

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

1.2.2022

Good morning baseball fans. Happy New Year.

Maybe more than two cups of coffee worth this morning. Trivia from NYT and The Athletic, Free Agents, Jayson Stark recaps 2021 oddities, some Hall of Fame bits and whiffle ball.

I grew up in Westfield, NJ. Whiffle Ball was a big thing behind Washington School when I was young (along with stick ball against the school wall). We looked up to the junior high school guys (shoutout to Brad Brewster, Larry Inkster, Jeff Jordan wherever they might be) who would later be Westfield HS sports stars in our eyes. We spent a lot of hours at it.

### **SUBSCRIBER CONTRIBUTION OF THE WEEK—SIT BACK WITH A DRINK AND ENJOY MR. BASEBALL, BOB UECKER**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPMOBLPr0hA>

### **OWNERS NET WORTH (NUMBERS TO THINK ABOUT AS THE CBA NEGOTIATIONS MOVE FORWARD) FROM MLBTRADERUMORS.COM**

- **Angels:** Arturo Moreno – \$3.6 billion. ([Forbes link](#))
- **Astros:** Jim Crane – \$1.4 billion. ([Forbes link](#))
- **Athletics:** John Fisher – \$2.6 billion. ([Forbes link](#))
- **Blue Jays:** Rogers Communications, chairman Edward Rogers III – \$11.5 billion. ([L.A. Times link](#))
- **Braves:** Liberty Media, chairman John Malone – \$8 billion. ([Forbes link](#))
- **Brewers:** Mark Attanasio – \$700MM. ([L.A. Times link](#))
- **Cardinals:** William DeWitt Jr. – \$4 billion. ([L.A. Times link](#))
- **Cubs:** Ricketts family – \$4.5 billion ([Forbes link](#))
- **Diamondbacks:** Ken Kendrick – \$600 million. ([L.A. Times link](#))
- **Dodgers:** Guggenheim Baseball Management, controlling partner Mark Walter – \$5 billion. ([Forbes link](#))
- **Giants:** Charles B. Johnson – \$5.8 billion. ([Forbes link](#))
- **Guardians:** Dolan family – \$4.6 billion. ([L.A. Times link](#))
- **Mariners:** John Stanton – \$1.1 billion. ([L.A. Times link](#))
- **Marlins:** Bruce Sherman – \$500MM. ([L.A. Times link](#))
- **Mets:** Steve Cohen – \$15.9 billion. ([Forbes link](#))

- **Nationals:** Lerner family – \$4.9 billion. ([Forbes link](#))
- **Orioles:** Peter Angelos – \$2 billion ([L.A. Times link](#))
- **Padres:** Peter Seidler – personal net worth unknown, Seidler Equity Partners estimated net worth of \$3 billion. ([ESPN link](#))
- **Phillies:** John Middleton – \$3.4 billion. ([Forbes link](#))
- **Pirates:** Bob Nutting – \$1.1 billion. ([L.A. Times link](#))
- **Rangers:** Ray Davis (co-chairman with Bob R. Simpson) – \$2.2 billion. ([Forbes link](#))
- **Rays:** Stuart Sternberg – \$800MM. ([L.A. Times link](#))
- **Red Sox:** John Henry – \$3.6 billion ([Forbes link](#))
- **Reds:** Robert H. Castellini – \$400MM. ([L.A. Times link](#))
- **Rockies:** Richard L. Monfort – \$700MM. ([L.A. Times link](#))
- **Royals:** John Sherman – \$1.25 billion. ([L.A. Times link](#))
- **Tigers:** Ilitch Holdings – \$3.8 billion ([L.A. Times link](#))
- **Twins:** Pohlad family – \$3.8 billion ([Forbes link](#))
- **White Sox:** Jerry Reinsdorf – \$1.7 billion ([Forbes link](#))
- **Yankees:** Steinbrenner family – \$3.8 billion ([Forbes link](#))

Everyone except Reds, Brewers, Rays, Rockies and Marlins worth over \$1 billion.

# TRIVIA

## THE 2021 BASEBALL TRIVIA EXPERIENCE (FROM NYT)

By Tyler Kepner

### **MVP**

The M.V.P., first presented by the baseball writers in 1931, was given to a pitcher 22 times before Ohtani. How many home runs did those pitchers hit, combined, in their M.V.P. seasons?

The 21 other pitchers combined to hit nine home runs in their M.V.P. seasons. The last pitcher to homer in his M.V.P. season was Sandy Koufax, who hit one in 1963. Until Ohtani hit 46, the record by a pitcher in an M.V.P. season was two, and it was shared by Don Newcombe (1956), Spud Chandler (1943) and Dizzy Dean (1934).

Which one of these M.V.P.s never appeared on an M.V.P. ballot except for the year he won it?

Vida Blue 1971, Roger Clemens 1986, Dennis Eckersley 1982, Willie Hernandez 1984. Hernandez was a three-time All-Star, but 1984 stands out in his 13-year career. He won the M.V.P. and the Cy Young Award for the World Series-champion Detroit Tigers and had a 1.92 E.R.A. in a major-league-leading 80 appearances.

Who had the lowest E.R.A. of any pitcher to win the M.V.P.?

Rollie Fingers, Bob Gibson, Clayton Kershaw or Bucky Walters. Fingers won the M.V.P. for the Milwaukee Brewers in 1981 with a 1.04 E.R.A., besting Gibson's famous 1.12 E.R.A. from 1968. Of course, Gibson threw  $226\frac{2}{3}$  more innings than Fingers. Kershaw had a 1.77 E.R.A. in his M.V.P. season (2014) and Walters had a 2.29 in his (1939).

Who are the only players to win the M.V.P., Cy Young and Rookie of the Year Awards?

Clemens and Seaver, Newcombe and Verlander, Newcombe and Seaver, deGrom and Verlander. Newcombe and Verlander. Clemens was an M.V.P. and a seven-time winner of the Cy Young Award, but he finished sixth in rookie of the year balloting in 1984. Seaver was rookie of the year and won three Cy Youngs, but he never finished higher than second in M.V.P. balloting. And deGrom has a Rookie of the Year Award and two Cy Youngs, but has thus far peaked at fifth place for an M.V.P. Award.

Which player was denied back-to-back A.L. M.V.P.s by finishing as the runner-up to Roger Clemens in 1986?

George Bell, Jose Canseco, Don Mattingly, Cal Ripken Jr. Donnie Baseball, who followed his 1984 M.V.P. by hitting .352 and leading the majors in slugging percentage, yet lost to Clemens, who was 24-4 with a 2.48 E.R.A. and 238 strikeouts.

## **No-Hitters**

In April, Joe Musgrove threw the first no-hitter in San Diego Padres' franchise history. Four other teams have had only one no-hitter. Can you name the pitcher who threw each one?

Rockies Ubaldo Jimenez

Mets On June 1, 2012, Santana got the Mets off the hook for having traded away Nolan Ryan before he threw a record seven no-hitters.

Rays Matt Garza A right-hander, he threw Tampa Bay's lone no-hitter on July 26, 2010. He allowed a walk, but he faced the minimum 27 batters because the runner was erased on a double-play.

Blue Jays. Roy Halladay or Pat Hentgen would have been a good guess, as would David Wells or Roger Clemens. But the correct answer is Dave Stieb, who threw a no-hitter on Sept. 2, 1990. It was the seventh and final no-hitter thrown that season.

Who is the last pitcher to lose a no-hitter in extra innings?

Pedro Martinez, Rich Hill, Cliff Lee, Francisco Cordova. Pitching for the Los Angeles Dodgers on Aug. 23, 2017, Hill lost a perfect game on an error in the ninth inning of a scoreless game. He went back to the mound for the 10th, after the Dodgers again failed to score, and lost the no-hitter and the game, 1-0, on a leadoff home run by the Pirates' Josh Harrison.

Which four current ballparks have never been the site of a no-hitter?

The old Yankee Stadium had 11 no-hitters thrown there and the old Busch Stadium had two, but neither of the current ballparks by those names has had one. Target Field, which opened in 2010, and Truist Park, which opened in 2017, have yet to have one. But Atlanta's Ian Anderson flirted with one at Truist in this year's World Series!

Only one of the last seven World Series champions also had a pitcher throw a no-hitter that same season. Can you name the pitcher?

Jake Arrieta of the 2016 Chicago Cubs who threw a no-hitter in the same season his team won the World Series. His big day came on April 21, 2016.

Jason Varitek is the only catcher in baseball history to catch no-hitters for four different starting pitchers. He did it for the Red Sox in 2001, 2002, 2007 and 2008. Can you name each pitcher?

Varitek caught no-hitters from Nomo (2001), Lowe (2002), Buchholz (2007) and Lester (2008).

## **Atlanta Braves**

Who ranks second to Hank Aaron on the franchise list for games, hits, runs and runs batted in?

From Rabbit Maranville to Eddie Mathews to Dale Murphy to Freddie Freeman, the Braves have had no shortage of star power. But the top spots on most of the franchise's career leader lists

belong to Aaron and Chipper Jones, the sweet-swinging switch-hitter who was with the team from 1993 to 2012.

Who is the only player in franchise history to win multiple M.V.P. Awards?

A first-round pick by the team in the 1974 draft, Dale Murphy won back-to-back M.V.P. Awards, in 1982 and 1983. Aaron was the M.V.P. in 1957 and in the top 10 in voting in 13 other seasons. Terry Pendleton won the award in 1991.

Seven different pitchers started World Series games for Atlanta in the 1990s. Three are the Hall of Famers Tom Glavine, Greg Maddux and John Smoltz. Who are the other four?

Steve Avery, Charlie Leibrandt, Kevin Millwood, Denny Neagle. Odalis Perez started 17 regular-season games for the 1999 team that made it to the World Series and Pete Smith started a combined 21 for the 1991 and 1992 teams that won N.L. pennants, but neither pitcher was picked to start a World Series game. Maybe they should have been: Atlanta failed to win the title in any of those three seasons.

Atlanta's Charlie Morton, who started Game 1 of the 2021 World Series, has also started World Series games for Houston and Tampa Bay. Who is the only other pitcher to make World Series starts for three different teams since 2000?

John Lackey, who started two World Series games for the Angels in 2002, two for the Red Sox in 2013 and one for the Cubs in 2016. Josh Beckett made World Series starts for the 2003 Marlins and the 2007 Red Sox, Jake Peavy for the 2013 Red Sox and the 2014 Giants, and James Shields for the 2008 Rays and the 2014 Royals.

The Braves were the third visiting team to clinch a World Series title at Houston's Minute Maid Park. Who are the other two teams?

Houston clinched the 2017 World Series on the road in Los Angeles, but its opponent clinched at Minute Maid in 2005 (White Sox), 2019 (Nationals) and 2021 (Braves).

