for two of them, the Athletics and the White Sox.

— Fergie Jenkins, 75.4% — Fergie played for four different franchises; he's probably most bonded with the Cubs, but he was also very good for the Texas Rangers.

— Ralph Kiner, 75.4% — Three different teams, though he was really only a star with Pittsburgh. Anyway, he's probably most associated with the Mets because of his 40-plus year time as broadcaster.

— Willie Keeler, 75.5% — Keeler played for four different teams and it's unclear which one was really his. He wears a Brooklyn cap in the Hall of Fame, but he actually played more games for the Yankees and the Orioles.

— Early Wynn, 76.0% — Three teams, wears a Cleveland cap on his plaque but he actually won his Cy Young Award with the White Sox.

— Ivan Rodriguez, 76.0% — Played for seven teams, though he spent more than half his career with the Rangers.

— Cy Young, 76.1% — It's actually super interesting that Cy Young not only failed to get elected in the first year of the Hall of Fame (Christy Mathewson and Walter Johnson were both picked ahead of him) but he only JUST made it by two votes in the second year. Young played for five teams — including two franchises in Cleveland — and he wears a Cleveland hat on his Hall of Fame plaque.

— Ryne Sandberg, 76.2% — Sandberg is, for all intents and purposes, a one-team guy with the Cubs, even though he did play in 13 games for the Phillies before he was traded.

— Catfish Hunter, 76.3% — Played for two teams in three cities. He started with the Kansas City A's, had his greatest years with the great early 1970s Oakland A's, and he signed the big deal to play with the New York Yankees.

— Lefty Grove, 76.4% — Split his career in two, dominating for the Philadelphia Athletics from 1925 to '33, and then winning four more ERA titles for the Boston Red Sox from 1934 to '41. Actually wears a Boston hat on his plaque even though he was great with the Athletics.

Amazing, isn't it? But you see this sort of thing all the time. Look at Jim Rice and Reggie Smith, two terrific outfielders who started their careers in Boston. I don't see many ways you can look at the two of them and decide that Rice was the better player.

Baseball-Reference WAR: Smith 64.6, Rice 47.7.

FanGraphs WAR: Smith 64.6, Rice 50.8.

Win Shares: Smith 325, Rice 282.

Smith was a Gold Glove winning centerfielder, a switch-hitter who got on base more than Rice, he has a higher OPS+, etc. And yet, while Rice eventually was elected to the Hall of Fame. Reggie Smith got THREE votes in his one year on the ballot. Three. It is one of the true travesties in BBWAA voting.

And while there are probably any number of reasons why Rice got support while Smith did not — Rice won an MVP award, Rice did more famous things like lead the league in home runs three times, etc. — I think the big one is the Rice spent his whole career playing for the Red Sox

while Smith bounced around and played for four different teams. I think this difference did not only play an optical role (we see players more clearly if they spent a career with one team) but a direct role too, since any number of Red Sox fans rallied behind Rice's case while nobody seemed to rally behind Reggie Smith's.

Anyway, it's an interesting thing to think about. And now, finally, we can look at this year's ballot and see how the one-team, one-Hall concept might affect different players:

Bobby Abreu — Six teams, but really known for his time in Philadelphia. His Hall of Fame case seems to be standing in place right now. I don't know how popular Abreu was — or still is — in Philadelphia, but I could see him gaining some momentum if Phillies fans get behind him.

Barry Bonds — Two teams. But the number of teams he played for is not his issue.

Mark Buehrle — Three teams. Funny, I don't really remember anything at all about his time in Miami or Toronto, though he was essentially the same pitcher for them that he was the rest of his career. I actually have more to say about Buehrle, but for now, he looks likely to drop off the ballot.

Roger Clemens — Four teams. If he had retired in 1996 for some health reason, having spent his entire career in Boston, I think he'd be in the Hall of Fame right now. But, you know, that's not how any of this works.

Carl Crawford — Three teams. Crawford was a really dynamic player in Tampa Bay, one of my absolute favorites. How about his 2010 season? He hit .307/.356/.495 with a league-leading 13 triples, 19 homers, 47 stolen bases, he scored 110 runs and he finally won his first Gold Glove after being the league's supreme leftfielder for like nine seasons. Then he went to Boston and ... blech. Anyway, he's not going to the Hall of Fame.

Prince Fielder — Three teams, but he was clearly at his best in Milwaukee. Had 200 doubles and 230 homers through his age 27 season. Then he signed a gargantuan deal with the Tigers, and though he had made a couple of All-Star teams and later, in Texas, was comeback player of the year, it was never the same.

Todd Helton — One team, and I think that both helps him and hurts him. Playing for one team definitely helps him. But that one team being the Rockies — and all the stuff that comes with playing half your games in Coors Field — definitely does not help. The guy hit .316/.414/.539 in his career with almost 600 doubles. If his one team had been the Orioles or Cubs, that would lock him in as a Hall of Famer. But if his one team HAD been the Orioles or Cubs, would he have posted those numbers? Round and round we go.

Ryan Howard — One team, the Phillies, and before he got hurt, he had a real shot at 500 homers and, as such, a real shot at the Hall of Fame. He will remain a Phillies legend no matter what.

Tim Hudson — Three teams. I probably associate him most with the A's — where he had his two best seasons — so I was surprised to find that he actually spent significantly more time with Atlanta. Consistent and consistently underrated. He will get a few votes, but will almost certainly fall off the ballot.

Torii Hunter — Three teams. I think of him as a Twin but he was actually at his very best with the Angels, putting up his biggest seasons in 2009 and 2012. Like Hudson, he will get a few votes but will likely fall off the ballot.

Andruw Jones — Five teams, which surprised the heck out of me ... I only remember him with the Braves and at the end with the Yankees. But he spent some time with the Rangers, Dodgers and Cubs in between. He's substantially a Braves player, though, which I think does help his Hall of Fame cause; Atlanta fans have rallied behind him.

Jeff Kent — Six teams, which is a couple more than I remember. Mostly was a Giant, of course, but actually made All-Star teams with the Astros and Dodgers too. He's probably hurt by not being more connected to one team.