## **I Don't Know About You, but I'm Feeling 22**

This season's N.L. and A.L. home run leaders are both still 22 years old. Who are they?

Vladimir Guerrero Jr. of the Toronto Blue Jays. A first baseman, he flirted with winning the triple crown by hitting .311 (third in the A.L.) with 48 home runs (first) and 111 R.B.I. (fifth). Fernando Tatis Jr. a shortstop (and sometime outfielder), he hit .282 with 42 home runs, 97 R.B.I. and 25 stolen bases despite playing in only 130 games.

Only two pitchers got at least 22 outs (seven and a third innings) in a postseason game this year — one in the N.L. playoffs, one in the A.L. playoffs. Who were they?

Logan Webb's masterpiece against the Dodgers. Just 24 at the time (he turned 25 in November), Webb pitched seven and two-thirds scoreless innings in Game 1 of San Francisco's division series against Los Angeles. Houston's Framber Valdez. Most of Valdez's postseason performances in 2021 were forgettable, but he had one shining moment, allowing one run in eight innings against the Boston Red Sox in Game 5 of the American League Championship Series.

Three pitchers have won multiple Cy Young Awards while wearing No. 22. One did it in the 1970s, one in the 2000s and one in the 2010s. Who are they?

Jim Palmer, Baltimore Orioles star wore No. 22 for his entire 19-season career, and he won the A.L.'s Cy Young Award in 1973, 1975 and 1976. Roger Clemens. A big right-hander, he wore No. 21 while capturing three Cy Youngs for the Boston Red Sox and two for the Toronto Blue Jays, but he won his last two while wearing No. 22 for the Yankees (2001) and the Houston Astros (2004). Clayton Kershaw. A left-hander, he wore No. 54 when he was first called up in 2008 but switched to No. 22 before he won Cy Young Awards in 2011, 2013 and 2014.

Which lefty set the Houston Astros' single-season wins record, with 22, and then was traded to the Mets in December 1999?

Mike Hampton.

Which two-time World Series champion manager — who is still active — was drafted with the 22nd overall pick by the Montreal Expos in 1980?

Tito Francona was a light-hitting first baseman and outfielder in 10 major league seasons, but he has had a far larger role as a manager. He won World Series titles with Boston in 2004 and 2007.

## **Miguel Cabrera**

Only four members of the 500 home run club have a better career average than Cabrera's .310. All of them played for the Red Sox. Who are they?

Jimmie Foxx, Manny Ramirez, Babe Ruth, Ted Williams. Ted Williams leads the 500-homer club with a .344 career average. Babe Ruth hit .342 for his career, Jimmie Foxx hit .325 and Manny Ramirez hit .312. David Ortiz made it into the 500-homer club but hit .286 for his career, and Jim Rice fell short of that pack in both regards, hitting .298 with 382 home runs.

Cabrera is the career home run leader for players born in Venezuela. Who is second?

Andres Galarraga slugged 399 home runs in his career, more than Maglio Ordonez (294) and Bobby Abreu (288). Jose Altuve, 31, is 14th among Venezuelan players with 164.

Cabrera is one of four players to make his debut after 2000 and hit 300 homers with a career average of .300 or better. Which of the following players is not on that list?

Robinson Cano, Albert Pujols, Mike Trout, Joey Votto. Pujols had a career average of .328 when he left St. Louis after the 2011 season. Since then he has hit .256 in 4,802 at-bats, bringing his career mark down to .297.

Cabrera won the World Series as a rookie with the Marlins in 2003. Who is the only other player in the 500-homer club to win a title in his first year in the majors?

Mantle, McGwire, Foxx, Mays.

It was good to play for the Yankees. Mantle first made the team in 1951 and helped them to their third consecutive World Series title. (They ended up with five straight wins.) Mays also came up for the Giants in 1951, but didn't get to the World Series until 1954, which came after he had won the Rookie of the Year Award and spent nearly two full seasons away from the team because of military service. Foxx came up in 1925 and won his first World Series in 1929, and McGwire made his debut in 1986, before the Athletics won the Series in 1989.

Cabrera — who won the triple crown in 2012 by leading the A.L. in batting average, homers and runs batted in — needs 13 hits to reach 3,000 for his career. Which triple crown winners have finished their careers with 500 homers and 3,000 hits?

Foxx/Yastrzemski/Frank Robinson. Yaz/Robinson. Yaz. None.

The answer is none of the above. If Cabrera is able to get the 13 hits he needs, he will stand alone in this regard. Only six players (Hank Aaron, Alex Rodriguez, Albert Pujols, Willie Mays, Rafael Palmeiro and Eddie Murray) have had both 3,000 hits and 500 home runs, and none of those six won a triple crown.

## **New York, New York**

With their victory in the 2021 A.L. wild-card game, the Red Sox became the third team to eliminate the Yankees in the postseason three times since 2000. (Also 2004 and 2018.) Name the other two teams.

Detroit and Houston. The Tigers eliminated the Yankees in 2006, 2011 and 2012. The Astros eliminated them in 2015, 2017 and 2019.

Derek Jeter and Bernie Williams rank first and second in games played for the Yankees in the expansion era (1961 to present). Who ranks third?

Gardner, Mattingly, Piniella, Roy White.

White appeared in 1,881 games for the team from 1965 to 1979. His final game was Sept. 27, 1979, slightly less than four years before Gardner was born.

Which four members of the 1996 Yankees' World Series roster have sons who have played in the majors?

Cecil Fielder's son Prince is on this year's Hall of Fame ballot. Charlie Hayes's son Ke'Bryan is an emerging star for Pittsburgh. Tim Lincecum Jr. played parts of three seasons in the majors, and David Weathers's son, Ryan, is a pitcher for San Diego.

Six players have had multiple 40-homer seasons for the Yankees. Three are Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig and Mickey Mantle. The others are among the group below. Which three?

Jason Giambi got his right away, hitting 41 in each of his first two seasons with the team. Curtis Granderson hit 41 in his second season in pinstripes and 43 in his third year with the team. Alex Rodriguez hit 48 in 2005 and 54 in 2007. The only Yankees besides Rodriguez with a 50-homer season are Maris (61 in 1961), Ruth (60, 59, 54, 54), Mantle (54, 52) and Judge (52).

Who has hit the most home runs at Citi Field, which opened in 2009?

Lucas Duda. A slugging first baseman, he hit 71 home runs at Citi Field, more than Michael Conforto (66), Pete Alonso (46) and Daniel Murphy (34).

Three N.L. teams have never won the World Series (Colorado, Milwaukee, San Diego). Name the only other N.L. team that has gone longer than the Mets without a championship.

It has been a long stretch for Pittsburgh. The Pirates have not even played in the World Series since 1979.

Three pitchers won the World Series M.V.P. Award in the 1980s and pitched for the Mets in the 1990s. Two were Frank Viola and Orel Hershiser. Who was the third?

Joining Viola and Hershiser in that unusual fraternity was Bret Saberhagen. He was the M.V.P. of the 1985 World Series as the ace of the Kansas City Royals, and he pitched for the Mets from 1992 until he was traded in July 1995.

Who holds the Mets' career record for home runs by a switch-hitter?

Howard Johnson had the most home runs among switch-hitters with 192. Carlos Beltran hit 149 for the Mets, Todd Hundley hit 124 and Jose Reyes hit 108.

### **Nick Groke, The Athletic**

In 2021 we saw the first pitcher to throw six walk-free, run-free innings in a World Series-clinching game since Bret Saberhagen did it for the Royals in Game 7 in 1985--Max Fried of the Braves

He won the American League batting title with the lowest average since Rod Carew hit .318 in 1972--Yuli Gurriel of the Astros hit .319 to beat out Michael Brantley.

Juan Soto played more than three months with an on-base percentage better than .500. Only other player in baseball's history 22 years old or younger--Ted Williams in 1941.

There were nine no-hitters thrown in 2021 (really 10, but the record book will show nine). It was the most no-hitters in baseball's history, breaking a record from 1884. The team no-hit most often--Cleveland was no-hit in three games, technically. They also lost a seven-inning doubleheader game without a hit, but that won't count as a no-no.

The longest home run in 2021--Miguel Sanó, Twins. Sanó hit a 495-footer off Nick Pivetta at Fenway Park on Aug. 25, the longest shot of the year.

The fastest pitch in 2021--Aroldis Chapman, Yankees, 103.4 mph. Chapman struck out Matt Chapman of the A's on June 19 with a 103.4 mph fastball, with runners on, to win the game.

Fastest base runner from home plate to first base in 2021--Byron Buxton, Twins, 4.00 seconds.

Since 2010, team that has won the most total games in September--Cardinals won 17 games in a row to storm into the playoffs — not surprising, perhaps, since they have won the most September games in the past 11 years, with 196.

What do Aaron Judge, Babe Ruth, Yogi Berra and Paul O'Neil have in common? Judge homered twice at Citi Field on Sept. 11, delivering a multi-homer game in a New York ballpark that wasn't Yankee Stadium. Babe Ruth, Polo Grounds, 1923; Yogi Berra, Ebbetts Field, 1956; Paul O'Neil, Shea Stadium, 1999.

In the second half, Bryce Harper had a 1.173 OPS, .700 SLG, .473 OBP, 46 extra-base hits, 19 home runs, 52 runs and 64 walks. Only three players in baseball's history matched or surpassed those second-half stats: Lou Gehrig (1934), Barry Bonds (2001) and Babe Ruth, who did it five times.

Manager of the year finalist was let go by his team before the award was even announced--Mike Shildt of the Cardinals.

The World Series-winning Braves played 110 games below .500 to start 2021 season before they finally had a winning record.

In late July, this player hit a home run in all three games of a three-game series — and played for both teams. Abraham Toro homered for the Astros against the Mariners on July 26, was traded to the Mariners the next morning, then homered for the Mariners against the Astros on July 27 and 28. That had never happened before in baseball's history.

Randy Arozarena of the Rays won AL Rookie of the Year Award in 2021 in his third season

Starting pitcher faced the Giants eight times in 2021. In the 53-year history of the division-play era, no other pitcher had started against a single team that often--Walker Buehler. Buehler was the first to face a team that often since Jim O'Toole of the Reds faced the Giants eight times in 1961.

### **WHO WAS BETTER?**

Note this week from a subscriber arguing Brett was better than Schmidt. Interesting when you look at them side by side.

#### **Brett**

21 seasons

3154 hits

.305 batting average

.369 OBP

.487 Slug

317 HRs

1596 RBI

201 stolen bases

2 batting titles including .390 in 1980.