Tim Lincecum — Essentially a one-team guy (Giants), though he did make nine starts for the Dodgers in 2016. His career is too short for him to get serious Hall of Fame consideration, but he was certainly Hall of Fame-worthy in 2008 and 2009, and he will get a few votes because of it.

Justin Morneau — Before I look up each guy, I guess how many team they played for. With Morneau, I guessed three — I remember him in Minnesota, obviously, and also that comeback

year he had in Colorado and I figured that he probably played for another team, though I couldn't place it. As it turns out he played for four teams — 25 games with Pittsburgh and 58 games with the White Sox. MVP voters LOVED Morneau for reasons that were never entirely clear — he rather bizarrely beat out Derek Jeter for the MVP in 2006 and he finished second in the MVP balloting in 2008 though a dozen players had better years, including teammate Joe Mauer. Still, very good player, very good guy.

Joe Nathan — Five teams. I have absolutely no memory at all of Cubs-era Nathan or Giants-era Nathan. Really a terrific closer year after year for the Twins and then the Rangers; but struggled mightily in the playoffs and never reached a World Series, so the memories of him are a bit mangled.

David Ortiz — Two teams, but as mentioned, all Red Sox.

Jonathan Papelbon — Three teams — and I knew this one. Obviously we all remember him from the Red Sox glory years. I remember the Phillies signing him to that four-year deal, and he generally pitched well for bad Phillies teams. And then who could forget Washington torpedoing their 2015 season by trading for Papelbon mid-year, just in time for him to choke Bryce Harper for not running out a ball.

Jake Peavy — Four teams. Mostly a Padre for sure — he won a Cy Young and two ERA titles while thriving in the pitching splendor that is Petco Park. He went 38-28 with a 2.75 ERA at Petco while going 114-98 with a 3.94 ERA away. A true force of nature, he kept finding new lives in the years after San Diego.

Andy Pettitte — Two teams, though obviously best known as one of the core Yankees during their dynasty years. Actually a bit surprised to see his Hall of Fame candidacy flailing a bit this year, he's down several votes from a year ago. I think because of the shape of his career, he's a good breakout candidate even though he did admit to using PEDs.

A.J. Pierzynski — I guessed four teams ... it's actually seven. I have no recollection whatsoever of his time in St. Louis or Boston or Texas. A.J. had more than 2,000 hits in his career, he was probably as disliked as any player in his time, and he will fall off the ballot this year. But we will

always have Troy — and the night we were both honored by the National Polish-American Sports Hall of Fame.

Manny Ramirez — Five teams, though it's really three — the 29 games he played with the White Sox and Rays at the very end of his career don't really count. It is worth mentioning that five of his Cleveland teams went to the playoffs (two to the World Series), four of his Red Sox teams went to the playoffs (two WON the World Series) and all of his Dodgers teams went to the playoffs.

Alex Rodriguez — Three teams. Ended up playing more than twice as many games for the Yankees as he did for the Mariners, and yet it's the Yankees fans who probably despise him the most. I'm not sure which group of fans is going to rally behind his Hall of Fame case. Well, actually, I am sure that none of them will.

Scott Rolen — Four teams. I do believe that playing for four teams — and really splitting time between Philadelphia, St. Louis and Cincinnati — has hurt his case somewhat. But he's rapidly gaining momentum, and with five years left on the ballot after this year, I think he is pretty sure to get in.

Jimmy Rollins — Three teams, but the last two don't really count — he's all Philadelphia. I wonder if Phillies fans will really rally around his case. I also wonder what effect it will have when his teammate Chase Utley becomes Hall of Fame-eligible in 2024.

Curt Schilling — Five teams. It's easy to forget he was traded THREE TIMES before he began making his big-league mark with the Phillies.

Gary Sheffield — Eight teams. Had one of the most disparate careers for any great player in baseball history. That hasn't helped.

Sammy Sosa — Four teams, but really he's a Cub through and through. Cubs fans, in general, no longer seem to embrace him or his Hall of Fame case. They seemed to grow tired of him by the end.

Mark Teixeira — Four teams. He was actually at his best during two partial seasons with Atlanta, but he is remembered best as a Yankee, particularly his 2009 season, when he led the AL in homers and RBIs and finished second in the MVP balloting to Joe Mauer.

Omar Vizquel — Six teams.

Billy Wagner — Five teams. I only have a strong memory of the Astros and Mets ... oh, and that awesome last year he had in Atlanta. The Phillies and Boston years slipped by me for the most part. I would say he has been hurt by the breakdown of his career. It probably isn't the decisive factor in his falling short so far — comparison to the gigantic save totals of Mariano Rivera and Trevor Hoffman probably hurt more — but if he'd played his whole career for one team, he'd probably be in the Hall of Fame or closer to it. Anyway, his case is building and he still has a real shot at election in the next three years.

SCHILLING AND SCHILLING

By Joe Posnanski

I don't suppose there really is much left for me to say about Curt Schilling. As I've written many, many times, I think he was a truly great pitcher, one of the greatest pitchers ever. And as a Hall of Fame candidate, well, he's torpedoed his chances by trolling and saying and spreading a bunch of dumb and controversial and hateful things and then saying he was being persecuted for being a conservative and then asking to be removed as a Hall of Fame candidate, which a number of voters were more than happy to do.*

**There are 152 ballots that have been made public by Ryan Thibodaux ... and so far, 20 people who voted for Schilling last year pulled his name from their ballots this year. At the same time, two people have added Schilling to their ballots this year, which is interesting, and only five of 12 new voters voted for Schilling. He is not officially eliminated, but like those experts love to say on election night, there are not nearly enough votes left in Palm Beach County to get him into the Hall of Fame.*

So, no, Schilling won't get into the Hall of Fame his last time on the writers ballot, which means it will be up to a veterans committee of former players, managers and executives to decide if he belongs in Cooperstown.

Schilling seems to believe that next committee will vote him in and when they do it will be infinitely more meaningful than being voted in by the know-nothing writers. I can't argue with that.

And maybe they will vote him in. I don't know how that will play out.

We'll have to wait five years on all that. In the meantime, Schilling has made me think again about something that is, yes, self-serving and seemingly unrelated: The incredible reaction to *The Baseball 100*. I cannot tell you how many times over the last few months people have asked me why the book has done so well — it was probably the No. 1-selling sports book of 2021. I've talked about the reasons why that success is kind of ridiculous*.

**Baseball books have not done as well lately, it is almost 900 pages long, it is expensive, it was not available in bookstores or on Amazon at various times because of supply chain issues, it did not get a lot of major media coverage, etc.*

So why did it happen? There are probably many reasons, some that I'm too humblebraggy to mention, but Schilling offers another clue to why, I think, *The Baseball 100* has resonated with so many people.

It is entirely and utterly about baseball.

And Hall of Fame voting, alas, is not at all.

As you might know, Schilling is in the Baseball 100 — he's No. 88 on the list. In the essay, I try my very best to tell a full story of Schilling, who is a man of deep and baffling contradictions. He has dedicated so much of his life to charity. He is, by all accounts, a devoted father and husband. I've seen his kindness up close. And as for the rest, well, the "Personal Life" section of his Wikipedia page is almost 3,000 words long, with subheads like "Conflicts with players" and "Conflicts with management" and "Conflicts with the media" — "conflicts" is a pretty big word with Schilling.

But the larger point is he's in the book because I truly believe he's one of 100 greatest players in the history of baseball. That's what the book is: The 100 greatest players in the history of baseball in my view. Barry Bonds is in there. Roger Clemens is in there. Pete Rose is in there. Rogers Hornsby is in there. Alex Rodriguez is in there. Ty Cobb is in there. Gaylord Perry is in there.

And, honestly, I never even considered leaving them out because for me, the sort of people they were off the field, the drugs they may have taken, the rules they may have broken, the cheating they may have done, well, all of that is *part of their story*. And all of that is *part of baseball's story*.

I don't think anyone will be surprised to know that baseball's best players are not always baseball's best people, that baseball's best players do not always play the game fairly, that baseball's best players sometimes have opinions that will offend a large number of people, etc. Because that's humanity too.

That's easy to talk about when writing a book — in fact, it's *vital* to talk about when writing a book because you want to tell the whole story of the game, the great, the good, the bad, the ugly, all of it. The fact that Hornsby, as just one example, was a real SOB doesn't make his place in baseball history any less meaningful or important or interesting. In some ways, it makes his place in baseball history even *more* interesting.

But the Hall of Fame plaque room ... well, that has become something else entirely. It's less about history and more about being an "honor." It's the closest thing a baseball player can get to knighthood or sainthood.

Maybe it was always intended to be something like that. From the start of the Hall, almost nobody voted for Shoeless Joe Jackson. To be exact, two people voted for Shoeless Joe in 1936, the first year of balloting, and he received two votes when the baseball writers were nominating players for the 1946 ballot.

And that's it. As far as I know, there was no rule preventing people from voting for Shoeless Joe, it was just a near-unanimous consensus that he didn't belong in the Hall of Fame after taking money from gamblers to throw the 1919 World Series.

But, it should be said, that other than Shoeless Joe, “character” — whatever that word is supposed to mean — did not seem to play a particularly important role in Hall of Fame voting. Every now and again, a player with superlative character like Lou Gehrig or Roberto Clemente was given a special exemption and voted in early. But with few exceptions, discussions revolved around baseball. Few writers seemed to think that Ty Cobb or Rogers Hornsby were admirable people. But they were incredible ballplayers. And there was no consideration at all to keep them out of the Hall of Fame. Cobb got the most votes in the very first Hall of Fame election — more than more honorable men like Walter Johnson or Christy Mathewson.

And in '42, with World War II raging and on a ballot that had 44 people who would eventually be elected to the Hall, the voters elected Hornsby ... this, even though baseball's commissioner, Kenesaw Mountain Landis, was opposed because of Hornsby's well-known gambling addiction to betting on horse racing.

John Lardner's famous words after Hornsby was elected: “The baseball writers seemingly have no regard whatever for the state of the Rajah's soul. They voted him to the Hall of Fame anyway, for the simple but slightly unavoidable reason that he was the best-right-handed hitter that most of them ever saw.”

Think about that: Lardner wrote those words EIGHTY YEARS AGO.

The more things change ...

I'd say something did break in 1992, when the Baseball Hall of Fame pulled Pete Rose from the ballot. That was unexpected — even Bart Giamatti, when announcing Rose's permanent ban, said that Rose would be on the Hall of Fame ballot. But with Rose banned from baseball, the Hall of Fame did not want to deal with the possibility of him getting elected to the Hall of Fame. I don't think he *would* have been elected; but we can't be sure. He did receive 10% of the vote purely as a write-in candidate.

But those votes didn't really count. Rose's removal was a clear sign that the Hall of Fame was willing to step in to keep certain less-commendable players from getting a plaque.

And then, of course, the PED-era players started coming on the ballot, and Joe Morgan weighed in on official HOF stationary — basically demanding that writers not vote for PED users.

“We hope the day never comes when known steroid users are voted into the Hall of Fame,” Morgan wrote on behalf of “many Hall of Famers.” “They cheated. Steroid users don’t belong here.”

And now, well, here we are: The Hall of Fame vote seems to be about everything BUT baseball. It’s like we’ve entirely lost the plot. On Tuesday, Boston’s Dan Shaughnessy made waves by, for the second year in a row, voting only for Jeff Kent. Without specifically trying to break down Dan’s mindset (?), I think it’s fair to say that when you look at this ballot of players and decide, for whatever hodgepodge of reasons, that the only player worthy of election is Jeff Kent, you are no longer voting for the best players and no longer voting for the people who best represent the game.*

You are just voting for ... well, I’m not sure? Someone who maybe didn’t use steroids, once lied after getting hurt doing motorcycle stunts on the highway, mostly had the good sense to keep some of his more controversial opinions to himself* and wasn’t nearly as good as Scott Rolen?