1 MVP

1 gold glove

### **Schmidt**

18 seasons

2234 hits

.267 batting average

.380 OBP

.527 Slug

548 HRs

1595 RBI

174 stolen bases

3 MVP

10 gold gloves

led NL in HRs 8 times

**UNBREAKABLE RECORDS? (a few more fairly recent achievements)**

**Two subscribers responded to last week's unbreakable records piece (duplicated below as a reminder)**

Consecutive Shutouts pitched- Don Drysdale 6 (1968)

Baserunners Caught Stealing- Jody Davis 89 (1986)

One Season Total Hits- (Ichiro) 262 (2004)

**You ignored Negative numbers—losses, walks, blown saves, manager ejections**

Cy Young lost 315 games

Nolan Ryan walked 2795 batters

John Coleman lost 48 games pitching in 1883 (if you make the cut off 1900 then its 27 losses for George Bell in 1910 and Dummy Taylor in 1901.

Ricky Henderson was caught stealing 335 times.

Instant replay has greatly reduced manager ejections—Bobby Cox 162

Goose Gossage blew 112 saves.

**REPLAY--UNBREAKABLE RECORDS? THINK ANY OF THESE WILL BE BROKEN? ANY OTHER NOMINIATIONS?**

Joe DiMaggio had a 56-game hitting streak in 1941. Pete Rose came close, at 44 games, so the most famous record may be the most breakable.

The Chicago Cubs went 108 years without winning a World Series. But the Indians/Guardians are working hard on this one.

Johnny Vander Meer threw back-to-back no-hitters in 1938. It could be done again, but who is going to throw a third consecutive no-hitter?

Hack Wilson drove in 191 runs in 1930. Manny Ramirez did have 165 in 1999.

Pete Rose had a record 4,256 hits; to break it someone would have to average 213 hits for 20 years.

Nolan Ryan threw seven no-hitters and had 5,714 career strikeouts.

Chief Wilson hit 36 triples in 1912.

Barry Bonds walked 232 times with 120 intentional walks in 1994.

Rickey Henderson stole 130 bases in 1982 and had 1,406 steals for his career.

Cal Ripken played in 2,632 consecutive games.

Hugh Duffy hit .440 in 1894.

Kid Nichols was the youngest pitcher to join the 300 wins club at age 30, by averaging 30 wins per year for a decade.

Walter Johnson threw 110 shutouts. Modern comparisons: Clayton Kershaw (15), Justin Verlander (8), Max Scherzer (5).

Cy Young finished his career with 511 wins and 749 complete games.

Jack Taylor pitched 202 consecutive games without being relieved once.

Charley "Old Hoss" Radbourn won 59 games in 1884. No modern pitcher will ever *start* 59 games.

## **STRANGE STUFF**

### **THE YEAR IN STRANGE BUT TRUE: THE WEIRDEST GAMES, PLAYS AND MOMENTS OF THE 2021 MLB SEASON. JAYSON STARK—THE ATHLETIC**

MAXED OUT: Is there anything safer than an 8-0 lead with [Max Scherzer](#) on the mound? Wait. Don't answer that! Because on July 7, the impossible happened. It was Strange But True enough that the Nationals' 8-0 lead in San Diego, with Mad Max on the mound, turned into a 9-8 loss. But there was also [this](#)!

o what was so Strange But True about that Slam Diego special that went rocketing off the bat of sweet-swinging [Padres](#) relief pitcher [Daniel Camarena](#)? Hahahahahaha. Really? It was only the fact that, before that Bartolo-esque swing of the bat . . .

- Scherzer was 52-0 lifetime in starts in which his team scored at least eight runs — and his teams had gone 67-2 in those starts, with no losses since 2014!
- Camarena had zero extra-base hits in a 10-year professional career — not to mention no big-league hits, period.
- Pitchers had made 384 unfortunate plate appearances against Scherzer through the years — and had hit as many home runs off him as Taylor Swift.
- All the relief pitchers in the sport hadn't heretofore reminded anybody of [Giancarlo Stanton](#), seeing as how they were 12 for 204 (.059) for the season — with no extra-base hits.
- Padres relievers had been right there with them, by going 1 for 20, with 11 strikeouts, before that swing — and then 0 for the season after that.
- And finally, no pitcher had launched a slam for his first career hit since the immortal Bill Duggleby — in 1898!

But then that Daniel Camarena grand slam, off the great Max Scherzer, happened. Ohmygod. Baseball. Have I mentioned that it . . . Makes. No. Sense.

FREDDIE VS. RIZZO: It was April 28 in Atlanta. [Freddie Freeman](#) was doing what Freddie Freeman does. By which I mean he was having himself an enjoyable 4-for-4 evening. But that was against the Cubs' real pitchers. Then Anthony Rizzo headed for the mound — and struck out the MVP, on a 61 mph curveball.

No position player had gone 4 for 4 in any game and then whiffed against a position player in 42 years (since Mike Vail vs. Mike Anderson in 1979). So if the photo of that whiff isn't on Rizzo's Christmas card to Freddie, I'll be sorely disappointed.

"I DON'T KNOW" WAS ON THIRD: Houston's [Kyle Tucker](#) was basking in a beautiful Sunday afternoon in San Diego back on Labor Day Weekend, until he hit a fly ball into the right-field corner — and this happened.

Yep, that was [Manny Machado](#) hauling in that fly ball to right. And yep, Manny still plays third base for a living. And yep, if you're scoring at home (never a good idea in the last week of December), you should be writing down "P-5" — on a ball that came to earth almost 300 feet from third base. Because baseball is weird — and definitely as weird as ever in the Strange But True, ever-shifting season of 2021. On the other hand, this play does raise one important question:

Why the heck do we even keep score anymore?

THOSE INSIDE-OUT DODGERS: Let's say you have a friend from Switzerland. (Stay with me on this, OK?) As challenging as it would be to explain to your friend why that Kyle Tucker fly ball would be recorded by baseball historians as a popup "to third base," I've got something way more challenging to explain than that. And it's what happened to the [Dodgers](#) in their first series of the season.

The first ball they hit over the fence in 2021 was not a home run. And why was that? Because [Cody Bellinger](#) passed [Justin Turner](#) on the bases. So that was confusing enough.

But then the first home run they did hit this season was on a ball that never cleared the fence. And why was that? Because it was an inside-the-parker by [Zach McKinstry](#).

Oh, and also, the only guy who got to trot around the bases after any of that was a player who hit neither ball. By which we mean Turner, the one runner who wasn't called out after Bellinger's non-homer.

So I asked Dodgers pre/postgame broadcaster Jerry Hairston Jr. how'd he explain that to a friend who didn't know anything about baseball. He laughed and replied: "I'm going to tell him, 'Let's go to the bar. Let's get a drink. Let's sit down and have a pint or have some tequila, and we'll walk it through — because it's gonna take some time.'"

Right! And you know what else will take some time? These ...

## Ten more things I can't believe actually happened this year

- With some minor assistance from the trading deadline, Abraham Toro did a thing that had never been done, by hitting a home run in all three games of a three-game Astros-Mariners series — for both teams . . . But then, four weeks later, he was still strategizing to make this column, by hitting the first grand slam off his career. And whom did he hit it against? The pitcher he was traded for ([Kendall Graveman](#)), naturally!
- In the eighth season of his professional career, White Sox pitcher [Dylan Cease](#) finally made it to home plate with a bat in his hands . . . and proceeded to go 3 for 3 — off three different pitchers. Because of course he did.
- [Ervin Santana](#) got [Danny Santana](#) to ground out . . . to [Carlos Santana](#).
- Dom Smith hit a home run off Will Smith . . . on a pitch called by the [Braves](#)' catcher that day, [Kevan Smith](#).
- In a Sept. 14 Tigers-Brewers game, [Wily Peralta](#) pitched for the [Tigers](#) . . . and [Freddy Peralta](#) pitched for the [Brewers](#) . . . and they both had pitching lines that looked like this: 6 IP, 2 H, 0 R.
- Goofy things happen in 20-1 games. For example, this thing happened: [Wilmer Difo](#) got dragged in to pitch for the Pirates on Aug. 28 . . . and gave up eight runs in one inning . . . but in the middle of all that carnage, he struck out Ronald Acuña Jr.!
- In a game in which he allowed a fair ball to fly over the fence, [Walker Buehler](#) still threw seven shutout innings. Wait. What? Well, he might want to send a thank-you note to Ke'Bryan Hayes . . . for missing first base on his home run trot!
- A guy wearing No. 99 ([Aaron Judge](#)) broke up a no-hit bid . . . by a pitcher wearing No. 99 ([Taijuan Walker](#)).
- Brewers coach Pat Murphy got ejected . . . while exchanging lineup cards at home plate.
- And after managing a win over the [Angels](#) on Sept. 20, [Dusty Baker](#)'s career totals looked like this:

1981 wins as a manager

1981 hits as a player

And one World Series won (as a player) — in 1981!

Nevertheless, that game by Dusty didn't manage to make this list, of . . .

## The 10 Strangest but Truest Games of the Year

**DODGERS-PADRES SWEET 16 SPECIAL:** You might have missed this game, since it ended at 3:59 a.m. in the distant Eastern Time Zone. But here is just a sampling of the wild highlights:

The Padres went 3 hours and 42 minutes between hits . . . which involved 38 Padres hitters in a row finding ways to not get hits . . . There were also 10 consecutive extra innings in which no Zombie Runners scored . . . And the Dodgers issued eight intentional walks just in extra innings . . . And [Corey Knebel](#) committed an intentional balk in the 15th so the runner on second couldn't steal signs — and then gave up a two-run game-tying homer anyway . . .

Max Muncy went 0 for 7 on his birthday . . . Three runners got thrown out at the plate on extra-inning groundballs even though they didn't have to run . . . And after more than five hours with nothing but zeroes and ones on the scoreboard, guess how the Dodgers won this thing in the 16th? With a two-run leadoff home run by A.J. Pollock. Which used to be impossible. But not in the Strangest But Truest baseball game of 2021.

**THE PRICE WASN'T RIGHT:** You never would have convinced me back in April that this 12-inning April 16 classic wouldn't even be the strangest Padres-Dodgers game of the year. Heck, so much Strange But True stuff happened in this game that I have no choice but to skip ahead to extra innings, when . . . [Jake Cronenworth](#) pitched and struck out [Mookie Betts](#) . . . and a week after pitching a no-hitter, [Joe Musgrove](#) wound up playing left field . . . where he would actually catch a fly ball . . . and that fly ball was hit, naturally, by [David Price](#) . . . which, besides turning into a sacrifice fly by a relief pitcher, became . . . the first time in the history of reliable play-by-play data that any pitcher had hit a ball that was caught by another pitcher playing a different position, with a position player pitching . . . Which feels like a thing that shouldn't possibly happen, except I just remembered . . . that's why there's such a thing as these Strange But True Feats of the Year columns.

**THAT THING YOGI SAID!** If you thought the Braves won some Strange But True games in October, you shoulda seen this Braves-Phillies 12-inning special on May 8, if only because . . . they played 4 hours, 47 minutes of baseball, and the Braves didn't lead for one second until the 287th minute . . . but also . . . they were behind by two runs with two outs and nobody on in the ninth . . . and trailed again (by one run) in the 11th . . . and found themselves down again — by three runs — in the 12th . . . And they won! . . . Which is not a thing that any other team in the modern era could say — until now!