David Grann, in The New York Times Magazine, reported that Kent, back in 2002, while standing in front of his locker surrounded by a group of reporters, began to take off his towel and first asked if any of them were “queers.” Grann pointed out that nobody reported this; he was trying to show that there was a different standard for Kent than there was for Barry Bonds, who undoubtedly would have been savaged for saying anything like that. But beyond the double standard, teammates would say that the statement was pretty consistent with Kent’s general behavior and feelings about LGBTQ people; he would later donate money and campaign against same-sex marriage in California.*

***This double standard is something that several people who were around the Giants a lot couldn’t help but notice. The key difference was race, certainly, but it also didn’t hurt that Kent spoke to reporters while Bonds, often, did not. “They are both, on balance, talented, churlish jerks a lot of the time,” Salon’s Joan Walsh wrote about Kent and Bonds. “One key difference being that Kent always cultivated the media.”*

Anyway, none of it has much to do with baseball. And that’s sad. Talking about steroids and domestic abuse and HGH and gambling and rule-breaking and cheating and bad behavior ... you

may find it important, but it's hardly a party. And, it feels like maybe we forgot that the Hall of Fame is supposed to celebrate baseball.

Tom Tango pointed this out: Since 2013 — the year Bonds, Clemens and Schilling came on the ballot — the Hockey Hall of Fame has inducted 34 players, the vast majority in their first or second year of eligibility, six of them women. The Pro Football Hall of Fame is a different animal, but since 2013, 81 people have been elected, including players, coaches and executives.

And the BBWAA has elected just 22 players (some of them suspected steroid users) while not electing the all-time home run leader, perhaps the greatest pitcher ever, the two players who basically revived baseball with their incredible 1998 home run chase, perhaps the greatest postseason pitcher ever, two of the greatest right-handed hitters ever and a first baseman with 3,000 hits and 500 home runs, and now you can probably add one of the greatest shortstops in baseball history to the no-fly zone.

I'm not saying this is right or wrong — people will always argue (and it's a fair argument) that it is this sort of persnickety voting that makes the Baseball Hall of Fame the most exclusive and best Hall of Fame.

But I am saying that it's a lot less fun.

HOW BILLY WAGNER WENT FROM RIGHTY TO LEFTY

A NATURAL RIGHT HANDER MADE A CAREER THROWING 100 MPH WITH HIS LEFT.

It sounds like some sort of baseball folk tale, some ridiculous bedtime story your grandfather might tell you when you were a little kid and believed everything you heard.

A young boy, [growing up tough](#) in the southern Appalachian corner of Tannersville, Va., breaks his right arm -- his natural arm -- twice, before the age of 7. He somehow learns how to throw with his left hand, eventually reaches speeds of 100 mph, goes to the Major Leagues and becomes one of the most dominant pitchers ever.

Only this story's even better because, well, it's real.

"Yeah, I mean, I'm still pretty much right-handed," Billy Wagner tells me over the phone from his home in Virginia. "I'm right-footed, as a kicker I punt right. I cut my food with my right hand. I'd probably poke my eye out with my left hand with a fork."

Billy Wagner's right-handed to left-handed transformation story has been told before, but definitely not as often as it should. And with his name once again on the Hall of Fame ballot (he jumped [15 percentage points back in January](#)), we called him up to see if there were any details he could fill in. We also talked to a New York City kinesiologist to see if anybody could do what Wagner did, or if, you know, he's just a super freak athlete and we're all mere mortals.

Wagner was always a sports-loving kid growing up -- mostly football and baseball -- so when he broke his arm playing football with a neighbor and once again while climbing some monkey bars, he didn't want to miss out on any games or activities with his friends. He had this other arm just hanging there, why not use it?

"I think as a kid, you just have that natural instinct that you're gonna do stuff. No matter what," Wagner says. "Kids are so resilient and I wanted to play. I wanted to do things. I think that natural competitiveness of, 'I'm gonna play,' took over."

"Yes, it's called neuroplasticity: the ability of our body to adapt to whatever we put on it," Dr. Eugene Charles, who pretty much [wrote the book](#) on this subject, tells me over the phone. "I believe we have this ability all throughout our lives. But the general consensus is that it's even more powerful [when we're younger]. Science says we have more pliability and neuroplasticity then ... and also less self-imposed inhibitions."

So, Wagner, unknowingly, took this newfound neuroplasticity and built on it. The middle-schooler began throwing anything he could find with his left hand -- baseballs, footballs or even just rocks. Constant practice is also a key to changing dynamics in the brain.

"Yeah, by him just making a concerted effort to go with his left hand, you can re-establish neural pathways," Charles says. "There's the old nature versus nurture. Nature might be the said foundation but, you know, nurture is really what develops who you are and what you can do."

All of a sudden, as Wagner's right arm was still healing, he found he was throwing harder and harder with his left. That arm became his good arm. He was breaking [aluminum siding](#) off the side of his house and striking out batters older and bigger than him in Little League.

"My dad always tells this story of how when I faced the big kids, I had no problem," Wagner remembers. "It was when I faced the little kids that I couldn't throw a strike. I didn't want to hit them."

He clocked his fastball in the low-80s in high school, [striking out an absurd](#) 116 batters in 46 innings (while also hitting .451 at the plate). He enrolled at Virginia's Ferrum College to play

Division III football, but coaches encouraged him to stick with baseball and his pitching career took off.

"That first year, I gained 40 pounds, I grew 2 or 3 inches," the 5-foot-10 Wagner says. "A substantial growth spurt for me. I went from 78-82 mph to 92-95 mph my freshman year."

The born-again lefty struck out a laughable (and still [NCAA record](#)) 19.1 batters per nine innings during one year in college. He struck out [19 during a no-hitter](#) and finished a three-year career with a 17-3 record and 1.63 ERA. He was inducted into the National College Baseball Hall of Fame in 2019.

In the 1993 MLB Draft, the Astros took him with their first pick. He made his debut two years later, struck out an Astros relief-record 106 batters in '97 and made his first of seven All-Star teams in '98. His "weaker" arm was now topping out at 100 mph. Future teammate Chipper Jones was scared to get in the box against him. Famous lefty fireballer and Houston teammate [Randy Johnson said](#), "He's a foot shorter than me, and throws harder than I do."

But even with all the success with his left arm, was he ever curious what he could do with his right? Did he ever test it out?

"No, no, no, no," Wagner laughs. "I don't think it would be anywhere near [my left]. I can't even put a number on it. I don't think it would be anywhere close to that."