**LIONS VS. VIKINGS:** The Lions and Vikings haven't played a 17-13 game since Week 15, 1987. But I guarantee you that if they ever play another one, it won't be as entertaining as Tigers 17, [Twins](#) 14, on July 28 at Target Field. I say that because . . . these teams scored 31 runs, and there were no one-run innings . . . and the Twins hit seven home runs while serving up zero, and they lost . . . and the Tigers allowed two six-run innings and a four-homer inning, and they won . . . and you know what was really, really Strange But True? Check out the Tigers' box score, because you won't find a single zero, in the AB-R-H-RBI columns next to the name of any position player . . . which is a thing they last did in 1929 . . . because wow.

THE BATTLE ROYALE: I was on vacation, hanging out on a beach, when this whacked-out Yankees-Royals game erupted on Aug. 9. And you know it was astonishingly Strange But True if I felt compelled to interrupt applying sunscreen to tweet about it. But it was impossible not to, since . . . the [Yankees](#) blew a save in four consecutive innings (eighth, ninth, 10th, 11th), and they won . . . and this would turn into the first game in history in which the two teams scored in none of the first 12 half-innings but then all of the last 10 half-innings . . . Yet the Strangest But Truest part wasn't even any of that. It was this: In the last 100 years, only two teams had ever scored in the seventh, eighth, ninth, 10th and 11th innings of any game. And then these two teams did that in the same game. And let's just say . . . the Strange But True Feats of the Year column thanks them profusely for that, even if my vacationing family might (in theory) not!

MEANWHILE IN THE CORNFIELDS: But that wild [Royals](#) game wasn't even the Yankees' most memorable game of that road trip, because, well . . . Iowa . . . where, on Aug. 12, the Yankees and White Sox sent eight home runs soaring off toward various cornfields . . . and you shouldn't need any memory supplements from Dr. Moonlight Graham to recall that the Yankees found themselves trailing by three runs with two outs in the ninth but then did something no other team did all year, by which I mean . . . pound two dramatic home runs off Liam Hendriks in the same inning and take the lead, only to . . . lose anyway, on the first walk-off big-league home run in the history of Iowa (by Tim Anderson) . . . which would have been cool and cinematic, even if it hadn't connected the dots to the first walk-off home run the White Sox ever hit against the Yankees . . . by Shoeless [Joe Jackson](#), on July 20, 1919, in a game that definitely was not attended by Kevin Costner . . . as far as we know.

THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN: Next time I take a beach vacation during the season, I'll have to remember to send an email to all 30 teams, reminding them not to permit the Strangest But Truest week of the whole season to happen while I'm gone. But this was yet another wild classic from that week, an Aug. 11 Fenway all-timer in which . . . the Red Sox gave up a seven-run inning to the [Rays](#) and still won this game by 12 runs (20-8) . . . with some assistance from Rays starter [Josh Fleming](#), who became the first pitcher in 98 years to pull off this box-score line: 17 base runners, 10 outs! . . . But I almost forgot to mention that none of that stuff was even the part that elevated this game into the Strange But True Feats of the Year column. That part was that these two teams lit up the Fenway scoreboard with . . . innings of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 runs (and put up none of those numbers more than once)! . . . So how many games in history have produced that scoreboard combo? Right. Never!

ONE MORE SAN DIEGO LATE SHOW: The whole extra-inning Zombie Runner rule was designed, obviously, to save the Padres from themselves. But this just in: It isn't working! They went 12 more raucous innings in this incomprehensible May 29 win over the [Astros](#). And why did I feel compelled to stuff a third Padres extra-inning game into this column? Just because . . . to find a way to win this thing, the Padres merely had to do something no team in the modern era had ever done, namely . . . score in the eighth, ninth, 10th, 11th and 12th innings . . . But that also required some help from the Astros, who made history themselves, by . . . holding a five-run lead in regulation and scoring in two different extra innings (the 10th and 11th), yet somehow . . . they still lost! . . . which is a feat no team had pulled off since the 1902 New York Giants. Who couldn't even blame it on Zombie Runners.

SUSPENDED ANIMATION 1.0: There's nothing Stranger But Truer than some good old-fashioned baseball time travel. So of course two time-shifting suspended-game classics make our list. We begin with a bizarre Marlins-Mets game that started on April 11 and didn't end for another 142 days, until those two teams finally got to finish it up on Aug. 31. But it was worth the wait, seeing as how . . . it produced the longest at-bat in baseball history (204,742 minutes), by Jesús Aguilar, against two different [Mets](#) pitchers . . . and a starting pitcher who faced zero batters (Marlins "starter" [John Curtiss](#), who'd been traded to Toronto by the time the bottom of the first arrived) . . . and Javy Báez finding yet one more way to wriggle into this column, by becoming the first player in 41 years to score a run and drive in a run for two different teams on the same day . . . which seems impossible in real life, but not in baseball, at least when the suspended-game rule starts wreaking its standard Strange But True havoc.

SUSPENDED ANIMATION 2.0: But is it possible that this Braves-Padres suspended-game fiasco was even Strange Than Truer than Mets-Cubs? After all . . . it started as a doubleheader in Atlanta on July 21 and ended in San Diego on Sept. 24, with the meteorological assistance of a 4.5-hour rain delay that stopped play in both cities . . . but also made this the first doubleheader in history to begin in the Eastern time zone and end in the Pacific Time Zone . . . which enabled [Fernando Tatis Jr.](#) to homer in both games of a doubleheader in two different time zones, including a Game 2 game-winning bomb that the box scores will always insist was hit in Atlanta but definitely came down in San Diego . . . which also meant he had the special thrill of hitting a ninth-inning game-winning home run in his home park but it wasn't a walk-off . . . and Tatis wasn't even the Strangest But Truest guy who played in this game! The winners of that award: [Adam Duval](#) and [Daniel Hudson](#), who historians will try to convince us played against each other for four different teams on the same day. Right. If you check those July 21 box scores, they'll say those two faced each other in a Marlins-Nationals game and a Braves-Padres game that day. Except no they didn't, unless you realize we're talking about . . .

Baseball!

### **More Stark--The Year in Strange but True: MLB's most amazing hitting feats, pitching feats and — of course — Shohei Ohtani feats**

The starting pitcher in the All-Star Game also *hit a 513-foot SpaceX blast in the Home Run Derby* . . . Another starting pitcher gave up three runs *on a ball that traveled one foot in the air*. . . And then there was that time a guy drew a walk despite the minor formality that *it was only ball three*.

So hey, was that Strange But True enough for you? I sure hope so, because it's time for Part Two of our Strange But True Feats of 2021 trilogy. The hitters! The pitchers! The no-hit weirdness! And, especially, the place where we can't help but begin – with the sheer improbability that somebody like [Shohei Ohtani](#) could possibly roam around this earth.

### **My 10 favorite Ohtani-isms of 2021**

**HE'S NOT A REGULAR HUMAN!** I'm still trying to digest how the same person – by which I mean that Shohei Ohtani person – could possibly have had a better OPS+ than [Aaron Judge](#), a better ERA+ than [Gerrit Cole](#), more extra-base hits than Vlad Guerrero Jr., a better strikeout rate than [Walker Buehler](#) and more stolen bases than [Billy Hamilton](#) and [Jonathan Villar](#) combined. *And he's one person.* But it's apparently possible, because that happened!

**HE INVENTED THE 40-20-60-FOOT-6-INCHES CLUB!** Think about this: 46 homers, 26 stolen bases and, ohbytheway, this Ohtani guy was also *the best pitcher on his team*. No need to run through the members of the 40-20 Club among people who also pitched (even once) that season, because that club had admitted *no* members in history . . . until now. But even if we lower the membership standards to include men who hit 20 homers instead of 40, we'd need a time machine to hold a meeting of that club . . . seeing as how the only guy in it before Ohtani was Buck Freeman (25 HR, 21 SB, 7 IP) – *who did it in 1899!*

**HE'S AN AL PITCHER AND HE HOMERED IN THE FIRST INNING!** We should have known something extraordinary was coming way back on April 4, when Ohtani made his first start of the season as a pitcher, hit 101 off the mound to the second hitter he faced and then . . . pounded a 451-foot home run *in the first inning . . . while batting second*. (Your attention: Pitcher Batting Second Alert!) No American League pitcher had hit a home run in the first inning of any game in over half a century, since Dave McNally bopped a first-inning slam on Aug. 26, 1968. Then came the inventions of A) the DH (five years later) and B) a dude named Ohtani (26 years later). History would never be the same.

**HE ALWAYS KNEW WHAT TO DO FOR AN ENCORE!** No matter what made you say, "Wow," one day, Shohei Ohtani always had another *Wow* moment ready to roll off his assembly line. June 4: Fires up the first 10-strikeout, no-walk game of his career . . . That was cool, but guess what was next? June 5: Mashs a 436-foot home run in the first inning, *on the first pitch he sees*. No need to even ask about the first inning, because Ohtani was the first human in the modern era to homer in *any* inning the day after a double-digit strikeout game. Of course.

**THE GREATEST SERIES EVER?** I want you to consider what Ohtani did from June 17-20, in a four-game series against the [Tigers](#):

Game 1 – Winning pitcher

Game 2 – 2 HR

Game 3 – 1 HR

Game 4 – 1 HR

So how many members of our species have ever had a four-game series like that (won a game as a pitcher, hit at least four homers in his spare time)? Take a wild guess. Ohtani is one. Some old-timer named Babe Ruth was the other. You were expecting maybe Bartolo?

**THE MAN OF STEAL:** Or how about Ohtani's routine evening of July 26? Threw a pitch at 99.7 mph. And also *stole a base!* Wondering about the last AL *starting* pitcher to steal a base in a

game in an AL park? Would you believe the correct answer is Nolan Ryan, on Oct. 4, 1972? Believe it! Good chance Nolan also threw a pitch 99.7 mph or harder that night. But we regret to announce we'd neglected to invent Statcast back then.

**NO PLACE (TO STEAL) LIKE HOME:** Did you know that in 19 years in the big leagues, Ichiro never stole home? He did pitch once, but let's not get distracted, because that's not the point. The point is, on Aug. 31, Ohtani [did this](#).

<https://www.mlb.com/video/joely-rodriguez-swinging-strike-to-jared-walsh-5pkdmw>

That's *an American League pitcher seen stealing home*. And how many people in the last 50 years have passed through the AL, stolen home and also made at least one start as a pitcher that season? One more time, that answer is nobody . . . except Ohtani.

**DINGER AT 8:** Then there was that game, Aug. 18 against the Tigers, when the starting pitcher for the [Angels](#) also *hit his 40th home run . . . which would have been Strange But True enough, except . . . he hit it in the eighth inning . . . while he was still pitching . . . which is not a thing we'd seen an AL starting pitcher do in an AL park in 50 years* (since another Dave McNally blast). One of these days, we'll run out of *first-in-half-a-frigging-century* Ohtani notes, I'm sure. But it's sure fun while it lasts.

**HE BROKE THE ALL-STAR GAME!** Until Ohtani showed up for the All-Star Game, there had never been any such baseball entity as a starting pitcher/DH/leadoff man. Two reasons for that: There had never been any such baseball entity as an Ohtani before. And also . . . *that would be illegal!* But did [Major League Baseball](#) care? It did not. So everyone just agreed to *change the rules of baseball for one guy*.

Then that one guy went out and hit a 513-foot homer in the Home Run Derby one night . . . threw a 100.2 mph fastball in the All-Star Game the next night . . . and then, just because it seemed like an enjoyable thing to do, became the first player ever to bat leadoff, be the starting pitcher and wind up as the winning pitcher in the same game . . . except not just in an All-Star Game. *In any game* – regular season, postseason or All-Star . . . Shohei Ohtani, friends. He can't really be from our planet, can he?

**NO SLUG ZONE:** And finally, there's this, my very favorite Ohtani tidbit of 2021 (borrowed from MLB.com's ever-attentive Andrew Simon). Slugging percentage of the unfortunate batsmiths who had to hit against Ohtani this year: .351. Slugging percentage of Ohtani when he got to slug: .592. And what should you make of that? Oh, only this: When the season ended, if they'd forced Shohei Ohtani to trot out to the mound and he then allowed a home run to the next 33 hitters he pitched to in a row, *those opposing hitters still wouldn't have had as high a slugging percentage as he had!*

So one more time, let's ask: Are we sure this man is a real person?

“He might be a robot – who knows,” the [Dodgers’ Max Muncy](#) told me last summer. “He might be a machine. You know, I play with The Machine (aka, [Albert Pujols](#)). But he (Ohtani) might be an actual machine. You can’t rule it out. You never know.”

## My 10 favorite Strange but True hitting feats of 2021

**STRANGE BUT TRUE HITTER OF THE YEAR:** Let the record show that 18 players got at least 100 more hits than White Sox walking man [Yasmani Grandal](#) this season. That’s a development that was only possible because A) Grandal got a mere 67 hits all season and B) he also managed to draw an incredible 20 more walks (87) than hits . . . Except wait! That’s not the Strange But True part. Here goes: You know what those 18 players had in common? *Not one of them* had as high an on-base percentage as Grandal (.420)!

**STRANGE BUT TRUE DEBUT OF THE YEAR:** Would you believe Mike Piazza never once had two walk-off RBIs in a season as a Met? Ditto for did Darryl Strawberry, or Keith Hernandez, or Ed Kranepool. But have you heard the one about [Mets](#) rookie [Patrick Mazeika](#)? He fired up two walk-off RBIs (on a couple of well-placed May fielder’s choices) *before he got his first career hit!* And how many rookies in the live-ball era have ever done that? That would be one: Patrick Mazeika.

**BRANDON’S STRANGE BUT TRUE SUB SHOP:** Elsewhere in Queens, did anyone have a Stranger But Truer season than [Brandon Drury](#)? In July games *in which he didn’t start*, the Mets’ ever-available benchmeister went an amazing 7 for 7, with five extra-base hits and a 3.286 OPS! . . . And in all the games this season *in which he did start*? He went 9 for 49 (.184), with two extra-base hits and a .455 OPS!

**SCHWARBER’S STRANGE BUT TRUE DOUBLE TROUBLE:** And now another thing that makes no sense. [Kyle Schwarber](#)’s white hot June in Washington: 16 home runs . . . *but zero doubles!* . . . Kyle Schwarber’s first at-bat in July: *A double to left!*

**THE METS’ STRANGE BUT TRUE TRIPLE THREAT:** Once upon a time, back in 1912, Ty Cobb hit 20 triples in 68 games all by himself. And why would I bring that up? Because in the middle of this goofy season, the Mets (all of them) went 68 games in a row *without hitting any triples*. But then, on Aug. 16, exactly one game after they’d set the all-time record for forgetting to hit triples, what did the Mets do? *Of course* they hit a triple. Courtesy of (who else?) [Pete Alonso](#) . . . that same Pete Alonso who had neglected to hit *any* triples in his previous 1,156 trips to the plate!

**STRANGE BUT TRUE EDITION OF THREE’S COMPANY:** I’m still trying to process how this actually happened on the South Side of Chicago. July 31: [Seby Zavala](#) (a man with *zero* career homers) hit *three* bombs in one game for the White Sox, against the [Cubs](#) . . . Then the next day: Rafael Ortega (a man with six career homers *for five teams*) launched three in one day for the Cubs, against the White Sox . . . But here’s the really Strange But True Part: *The teams they hit those trifectas didn’t win either game!*

**STRANGEST BUT TRUEST WRIGLEY INVADERS OF 2021:** I'm also trying to process how these things happened on the North Side of Chicago. June 19 and 20: [Adam Duvall](#) put up back-to-back multi-homer games against the Cubs, at Wrigley . . . So who never did this *for the Cubs* at Wrigley? Oh, only *Ernie Banks* (among many others) . . . But also, on July 26-29: In the midst of a wild streak in which he homered (but never singled) in seven straight games, [Joey Votto](#) rolled into Wrigley and thumped a home run in all four games of a four-game series ... And who never did that *for the Cubs* at Wrigley: Oh, only *everyone who ever played for the Cubs*!

**STRANGEST BUT TRUEST MVP HOT STREAK:** On the way to his attractive MVP trophy, [Bryce Harper](#) did some serious streaking, my friends. Including a sizzling little stretch in April in which he went 7 for 9, plus two walks. But that wasn't the Strange But True part. The Strange But True part was the average exit velocity of *the seven hits*, according to Statcast: 78.6 mph . . . As opposed to the exit velocity of *the two outs*, both crushed into howling April 16 winds in Philadelphia: 109.0 mph and 108.0 mph! Expected batting average of those two rockets: .980 and .990 . . . *and they were outs* . . . serving as yet more proof that . . . Baseball. Makes. No. Sense.

**STRANGE BUT TRUE WALK OF THE YEAR:** The rules of baseball have been pretty darned clear for over a century now. A walk is what happens "when a pitcher throws four pitches out of the strike zone, none of which are swung at by the hitter" . . . Unless, that is, they're thrown to the *Yankees'* [Gio Urshela](#) . . . who managed to draw a walk in a May 28 game against the Tigers even though the pitcher, [Kyle Funkhouser](#), *still hasn't thrown ball four*! So why were three balls enough? You can blame it on a slight addition/subtraction mixup. Or also . . . baseball!

**STRANGE BUT TRUE BAMBINO OF THE YEAR?** He never got to hit any historic World Series walk-off something-or-others in 2021. So in order to keep us Strange But True fans entertained, *Rays* joy-spreader [Brett Phillips](#) did do this: In a span of a mere 19 days between July 29 and Aug. 16, he worked three grand slams and an inside-the-park homer into his busy schedule.

So how many other players have done that, you're no doubt wondering? That would be none, of course. And who held the old record for that sort of thing, you're no doubt also wondering? That would be *Babe Ruth*, naturally – with three slams and an inside-the-parker in a span of 36 days in 1929. And how could Babe Ruth and Brett Phillips just have wound up in the same sentence in this Strange But True Feats of the Year column? Because . . . baseball!

## My 10 favorite Strange but True pitching feats of 2021

**STRANGE BUT TRUE ONE-PITCH WONDERS:** Isn't it miraculous what you can do with one pitch, assuming it's at the right (or not so right) time . . . So on one hand, there's *Brewers* reliever [Miguel Sánchez](#), whose Aug. 10 day's work looked this way: One pitch, one strikeout, one win! . . . On the other hand, there's *Marlins* starter Pablo López, whose July 2 outing against the *Braves* went like this: One pitch, one loss!

So how'd that happen? For Sánchez: Starting pitcher exits with an elbow thing. He inherits a 3-2 count. Completes a whiff. Brewers rally. He's your winner! . . . But for López: Drills Ronald Acuña Jr. with his first pitch of the game. Gets ejected. Acuña then scores. Marlins never catch up. He's your loser! So . . . thanks for playing!

**STRANGE BUT TRUE KING OF TRIPLE DIGITS:** I could write a whole Strange But True column on [Jacob deGrom](#). It wouldn't be hard. But since that's not really fair to the rest of the pitching species, I'll just get out of the way while you watch the first 10 pitches of his start on May 31 in Arizona. Make sure you check out the mph box!

<https://twitter.com/i/status/1399567040814403586>

That's 10 straight fastballs to open the game – *and every one of them appeared on your TV screen at 100 or 101 mph!* Sadly, on Planet Statcast, where those killjoy Statcastians live for their overrated decimal points, three of those pitches were technically computed at either 99.9 or 99.8. But whatever . . . You know who didn't throw 10 pitches at 100 mph all season? How about [Zack Wheeler](#), Walker Buehler, [Corbin Burnes](#), Carlos Rodón and [Josh Hader](#) combined. But Jacob deGrom threw 10 in a row *to start a game* . . . because he's The Man.

**STRANGE BUT TRUE DEBUTS OF THE YEAR:** Big-league life is so much harder than it looks. Just ask [Royals](#) phenom [Jackson Kowar](#). His first big-league start, on June 7, included this seldom-seen combo: Two outs, *three wild pitches!* . . . Or you could also consult Brewers rookie [Alec Bettinger](#). His major-league debut went like this: Grand slam in the first, grand slam in the second, 11 runs all told in four innings and a 24.75 career ERA that at least had no place to go but down . . . Jacob deGrom has never allowed a slam in his career. Alec Bettinger gave up two of them to the first 15 hitters he faced . . . Baseball. It's hard!

**STRANGEST BUT TRUEST WAY TO GIVE UP THREE:** You know what else is hard? Giving up three runs *on a ball that travels one foot in the air!* But that really did happen to Mets pitcher [Taijuan Walker](#) on July 18, even though he contributed heavily. Aw, just watch it.

<https://twitter.com/i/status/1416827168722673666>

It was a beautiful time to be grateful for Statcast, which reported that three runs managed to score on a ball that carried one foot *and had a launch angle of minus-57*.

**LOST IN STRANGE BUT TRUE SPACE:** To continue with this poignant theme, you know what else is hard? Losing a game in which you can claim you were literally unhittable. Allow me to introduce [Zach Thompson](#), [Blake Treinen](#), [Daniel Bard](#) and [Emmanuel Clase](#). They learned firsthand that unhittability can be overrated.