Wagner did have a funny story from his time in Philadelphia involving visiting pitcher Kenny Rogers. Rogers, a lefty, challenged Wagner to a throwing contest using their opposite hands. Rogers, of course, had no idea that Wagner was a natural righty.

"We're standing by the batting cages and I say, 'OK let's see,'" Wagner recalls. "[Rogers] picks up a baseball and he throws it down the foul line and one-hops it to the seats. I pick up a ball and I throw it right into the seats. Cages, down the third-base line, into foul territory the furthest part."

Wagner retired his golden left moneymaker in 2010 at the age of 38, after putting together one of his greatest seasons: 37 saves, 1.43 ERA, 13.5 K's per nine innings. He struck out the [last four batters](#) he faced. He could've probably played a couple more years, but his [desires shifted](#) to spending more time with his kids and coaching baseball, which he still does today at Virginia's Miller High School.

"Oh yeah, I throw BP all the time," Wagner says. "Father Time's caught up with me, but I still get on the mound and compete against them."

He said he got it up to 90 mph a couple years ago and that his control is much better now. He also mentioned that he can throw some solid BP with his right arm.

So, what's the answer? Do we all have the ability to do what Wagner did? Dr. Charles thinks so ... with a caveat.

"Everyone can do it," Charles says. "But where he deserves all the credit, and a Hall of Fame nod, is that he had the discipline and determination to do it. That's the caveat: You have to have his discipline and persistence. That's kind of the X-factor."

So, yes, anybody has the capacity to do it. But not everyone will do it, be able to throw faster than a hurricane, become an elite Major League closer and be knocking on the door of Cooperstown.

Everyone can do it, but not everyone can be Billy Wagner.

Over 16 seasons Wagner pitched in 853 games. 7x All-Star, 422 saves, 1196 K's/300 BBs, struck out 11.9 batters per 9 innings pitched, finished 50+ games 7x,

ATLANTIC LEAGUE TO SHELVE ROBOT UMPIRES, RETURN MOUND TO STANDARD DISTANCE

By [James Hicks](#) | mlbtraderumors.com

The independent Atlantic League, one of four independent leagues designated as official MLB Partner Leagues following the 2020 reorganization of MiLB, will return to the traditional method of calling balls and strikes in 2022, [reports](#) J.J. Cooper of Baseball America. The league had adopted the Automated Ball-Strike (ABS) system — known colloquially as the 'robo-ump' — ahead of the 2019 season, when it reached an agreement with Major League Baseball to test equipment and rules changes under consideration for use in affiliated ball. The league will also return the distance between the pitching rubber and home plate to the conventional 60 feet, 6 inches after a late-season trial of an extra foot was met with disfavor by players and coaches.

As Cooper points out, the strike-zone change is likely driven by the expectation of a more widespread implementation of ABS in the minors; there's been no official announcement, but MLB posted [job listings](#) for an ABS tech to work with each team in Triple-A West (the successor to the Pacific Coast League) earlier in the offseason. The technology was also deployed in Low-A Southeast (the revamped Florida State League) in 2021 and in the 2019 Arizona Fall League.

Though just one of a number of rules changes mooted by the commissioner's office during Rob Manfred's tenure, the proposed automation (and thereby standardization) of the strike zone has proven to be among the most polarizing. Beyond more longstanding intra-fan disputes regarding the relative values of innovation and tradition, proponents of the idea have suggested that a strike zone standardized by precise technological measurement would

substantially reduce the element of human error in umpiring decisions (and, perhaps, reverse the trend of declining contact rates), while those opposed argue that imprecision, ambiguity, and the idiosyncrasies of individual umpires — as well as the arguments that often ensue as a result of these — add intrigue and drama to the game.

Regardless of one's opinion of the potential implementation of ABS at the big-league level, any longtime fan of the game will recognize a progressive change in the strike zone since the advent of pitch-tracking technology in the early 2000s, when MLB introduced QuesTec's Umpire Information System in big-league ballparks to track umpire performance. This much less invasive system drew its fair share of criticism (Curt Schilling infamously took a bat to a QuesTec camera after a poor start in May 2002, and the umpires union filed a grievance with the National Labor Relations Board over its use before securing its removal in 2005 contract negotiations). Still, it's long-term effects ([as compiled in 2017](#) by Joe Lemire of Sports Business Journal) have rendered the effective strike zone closer to its rule-book definition, decreasing its width while increasing its height.

Despite scrapping the ABS, the Atlantic League will continue to test a number of potential tweaks to the game, including the use of 17-inch bases (2 inches larger than standard), anti-shifting rules (which require the four infielders to have two feet in the infield dirt before every pitch), and enhanced extra-inning 'zombie runner' rules (which would place runners at first and second to start the 10th inning and load the bases in any innings thereafter). Further changes to Atlantic League play are expected to be announced later in the spring.

USING THE WISDOM OF THE CROWD TO FIND THE BEST REMAINING FREE-AGENT VALUES

This gets a little geeky but shows how radically different talent evaluation and projection is from when I was a kid.

Eno Sarris, The Athletic

As a president of baseball operations or general manager, the job is clear: get as much talent on your team as your budget allows. That's a constant no matter which front-office leader you talk to. You're given a number from ownership, and you spend it all trying to improve your short- or long-term chances.

This is the context for any list that's going to try and rank free agents by potential 'value.' There's plenty of debate around the fact that ownership could give their teams more money for free agency, and that players are perhaps underpaid relative to the exponential growth in revenue around the game, yes. But the job of putting together a team is identifying the players you like at the contract you'll think they'll get.

Before they sign, there's some guesswork as to what those numbers will be, at least for us on the outside looking in. There are plenty of prognosticators, though, who aim to predict outcomes in the free-agent marketplaces. Let's use the [FanGraphs crowdsourcing data](#) for our predictions — they've been off an average of only \$1.9 million a year in average annual value on the contracts signed so far.

Using those crowd sourced projections, here are the top 15 remaining values with respect to their projected production and cost in free agency.