**Thompson:** Started a June 20 game for the Marlins. Went four hitless innings. Lost anyway, thanks to an inning that went: Walk, strikeout, strikeout, error, passed ball.

**Treinen:** Entered a tied game for the Dodgers with two outs in the ninth. Got the third out. Ripped off two more outs in the 10th. So it was all going fine – until a wild pitch and an off-kilter Will Smith throw scored that darned Zombie Runner!

**Bard:** The Rockies' then-closer headed for the mound on May 18 in the ninth inning of a tie game. Faced three hitters – who went strikeout, strikeout, groundout. Came back out to pitch the 10th. Nobody reached base in that inning, either. Except . . . oops! Bard threw a sailing fastball that his catcher, Dom Núñez, didn't catch. In came the Zombie Runner. Enjoy that L next to your name, Daniel.

**Clase:** This will sound familiar. How does a guy lose a game in which he spins off two hitless, walkless innings? Well, there's that Zombie Runner thing. But [also this](#).

<https://sporty-clips.mlb.com/75d59c86-eac1-43cf-b860-5857ddf81611.mp4>

So how hard is it to throw two innings of zero-baserunner relief and still lose? So hard that only one pitcher in modern history has done it . . . Emmanuel Clase!

**STRANGEST BUT TRUEST HITLESS EXIT:** We're not done with the perils of hitlessness, 2021-style. Let's bring on [Matt Moore](#) . . . Spun off six hitless innings Aug. 18 for the [Phillies](#) . . . Then batted for himself *after* those six hitless innings . . . Then exited *before throwing another pitch* . . . All right, the truth is, [Joe Girardi](#) just left him in to bunt. But once, there was a time when this would have been considered a high baseball crime and misdemeanor. That time, however, definitely was not in 2021.

**STRANGEST BUT TRUEST SAVES OF THE YEAR:** All saves are not created equal. [Randy Dobnak](#), [Aroldis Chapman](#) and [Tim Hill](#) could tell you all about it.

**Dobnak:** In an April 5 game against Detroit, Dobnak gave up a grand slam with two outs in the ninth – *and still got a save out of it*. Helpful footnote: The [Twins](#) led, 15-1, when they brought him in.

**Chapman:** How does a guy save a game in which his line reads: 11 pitches, 2 strikes (Chapman's actual line June 20 against the A's)? Well, it always helps to throw *a walk-off triple play*!

<https://www.mlb.com/video/aroldis-chapman-in-play-out-s-to-sean-murphy>

**Hill:** Managed to save a June 30 game for the [Padres](#) despite the slight technicalities that 1) *he didn't throw the final pitch of the game* and 2) *he was also pinch hit for*! Heck yeah, that's possible . . . when you pitch the bottom of the fifth and then . . . *the game gets rained out four*

*pitches into the top of the sixth.* So Cionel Pérez actually threw the last four pitches of the game – but since he threw them for the team that lost (the [Reds](#)), it was Tim Hill who got the save. Because . . . baseball!

**STRANGE BUT TRUE CLONE KING OF THE YEAR:** In actual life, the last true starting pitcher to start two games on the same day was Don Newcombe – in 1950. But here at the Strange But True Feats of the Year column, we see no need to be confined by the events of “actual life.” So as far as this column is concerned, Yankees pitcher [Luis Gil](#) started two games on the same day this summer. Or at least he was “*the pitcher of record*” in two games going on at the same time. Confused yet? Here’s the deal:

On Aug. 17, in what we like to call “the big leagues,” Gil started Game 2 of a doubleheader against the Red Sox . . . Meanwhile on the same day, in what we used to call “the International League,” he was also the pitcher of record for Scranton, in a game in Worcester that had been suspended in July and then resumed just about the same time Gil was taking the mound in the Bronx . . . So did he actually start two games on the same day? Aw, whatever. Humor us!

**STRANGE BUT TRUE MINOR LEAGUE WALKFEST OF THE YEAR:** Here it comes, an actual thing that happened in a May 6 Double-A game between those Biloxi Shuckers and Birmingham Barons: A 13-walk inning from that strike-challenged Birmingham staff! It included this 10-batter stretch: Walk, walk, walk, walk, walk, walk, hit batter, walk, walk, walk. So that’s 10 hitters in a row reaching base – on nine walks, one hit batter . . . *and zero hits.* I’ve never seen a 13-walk inning. And honestly, I never hope to see one. But when you’re writing a Strange But True Feats of the Year column, hey, it comes in handy!

**STRANGEST BUT TRUEST COMMENCEMENT NON-SPEAKER OF THE YEAR:** It was May 28. The Georgetown University commencement ceremonies were in mid-diploma-name-call mode at Nationals Park . . . when that time-honored ritual of every graduation day occurred: [Max Scherzer](#) *throwing his long toss the day before a start!* I think graduating senior Jonathon Marek summed up the Strange But True spirit of the moment when he told me afterward:

“You know, they say every time you go to a baseball stadium, you see something new. I just never thought the new thing would have been a guy throwing a bullpen in right field during my college graduation.”

**BONUS STRANGE BUT TRUE PITCHING MESS:** Here’s a weird thing that happens when you write one of these Strange But True extravaganzas. You finish writing three loonnnggg columns, filled with lots and lots and lots of wild notes. You think you’ve covered everyone and everything. And then . . . you wake up in the middle of the night and remember: *I forgot the Cardinals!* That’s bad. So a week after I finished the rest of this column, I added this bonus Cardinals Strange But True note. What’s wrong with me?

The Strangest But Truest thing about those Cardinals pitchers in 2021 was this: *They walked 29 hitters this season with the bases loaded!* No team had done that and made it to the postseason since Cuddles Marshall's 1949 Yankees. But meanwhile . . .

Remember Dennis Eckersley? On his road to Cooperstown, he walked three hitters with the bases loaded – in a 14-year career . . . Then, all these years later, another Cardinals closer, [Alex Reyes](#), headed for the mound in an Aug. 5 game against the Braves – and also walked three hitters with the bases loaded – *in a row* . . . in an outing that went: Hit batter, walk, walk, walk, walk . . . after which he was relieved by [Justin Miller](#), who issued *a fourth bases-loaded walk in a row* . . . Which made Alex Reyes the first pitcher in history to rip off this action-packed Strange But True box-score line: 0 outs, 0 hits, 3 runs, 3 earned runs, 4 walks, 1 HBP, 21 pitches, 4 strikes. So there you go. You're welcome, St. Louis – I guess!

**BONUS STRANGE BUT TRUE HITTING NOTE:** OK, hold on. I need to do this one more time, because the next night, I woke up and remembered: *I also forgot the [Blue Jays](#)!* At one point they were actually supposed to get their own Strange But True Team of the Year mention. Then that didn't happen. But I still need to tell this tale of . . .

[Bo Bichette](#)! . . . Who hit an April 20 home run that sailed clear out of Fenway Park and nearly clattered off a building on Lansdowne Street . . . which would have been Strange But True enough, even if that building hadn't been *the place where his parents met*, at a now-closed Golds Gym, where his dad, [Dante Bichette](#), worked out during a 1991 road trip to Boston . . . where he met a girl named Mariana, who had just started working at the gym *that day* . . . which means this home run (and the guy who hit it) literally wouldn't have been possible without the place where it almost landed. . . . But also one more thing . . .

This homer, which landed in this fateful spot, also wouldn't have been possible without its rarified *40-degree launch angle*. . . . And you might not believe this, but would you like to guess how many big-league home runs Bo Bichette has hit with a 40-degree launch angle? . . . Yessir. Exactly one. *That one!*

## Strange but True no-hitter-palooza

Finally, has anybody mentioned that it was the Year of the No-Hitter? Well then . . .

**BREAKING: THERE WERE MORE GAMES IN 2021 IN WHICH A TEAM GOT NO HITS (11) THAN . . .**

- Home runs by [Mike Trout](#) (eight)
- Doubles by a guy who hit 23 home runs (nine-double machine Yasmani Grandal)
- Series won by the [Diamondbacks](#) (nine)

- Games won by the [Orioles](#) against the five AL Central teams combined (10)
- Games won this fall by the Detroit Lions and Pistons combined (seven\*)
- Episodes of “Curb Your Enthusiasm” (10)
- And weeks when Taylor Swift had Billboard’s No. 1 album in America (six)

To be clear, there weren’t 11 official no-hitters. The MLB nitpickers will tell you it was nine. Which breaks down to seven individual complete-game no-hitters . . . plus two combined no-hitters . . . plus two other seven-inning whatever-the-heck-they-were games with no hits. But that’s still a lot of hitlessness! So here come the Strangest But Truest No-Hit nuggets I could mine.

**CLEVELAND ROCKS!** Number of times the Indians/Guardians got no hits in a game this year: Four . . . Number of times the Yankees have gotten no hits *in the last 75 seasons combined*: Four. Even if only three of those Cleveland games count as “real” no-hitters, this is Strange But Trueness at its zenith.

**THE ZACH ATTACK:** And if there was one other common theme that ran through all those Cleveland no-hitters, it was the starting pitcher who *didn’t* throw them. [Zach Plesac](#) was on the other end of three of those games. In one year. And only one other pitcher who ever lived, Jim Perry, was the opposing starter in three no-hitters, except that was . . . *in his whole career*. Then Zach Plesac got run over by that no-hit train three times *in a span of 20 starts*.

**THE 8,000-8,000 CLUB:** The Padres (thank you, [Joe Musgrove](#)!) ended their 8,205-game no-no-hitter streak in April . . . Then the Orioles (thank you, John Means!) ended another half-century complete-game no-no-hitter streak in May . . . So think about this. In the history of baseball, only two teams – the 1906-64 Phillies and 1962-2012 Mets – had ever ended an 8,000-game no-no-hitter drought. Then it happened *twice in four weeks*, because . . . 2021!

**BY NO MEANS:** Let’s sum up Means’ May 5 no-hitter in Seattle: No runs. No hits. No walks. No hit batters. No errors. 27 up. 27 down. So it’s almost impossible to do all that and *not* throw a perfect game. But are you familiar with the work of the 2021 Orioles? So naturally, the only hitter to reach base in this game got there *after striking out* (on a wild pitch). And would you believe that this was John Means’ 49th big-league appearance, a span during which he’d thrown more than 4,000 pitches . . . and . . . *this was the first time that any hitter had ever reached base against him on a strikeout/wild pitch, a strikeout/passed ball or any other size or shape of strikeout*? So your attention, please. Are any mathematicians reading this? What were the odds of that?

**THE IMPERFECT STORM:** But hey, it wasn’t just him. Means was one of four pitchers this year – Musgrove, Carlos Rodón and [Madison Bumgarner](#) being the others – who threw a complete game allowing no hits, no runs and no walks. And somehow . . . *not one of them was a perfect*

*game?* As Strange But True as that sounds, it gets Stranger But Truer. Before 2021, there had never been a season in the modern era with four games that met that description. And then, this year . . . *it happened four weeks in a row!* Because, well, 2021!

**THE BEST LITTLE NO-HITTER HOUSE IN TEXAS:** Those Texas Rangers spent 59 seasons playing baseball in parks not known as “Globe Life Field.” One thing they could pretty much guarantee back in the olden days, in those olden parks, is that they were going to get a hit nearly every day. At least one hit, anyhow. Well, not anymore!

**Times Rangers no-hit in Arlington Stadium:** once in 1,750 games

**Times Rangers no-hit at Globe Life Park:** never in 2,081 games

**Times Rangers no-hit at new Globe Life Field:** twice before Memorial Day this year!

**LET ME INTRODUCE MYSELF:** On Aug. 14, a fellow named [Tyler Gilbert](#), scooped up by the Diamondbacks as a Rule 5 draft pick just eight months earlier, made the first start of his major-league career, against the Padres. And when he was through, the scoreboard, incredibly enough, looked like this: **0 0 0 . . .** Yessir. One start. *One no-hitter!* That’s a ratio that will definitely work. Ever heard of three men named Greg Maddux, Roger Clemens and Steve Carlton? How ‘bout this fun comparison chart once that Tyler Gilbert game was in the books:

|              | Icons | Gilbert |
|--------------|-------|---------|
| Cy Youngs    | 15    | 0       |
| Hall of Fame | 2     | 0       |
| Starts       | 2,156 | 1       |
| No Hitters   | 0     | 1       |

Baseball! . . . It . . . Makes . . . No . . . Sense.

**THE CURSE OF THE NO-HITTERS:** We should always remind ourselves that too much of a good thing can be way more trouble than we had in mind. That goes for everything. Ice cream. Refreshing beverages. Possibly even pizza. And now, it turns out, that’s even true of no-hitters. Eleven games in one season in which a team gets no hits. No wonder the Curse of the No-Hitters broke out. This all really happened, following various no-hitter-type events:

**DIAMONDBACKS** – After their man Madison Bumgarner crafted an uplifting seven-inning Whatever That Was hitless game in Atlanta on April 25, the Diamondbacks lost *their next 24 road games in a row*. That’s the most by any team in any season since Henry (I Don’t Get No Respect) Youngman’s 1890 Pittsburgh Innocents somehow lost 41 in a row.

**ORIOLES** – It undoubtedly seemed like a good thing when John Means no-hit the [Mariners](#) in Seattle on May 5. Or at least it did until the aptly named “O’s” lost their next 20 games not

played at still-lovely Camden Yards. That means this was the first season with two teams losing at least 20 in a row on the road since 1894!

**RANGERS** – Somebody had to prove you could curse your team just by *losing* a no-hitter. So the Rangers lost two of them – both at home – by May 19. They then proved every theory of Reverse Jinx conspiracists everywhere – by losing their next 10 on the road.

**CUBS AND DODGERS** – So if you didn't think there was such a thing as the Curse of the No-Hitter before, this should put you over the top. On June 24 at Dodger Stadium, the "first-place" Cubs spun a combined no-hitter against the Dodgers. Those two teams then proved this whole curse thing was more powerful than we even knew.

The Cubs lost their next 11 games in a row, plummeting from first place to nine games out of first. The Dodgers did the whole boomerang-curse thing by winning their next nine in a row. There had never been two dueling streaks like that, involving two teams that got mixed up in the same no-hitter, in the history of baseball. And that's the only part of both of those streaks that feels even remotely logical.

**THE TROUBLE WITH ANGEL:** Finally, the Strangest But Truest no-hit development of them all might just have involved everyone's favorite umpire, Angel Hernandez. This is his 31st season as a big-league umpire. And for reasons known only to the great man in blue in the sky, he hadn't been behind the plate for a single no-hitter, in all those years, until [Spencer Turnbull](#) ended his personal no-hit curse on May 18. Would you believe that since Hernandez debuted in 1991, 65 other umpires called at least one no-hitter before he did? Fill in your own explanation on that if you'd like. But here's ours. It sums up . . .

Baseball! . . . In 2021!

## **FREE AGENTS**

### **The Best Free-Agent Signing in MLB History at Each Position**

By Joel Reuter in bleacher report

With the current [MLB](#) free-agent market frozen amid the ongoing lockout, now is the perfect time for a look back at some of the greatest free-agent-signings in the history of the sport.

Rather than simply list the best of all time, we've taken a slightly different approach and gone position-by-position to select the top free-agent addition at each spot.

A few things to clarify before we get started.

Only outside free-agency signings were considered—no players re-signing with their previous team, no contract extensions, no trade or waiver additions.

As far as what went into selecting the top player at each position, team success played a major role. The ultimate goal of free agency is to add the missing pieces to a title contender, so guys who were that missing piece and helped their team find postseason success have a leg up on a player who had strong individual numbers but is lacking in October accolades.

Of course, individual production was still a significant factor as well, and there are multiple players on this list who didn't win a World Series during the life of their contract.

We've also included a handful of honorable mentions at each position, but feel free to suggest anyone else you feel is worthy of consideration.

Off we go!

**Catcher: Ivan Rodriguez, Florida Marlins**

**Date:** Jan. 28, 2003

**Terms:** One year, \$10 million

In 12 seasons with the Texas Rangers to begin his career, Ivan Rodriguez established himself as one of the best catchers in baseball history, earning 10 All-Star selections while winning 10 Gold Glove Awards, six Silver Sluggers and 1999 AL MVP honors during that stretch.

However, after a herniated disc limited him to 108 games during the 2002 season, teams were hesitant to sign the 31-year-old backstop to a long-term deal when he reached free agency that offseason.

The Florida Marlins ultimately rolled the dice in late January, and that one-year deal can be pointed to as the missing piece that pushed them over the top for an unlikely World Series run.

Rodriguez hit .297/.369/.474 with 36 doubles, 16 home runs and 85 RBI in 144 games while also doing a masterful job handling a young starting rotation that featured Dontrelle Willis (21), Josh Beckett (23), Brad Penny (25) and Carl Pavano (27).

He won NLCS MVP honors and hit .313/.390/.522 with 17 RBI in 17 games during the playoffs to lead the Marlins to a title, and then cashed in with a five-year, \$53 million contract from the Detroit Tigers that winter.

**Honorable Mentions:** *Carlton Fisk (CWS), Russell Martin (PIT), Darrell Porter (STL), Ivan Rodriguez (DET)*

**First Baseman: Pete Rose, Philadelphia Phillies**

**Date:** Dec. 5, 1978

**Terms:** Four years, \$3.24 million

Pete Rose was 38 years old with 3,164 career hits under his belt when he reached free agency following the 1978 season.

Despite his age, he had no shortage of suitors.

"St. Louis wanted me to replace Lou Brock, and I didn't want to do that," Rose told [Todd Zolecki](#) of MLB.com. "Kansas City wanted me to change leagues, and I didn't want to do that. ... And Pittsburgh, I didn't think they had a good enough team. But I thought the team sitting on the powder keg was the Phillies."

He inked a four-year deal that made him the highest-paid player in baseball, and in the second season of that contract he helped lead the Phillies to a World Series title.

"We had a lot of basic talent, but we really didn't have a leader," former Phillies team president Bill Giles said, via Zolecki. "We didn't have somebody who had the confidence to chew out the other players."

Rose hit .300 with a .375 on-base percentage over the course of that four-year deal, making the NL All-Star team each year and winning a Silver Slugger in 1981.

**Honorable Mentions:** *Jose Abreu (CWS), Jason Giambi (NYY), John Olerud (SEA), Rafael Palmeiro (TEX), Rafael Palmeiro (BAL)*

**Second Baseman: Ben Zobrist, Chicago Cubs**

**Date:** Dec. 8, 2015

**Terms:** Four years, \$56 million

If the Jon Lester signing was the move that shifted the Chicago Cubs from rebuilding to contending, the Ben Zobrist signing is the one that pushed them over the top in their pursuit of the World Series title that had evaded them for more than a century.

One of baseball's most versatile players, fresh off a World Series win with the Kansas City Royals, Zobrist brought a veteran presence to a young clubhouse and a high-contact, on-base-oriented approach to a lineup with some strikeout issues.

He hit .272/.386/.446 with 52 extra-base hits and [3.4 WAR](#) in his first year with the team, earning the start at second base for the National League in the All-Star Game, but it was the postseason where he truly etched his place in Cubs lore.

The 35-year-old went 10-for-28 in the World Series, including an RBI double in the top of the 10th in Game 7 of the World Series that put the Cubs ahead for good, en route to World Series MVP honors.

Those contributions alone made the contract a massive success, and he added a [3.5-WAR](#) season in 2018 for good measure.

**Honorable Mentions:** *Roberto Alomar (BAL), Roberto Alomar (CLE), Jay Bell (ARI), Bret Boone (SEA), Bobby Grich (CAL), Daniel Murphy (WAS), Marcus Semien (TOR)*

### **Third Baseman: Adrian Beltre, Texas Rangers**

**Date:** Jan. 5, 2011

**Terms:** Six years, \$96 million

After an inconsistent five-year run with the Seattle Mariners, third baseman Adrian Beltre signed a one-year, \$10 million deal with the Red Sox and sent his stock soaring by hitting .321/.365/.553 with 49 doubles, 28 home runs, 102 RBI and [7.8 WAR](#).

That stellar performance earned him a six-year deal with the Texas Rangers, and over the life of that contract, he solidified his place as one of the greatest third basemen in MLB history and a sure-fire future Hall of Famer.

While he played eight seasons with the Rangers, over that initial six-year pact he hit .308/.358/.516 for a 132 OPS+ while averaging 32 doubles, 28 home runs, 94 RBI and 6.0 WAR. During that time, he earned three All-Star selections, won three Gold Gloves and finished in the top 10 in AL MVP balloting four different times.

The Rangers made back-to-back World Series appearances in 2010 and 2011, which stand as the only two trips to the Fall Classic in franchise history.

Enshrinement in Cooperstown awaits in 2024.

**Honorable Mentions:** *Adrian Beltre (BOS), Wade Boggs (NYY), Bill Mueller (BOS), Terry Pendleton (ATL)*

### **Shortstop: Alex Rodriguez, Texas Rangers**

**Date:** Jan. 26, 2001

**Terms:** 10 years, \$252 million

Love him or hate him, [Alex Rodriguez](#) was a transcendent talent at his peak.

Just look at his production during the three years of his mega deal:

- **2001:** [160 OPS+](#), .318/.399/.622, 52 HR, 135 RBI, 8.3 WAR
- **2002:** 158 OPS+, .300/.392/.623, 57 HR, 142 RBI, 8.8 WAR
- **2003:** 147 OPS+, .298/.396/.600, 47 HR, 118 RBI, 8.4 WAR

Unfortunately, the Texas Rangers went a combined 216-270 during those three years, and he was traded in 2004 to the New York Yankees in exchange for Alfonso Soriano and a prospect who wasn't Robinson Cano but [reportedly](#) could have been.