Best Remaining Free Agent Values:

Name	Position	\$ Millions	Years	WAR over life of contract	\$ Millions/WAR
Donovan Solano	2B/3B	\$4	1	1	\$4.0
Josh Harrison	2B/3B/LF	\$5	1	1.2	\$4.2
Martin Perez	SP	\$5	1	1.2	\$4.2
Tommy Pham	LF/RF	\$20	2	3.9	\$5.1
Odubel Herrera	CF/LF/RF	\$6	1	1	\$6.0
Zack Greinke	SP	\$12	1	1.9	\$6.1
Jonathan Villar	3B/2B/SS	\$12	2	1.9	\$6.3
Carlos Rodon	SP	\$76	4	12.0	\$6.3
Jorge Soler	RF/LF/DH	\$18	2	2.7	\$6.7
Tyler Anderson	SP	\$14	2	2.1	\$6.7
Kwang Hyun Kim	SP	\$14	2	2.1	\$6.7
Garrett Richards	SP	\$8	1	1.2	\$6.7
Michael Conforto	RF/LF	\$17	1	2.5	\$6.8
Joc Peterson	RF/LF/CF	\$18	2	2.5	\$7.2
Carlos Corraa	SS	\$240	8	33.3	\$7.2

The way to read this is that [Donovan Solano](#) is projected to get a one-year, \$4 million deal and produce one win. It's not a surprise that a couple of part-time players head the list, honestly, because the market has demonstrated over the past few years that it's less willing to pay for below-average or part-time players — Ben Clemens at FanGraphs found that teams are [paying around 20 percent less per win for below-average players](#), and two wins is the benchmark for average. That doesn't mean [Josh Harrison](#) or Solano can't help, or won't be good values on their smaller-money, short-term deals, but it does mean that players like them will always show up on a list like this.

So, for our four best values, let's concentrate on some average or better-than-average players who are projected to get decent deals and help their teams in the starting lineup or rotation. Then we'll add one to grow on.

Tommy Pham, Outfielder

2 years, \$20 million crowd-sourced contract, 3.9 WAR projected over contract

Pham has an excellent eye at the plate. Only [Max Muncy](#) last year swung at fewer pitches outside the strike zone, and that's a skill that's important in the context of an aging player because [contact on pitches outside the zone ages terribly](#). Pham also runs well, with a sprint speed in the top third of the league. So, despite the fact that the outfielder is 34 and coming off one of his lesser seasons, he's got a skill at the plate that ages well and is still demonstrating the athleticism needed to be a positive on defense and on the basepaths.

Pham was slightly above average last year, but he's projected to be 14 percent better than average with the bat next year. Why? Well, he still hit the ball well, netting a [Barrel](#) (Statcast-defined good contact) on 10 percent of his balls in play. That's in the top third of the league and on par with the type of contact made by [Joc Pederson](#) and [Jose Abreu](#) last season. Pham actually underperformed more on his well-hit balls than almost anyone. Statcast has an expected slugging percentage based on the velocity and angle of a ball in play, and Pham is on this list of the 10 batters who underperformed that expected slugging percentage the most on their Barrels.

Underperforming their Barrels

Player	Barrels	SLUG	XSLG	DIFF
Andrew Benintendi	36	1.800	2.320	- 0.52
Sean Murphy	32	2.161	2.681	- 0.52
Starling Marte	31	1.903	2.422	- 0.52
Jed Lowrie	33	1.938	2.408	- 0.47
Paul Goldschmidt	64	2.302	2.756	- 0.45
Bobby Dalbec	53	2.358	2.754	- 0.40
Tommy Pham	35	2.000	2.359	- 0.36
Jeimer Candelario	38	2.184	2.532	- 0.35
Carlos Santana	32	2.438	2.776	- 0.34
Pete Alonso	65	2.323	2.655	- 0.33

So why didn't Pham hit for more power last season? It probably has to do with the direction of the Barrels. Pham pulled less than a quarter of his Barrels last year, and pulled Barrels fly straighter and go farther. It was the [second-lowest pull percentage on his Barrels](#) in his career, though, so perhaps a small tweak or two will get him back to pulling more of his hard contact.

The best news is that even if he just uses his good eye at the plate and athleticism to play to last year's level, he's likely an average outfielder. But if he can improve the direction of his batted balls, there's still an opportunity to return to the better production he put up in the past.

Carlos Rodón, SP

4 years, \$76 million crowd-sourced contract, 12 WAR projected over contract

The lefty picked a great time to show the best velocity of his career, but it wasn't just velocity that went well for Rodón in 2021. He had the most ride on his four-seamer and the most drop on his slider as well, both aspects that were beneficial to those pitches. In fact, he was one of the 10 pitchers who improved their stuff the most from 2020 to 2021 (minimum 1,000 pitches in 2021). Here are the biggest risers in [Stuff+](#), a metric that captures the physical quality of a pitch by looking at velocity, movement and spin.

Stuff+ Improvers

Player	2021 Stuff+	2020 Stuff+	DIFF
Corbin Burnes	126	112	14
Logan Webb	110	96	14
Dylan Cease	113	101	12
Jacob deGrom	134	123	11
Jhoulys Chacin	95	85	10
Alex Wood	97	87	10
Charlie Morton	113	103	10
Luis Patino	113	105	8
Madison Bumgarner	101	94	7
Carlos Rodon	110	103	7

He showed top 20 Stuff+ among starters this past season, thanks to a few mechanical changes.

"My lower half is different now, all my energy is going to the plate, and that's probably why I throw harder and why my four-seam command is better," Rodón [said at the All-Star Game](#). "My fastball has more carry now to it."

He's [also attributed his success](#) to some drills he got from teammate [Lucas Giolito](#) and using the core velocity belt, but either way, the results matched the Stuff improvement. Unfortunately for him, he had a shoulder issue in the second half and missed some time late in the season, which might stop potential suitors from going all-in when it comes to years on the coming deal. And his velocity did sit lower once he came back ... until that last start in the playoffs, when he sat 95.8 mph and was routinely touching the upper 90s as he finished up.

In any case, getting the best Stuff that was available on the market this year (by a decimal point over [Max Scherzer](#)), at what looks like a good price — that's probably worth the risk, once the green light comes from the doctors.

[Michael Conforto](#), OF

1 year, \$17 million crowd-sourced contract, 2.5 WAR projected over contract

Look across Conforto's statistical line at FanGraphs and you'll see it was one of his worst years. His power was down, he hit too many groundballs ... it wasn't a good year. But follow that line all the way to the right and you'll see that the defensive numbers indicate he went from being a scratch corner outfielder to being the [third-worst defensive outfielder](#) among qualified players last season. That's a little weird, especially since Statcast's advanced defensive metric, Outs Above Average, had him at +6 and in the [top fifth of the league](#). Why does that matter? Well, if you put his OAA into his WAR line, he would have basically been an average player last year, even in a down year.

And that makes sense because the underlying statistics say that Conforto was above average at:

- Not striking out, with a 21.7 percent strikeout rate (22.6 league average)
- Making contact, with a 9.6 percent swinging-strike rate (11.2 average)
- Taking walks, with a 12.3 percent walk rate (8.8 average)
- Not swinging at balls, with a 27.6 percent reach rate (31.3 average)
- Barreling the ball, with a 9.2 percent rate (8 average)
- Outfield defense, with a +6 Outs Above Average

That seems like a player who's likely to be above average next year. Of course, a team spending \$17 million for his services — and that number might be light, considering he rejected the one-year, \$18.5 million qualifying offer in order to jump into free agency — is hoping for more of a return to form than just a league-average corner outfielder. Maybe he needs a healthy hamstring to get back to the four-season stretch between 2017 and 2020 when he was a [top-25 bat in the league](#) by at least one overall batting metric. On a short deal, that sort of upside is worth the risk.

[Carlos Correa](#), SS

8 years, \$240 million crowd-sourced contract, 33.3 WAR projected over contract

It might be tough for some to consider a nine-figure deal a potential bargain, but Correa is a top talent at a premium position entering the market with three more years before he turns 30. If you're not a WAR fan and aren't convinced that Correa could sign for much more than the crowdsourced \$240 million listed here and still be going at a market rate, then perhaps a comparison to the past two huge shortstop deals might be a worthy exercise. [Corey Seager](#) and [Francisco Lindor](#) already got much more than this, how do they stack up against Correa over their careers to date? (Let's use Lindor's stats going into 2021, to judge them all at the time they signed their deals.)

The Big Shortstop Trio

Player	PA	OBP	SLG	K%	BB%	Barrel%	O-Swing%	OAA
Corey Seager	2710	0.367	0.504	18.5	9.4	8.9	26.5	-17
Carlos Correa	3223	0.356	0.481	20.5	10.8	8.3	26.5	27
Francisco Lindor	3510	0.346	0.488	14.1	8.1	6.2	29.6	82

Already, from the first few numbers, we can see that Correa absolutely belongs in the conversation. A little more durable than Seager, a little less durable than Lindor, Correa was a little bit better of a hitter than Lindor and a little bit worse than Seager. If you scroll over, that comparison continues, where his quality of contact was superior to Lindor's and inferior to Seager's, his defense better than Seager's and worse than Lindor's by Outs Above Average.

If Correa belongs in the conversation with two \$300 million men, then his next team is getting a bargain if it doesn't pay that full freight. Even if he does get that money, he might be the best bet — his combination of batted ball quality, eye at the plate, and defense might be the best of the three.

Collin McHugh, RP

1 year, \$5 million crowd-sourced contract, 0.5 WAR projected over contract

The most recent work on the cost of a win in free agency suggests that teams are paying \$8.5 million per win right now, but that doesn't really apply to relievers, who've always been paid on a scale that doesn't seem tethered to wins above replacement. The only question here with McHugh, who admittedly has been up and down in his career, is if he's going to be a good reliever next year. The good news is, velocity isn't everything — only nine qualified relievers threw their fastball slower than McHugh last year, and three of those were sidearmers. What McHugh does well is spin the ball. His breaking ball is in the top 20 for spin, and that's [one of the reasons the Astros first traded for him back in the day](#).

He spins it well, and he turns that spin into movement well (called spin efficiency). Look at where his slider (black) sits compared to league average (gray) set against a heat map that shows the good mixes of spin rate and efficiency (red in the heat map behind).

This sort of spin and movement is why McHugh's slider is rated as a top 10 slider by [Pitching+](#). Sometimes, one great pitch is enough.

Pitching+ beats projections in terms of predictive quality for relievers, and Pitching+ has McHugh as the second-best reliever on the market, who won't cost the second most on the market. That sounds like a bargain, doesn't it?

HOW YANKEES' RACHEL BALKOVEC BECAME BASEBALL'S FIRST FEMALE MANAGER: 'IT'S A CREDIT TO HER'

Linsey Adler in the Athletic

Rachel Balkovec knows she represents an evolution in baseball. It was just a few years ago that, she recalls, she shortened her name to "Rae" in an attempt to conceal her gender to get interviews as a strength and conditioning coach in professional baseball.

Now, she is the manager of the Low-A Tampa Tarpons after two years as a hitting coach in the [Yankees](#) organization. It is the first time that a woman will manage a team in affiliated professional baseball, but Balkovec's hiring represents more than just a new era of opportunity for women in baseball: It represents the industry's exercise in redefining what a manager does in the age of analytics and expanded coaching staffs.

Balkovec said Kevin Reese, the organization's vice president of player development, came to her in December with the idea of managing the Tarpons.

"Reese said that you don't have to be a defensive specialist to be a manager right now. Let's open our minds to what a manager really is: a leader," Balkovec recalled to *The Athletic* on Monday. "When he described it like that, I immediately opened my mind to it. I think this is actually a better role for me than a hitting coach. I don't lose sleep over mechanics. I lose sleep over culture."

In a video news conference on Monday, Reese noted that the path to become a major-league manager had changed. Around baseball, many minor-league coaches had become major-league support staff and coaches, but that the system of developing future major-league managers needed to be reconsidered. In promoting Balkovec to Tarpons manager, Reese and the Yankees are attempting to get back to developing the traits clubs are looking for in a major-league manager and leader.

"We are trying to prepare minor-league managers to get back into that pool of major-league manager candidates," Reese said. "Hoping to flip the script on that a little bit more and have minor-league managers be in conversation."

“My goal is to know the names of the girlfriends, the dogs, the families of all the players. My goal is to develop them as young men and young people who have an immense amount of pressure on them,” Balkovec said Wednesday. “My goal is to support the coaches who are on the staff — we’re going to be talking nuts and bolts of pitching and hitting with them and defense. It’s really just to be a supporter and to facilitate an environment where they can be successful and you just design the environment and let the rest take care of itself.”

Balkovec said she aspires to be a general manager some day, and she feels that a managerial role will give her insight and experience that could help her lead an organization.

“When you think about bridging the gap between being a minor-league hitting coach and general manager — that’s a pretty big gap,” Balkovec said. “For a while I thought I needed to become a scout because like, that’s what GMs do. But I love the coaching aspect and developing personal relationships with people. And when you say relationships, that usually means one person, but I love orchestrating a group of human beings and like putting them together to do really difficult tasks, which is hard to do.”

On Wednesday, Yankees general manager Brian Cashman noted that the organization received a wave of attention upon hiring Kim Ng as an assistant general manager in 1998. He hired Jean Afterman as an assistant general manager in 2001, a title she still holds today.

“We look forward to the days where these are no longer newsworthy items,” Cashman said.

“There is always a first,” Cashman said Wednesday. “There’s always someone who emerges who is not afraid, who wants it that goes after it, and is strong enough to take it. Unfortunately, in some categories, it takes longer than others. And unfortunately, society had failed to recognize the strength and power — and equal power, if not more power — that women possess. This is the point now where, when Kevin Reese was considering the next step, best steps for this particular category, the best person on the job was Rachel. It’s a credit to her, and it’s a credit to Kevin seeing that ability and enforcing that ability.”

In her two years as a hitting coach with the Yankees, player development — in all meanings — has been her priority. She said she looks up to and has spoken with Vanderbilt University baseball head coach Tim Corbin, who is well-known for developing people, not just players at his program.

“I think her time, not only as a college athlete, but especially as a strength coach, helped her learn how to convince people to do difficult things that will benefit them in the long term,” said Yankees hitting coach Dillon Lawson, who Balkovec considers a mentor.

Balkovec was a softball catcher at Creighton University and the University of New Mexico, where she graduated with a degree in exercise science. She went on to study kinesiology at Louisiana State University before beginning her career as a strength coach.

The Yankees hired Balkovec as a minor-league hitting coach after the 2019 season, following stints as a minor-league strength and conditioning coach with the Houston [Astros](#) and St. Louis Cardinals. Prior to joining the Yankees, Balkovec studied biomechanics in the Netherlands and worked at Driveline Baseball.

“In baseball, you’ve historically had a lot of people who don’t like to work out,” Lawson said. “I think that’s changed over time, but she’s had to try and convince people to do the right thing, even though it’s not something that’s very fun. That takes communication skills, persuasion skills, the ability to sell different ideas and emphasize the importance of those ideas. I think you could say the modern manager is almost like a coordinator of their individual affiliate.”

Her first two seasons with the Yankees were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, but she has spent her time working to connect with some of the youngest players in the organization.

“I’ve been fighting tooth and nail to develop relationships,” Balkovec said. “Obviously, 2020 was hard for everybody, but I had just started. Last year was really the first time I gained ground with that.”

Balkovec said she has faced skepticism from players due to her being a woman, but notes that gender is one of a handful of things that separate her from the organization’s young prospects. As “a 34-year-old white woman from Nebraska,” Balkovec said she has to learn how to connect with players on their terms, be it by making FaceTime calls instead of regular phone calls, playing their favorite music during hitting drills instead of “‘80s rock,” and most importantly, speaking Spanish fluently so she can connect equally with all of her players.

“The outside perception is always the thing. When players meet me, I think there’s a level of curiosity. That’s normal — change is change,” Balkovec said. “I was curious! I was like, ‘What will I look like in uniform?’ I was curious myself, so I’m not going to blame anyone for being curious or not really understanding the situation.”

“The players that I’ve worked with, whether they like me or they don’t like me, they like what I’m saying or they don’t like what I’m saying — I do feel like they respect me. At the very least, they know that I’m passionate, hard working and then I know what I’m talking about. Whether they like it or not is a different story. But every coach goes through that.”

She attends English-language immersion classes with her players and recalls 18-year-old super-prospect [Jasson Dominguez](#) asking her, in his second language, “How do you deal with the pressure of being a woman in baseball?”

“Whoa,” Balkovec said she thought. “This English class just got deep.”

She felt Dominguez was relating to something the two share: Fan and media attention disproportionate to that received by most minor-league players and coaches. Dominguez was

compared to Mickey Mantle by ESPN at age 16. Balkovec's hiring as the Tarpons manager might be the most attention ever earned by a player development coaching staff hire.

"I was thinking the other day: Is it going to be considered news the first time I get ejected from a game?" Balkovec said, already aware of the answer.

Balkovec, whose Twitter header image is one of Jackie Robinson and Branch Rickey shaking hands, understands that due to her gender, she does not have the luxury of simply being just another baseball coach. She feels that it is her responsibility as a trailblazer to take the photos with fans and see her face on the national news whenever she gets a promotion.

"It feels a little interesting to me that there's so much attention now, but obviously, society's changed, the world has changed," Balkovec said. "We're celebrating women in sports in general a lot more than we ever were in 2012 when I first got in.

"Three years ago, on this day, I was sleeping on a mattress that I had pulled out of a dumpster in Amsterdam. Four years ago, I was studying physics flashcards on the floor of a bathroom stall in the San Antonio Missions women's restroom because I wasn't able to be in the clubhouse. I think it's interesting to me, because I don't understand the negativity (about my career). If you know my story, and you have a pulse, I think it's pretty hard not to get behind what's going on here."

"I imagine there's a lot of people thinking it's a token hire," Lawson said. "It's disappointing, but when you spend time with her, work with her, it's so clear. Even if you thought she was a token hire, working with her, your mind would be changed instantly."

So, this is baseball: A sport evolving in myriad ways throughout its ranks. The job of a field manager has changed. The role of a general manager has changed. The players have changed, the information has changed. The sentiment around who gets to have a place in the game has evolved. A woman's place in the game is changing, too.