A-Rod would ultimately opt out of the contract after seven years, signing a new 10-year, \$275 million deal with the Yankees. Along with his 2003 AL MVP with the Rangers, he won the award twice more in 2005 and 2007, but he didn't win his first World Series ring until he had moved on to his second 10-year deal.

Still, this stands as the best free-agency signing at the shortstop position by a wide margin. Is that poised to change with this year's loaded free-agent class?

**Honorable Mentions:** *David Eckstein (STL), Miguel Tejada (BAL)*

**Outfielder: Barry Bonds, San Francisco Giants**

**Date:** Dec. 8, 1992

**Terms:** Six years, \$43 million

Barry Bonds was the headliner of a truly epic 1992-93 MLB free-agent class that also included Greg Maddux, David Cone, Mark McGwire, Kirby Puckett, Wade Boggs, Paul Molitor, Joe Carter, Dave Winfield, Doug Drabek and Jimmy Key.

Already a two-time NL MVP entering his age-28 season, Bonds had just taken home the hardware during the 1992 season when he hit .311/.456/.624 with 34 home runs, 103 RBI, 109 runs scored and 39 steals with more walks (127) than strikeouts (69) in a 9.0-WAR season.

The Giants made him baseball's highest-paid player with a six-year, \$43 million deal, and that deal is [often credited](#) with saving baseball in San Francisco.

The 28-year-old immediately won another MVP award in his first season with the team, hitting .336/.458/.677 for a [206 OPS+](#) while leading the NL in home runs (46) and RBI (123) and swiping 29 bases in a 9.9 WAR.

He was worth 49.6 WAR over the life of his initial six-year contract in San Francisco, but the Giants made the playoffs just once during that stretch.

**Outfielder: Manny Ramirez, Boston Red Sox**

**Date:** Dec. 19, 2000

**Terms:** Eight years, \$160 million

The Boston Red Sox's top target during the 2000-01 offseason was actually right-hander Mike Mussina, who signed with the New York Yankees on Dec. 7.

A few weeks later, at the annual Winter Meetings, the Sox shifted gears and signed slugger [Manny Ramirez](#) to a massive eight-year deal.

"It was important for us to get a player like that, and for us to have really good, identifiable players from a competitive basis," then-general manager Dan Duquette [told reporters](#). "We thought that Manny would be a long-time fixture and fit in with the tradition of great Red Sox sluggers in left field."

Suffice to say, he lived up to expectations.

He hit .313/.412/.594 and averaged 36 home runs and 114 RBI over the first seven years of the contract, anchoring the lineup alongside David Ortiz for a pair of World Series winners in 2004 and 2007. In 43 postseason games during his time in Boston, he had a .980 OPS with 11 home runs and 38 RBI.

The Red Sox traded him to the Los Angeles Dodgers midway through the final year of his contract, bringing back Jason Bay in a three-way trade that also involved the Pittsburgh Pirates.

**Outfielder: Ichiro Suzuki, Seattle Mariners**

**Date:** Nov. 30, 2000

**Terms:** Three years, \$14.1 million

Ichiro Suzuki already had nine professional seasons with the Orix Blue Wave in Japan under his belt when he made his way stateside and joined the Seattle Mariners on a three-year contract prior to the 2001 season.

He was the first position player to make the jump from the Japanese League to MLB, and with that came a level of uncertainty, even with a .353 career average to his credit.

It only took one season for him to silence any potential doubters, as he won the AL batting title (.350) and led the majors in hits (242) and steals (56) to win AL Rookie of the Year and AL MVP for a Mariners team that won 116 games.

He batted .328 with 662 hits during his initial team-friendly three-year contract, then re-upped with the Mariners on four-year, \$44 million and five-year, \$90 million extensions.

*Honorable Mentions:* Carlos Beltran (NYM), Johnny Damon (BOS), Andre Dawson (CHC), Jermaine Dye (CWS), Vladimir Guerrero (ANA), Dave Henderson (OAK), Torii Hunter (LAA), Larry Walker (COL), Dave Winfield (NYY)

**Right-Handed Starting Pitcher: Greg Maddux, Atlanta Braves**

**Date:** Dec. 9, 1992

**Terms:** Five years, \$28 million

After winning the first Cy Young Award of his career with the Chicago Cubs in 1992, Greg Maddux was a hot commodity on the free-agent market that offseason.

He reportedly had a [five-year, \\$34 million offer](#) on the table from the New York Yankees but instead joined the Atlanta Braves, where his first five years with the team represent one of the greatest stretches in MLB history:

- **1993:** 20-10, 2.36 ERA ([170 ERA+](#)), 1.05 WHIP, 5.8 WAR
- **1994:** 16-6, 1.56 ERA (271 ERA+), 0.90 WHIP, 8.5 WAR
- **1995:** 19-2, 1.63 ERA (260 ERA+), 0.81 WHIP, 9.7 WAR
- **1996:** 15-11, 2.72 ERA (162 ERA+), 1.03 WHIP, 7.2 WAR
- **1997:** 19-4, 2.20 ERA (189 ERA+), 0.95 WHIP, 7.8 WAR
- He won the NL Cy Young in '93, '94 and '95, and he led the Braves to a World Series title in '95 en route to establishing himself as one of the greatest pitchers to ever set foot on an MLB mound.
- ***Honorable Mentions:*** Kevin Brown (FLA), Chris Carpenter (STL), Roger Clemens (TOR), David Cone (KC), Zack Greinke (LAD), Orlando Hernandez (NYY), Jack Morris (MIN), Mike Mussina (NYY), Nolan Ryan (HOU), Max Scherzer (WAS)

**Left-Handed Starting Pitcher: Randy Johnson, Arizona Diamondbacks**

**Date:** Dec. 10, 1998

**Terms:** Four years, \$53.4 million plus a \$15 million club option in 2003

Had it not been for a knee injury that limited Randy Johnson to 18 starts and a 4.26 ERA in 114 innings in the fifth year of this contract, this might be the greatest signing in MLB history.

Heck, even with that injury, it's still very much in the conversation. Just look at what he did during the first four years of the deal:

- **1999:** 17-9, 2.48 ERA ([184 ERA+](#)), 364 K, 9.2 WAR
- **2000:** 19-7, 2.64 ERA (181 ERA+), 347 K, 8.1 WAR
- **2001:** 21-6, 2.49 ERA (188 ERA+), 372 K, 10.1 WAR

- **2002:** 24-5, 2.32 ERA (195 ERA+), 334 K, 10.7 WAR

That sheer dominance came at the height of the Steroid Era and resulted in four straight NL Cy Young wins.

It also helped the D-backs capture a World Series title in 2001, when the "Big Unit" went 5-1 with a 1.52 ERA and 47 strikeouts in 41.1 innings over five starts and one relief appearance. That includes 1.1 no-hit innings to close out Game 7 of the World Series after tossing seven innings of two-run ball the night before.

**Honorable Mentions:** *Mark Langston (CAL), Al Leiter (FLA), Jon Lester (CHC), CC Sabathia (NYY)*

**Relief Pitcher: Koji Uehara, Boston Red Sox**

**Date:** Dec. 18, 2012

**Terms:** Two years, \$9.25 million

Right-hander Koji Uehara was already 34 years old when he made his MLB debut in 2009, and he had a 2.89 ERA with 14 saves in 157 appearances over four seasons when he joined the Boston Red Sox prior to the 2013 campaign.

The Red Sox were in desperate need of stability in the closer's role after Alfredo Aceves (25/33 SV, 5.36 ERA) and Andrew Bailey (6/9 SV, 7.04 ERA) had both floundered in that role the previous season, but it wasn't Uehara who was initially expected to be the answer.

Veteran Joel Hanrahan had been acquired from the Pittsburgh Pirates in a six-player deal that sent a young Mark Melancon the other way, and he was fresh off a 36-save season and his second straight All-Star Game appearance. However, when he struggled to a 9.82 ERA with two blown saves in his first nine appearances, the ninth-inning role quickly returned to a state of flux.

Uehara finally took over the job in late June, and he went on to post a pristine 1.09 ERA and 0.57 WHIP in 73 appearances with 21 saves in 24 chances. That success continued in October, as he nailed down all seven of his save chances and won ALCS MVP honors en route to a Red Sox title.

He had 26 saves and a 2.52 ERA in 64 chances the following season to earn his first All-Star selection.

**Honorable Mentions:** *Rollie Fingers (SD), Goose Gossage (NYY), Joe Nathan (TEX), Billy Wagner (ATL)*

**AND TWO PIECES FROM MLBTRADERUMORS.COM**

## **Largest Contract In Franchise History For Each MLB Team**

By Tim Dierkes

Here's our list of the largest contract each of the 30 MLB teams has ever signed. Each contract is linked to its MLBTR post, with the exception of those that predate the site's existence.

Angels: [Mike Trout](#) – 10 years, 360MM. [Signed 3-21-19](#).

Astros: [Jose Altuve](#) – 5 years, \$151MM. [Signed 3-20-18](#).

Athletics: [Eric Chavez](#) – 6 years, \$66MM. [Signed 3-18-04](#).

Blue Jays: [George Springer](#) – 6 years, \$150MM. [Signed 1-19-21](#).

Braves: [Freddie Freeman](#) – 8 years, \$135MM. [Signed 2-4-2014](#).

Brewers: [Christian Yelich](#) – 7 years, \$188.5MM. [Signed 3-6-2020](#).

Cardinals: [Paul Goldschmidt](#) – 5 years, \$130MM. [Signed 3-24-19](#).

Cubs: [Jason Heyward](#) – 8 years, \$184MM. [Signed 12-15-15](#).

Diamondbacks: [Zack Greinke](#) – 6 years, \$206.5MM. [Signed 12-8-15](#).

Dodgers: [Mookie Betts](#) – 12 years, \$365MM. [Signed 7-22-20](#).

Giants: [Buster Posey](#) – 8 years, \$159MM. [Signed 3-29-13](#).

Guardians: [Edwin Encarnacion](#) – 3 years, \$60MM. [Signed 1-7-17](#).

Mariners: [Robinson Cano](#) – 10 years, \$240MM. [Signed 12-12-13](#).

Marlins: [Giancarlo Stanton](#) – 13 years, \$325MM. [Signed 11-18-14](#).

Mets: [Francisco Lindor](#) – 10 years, \$341MM. [Signed 3-31-21](#).

Nationals: [Stephen Strasburg](#) – 7 years, \$245MM. [Signed 12-9-19](#).

Orioles: [Chris Davis](#) – 7 years, \$161MM. [Signed 1-21-16](#).

Padres: [Fernando Tatis Jr.](#) – 14 years, \$340MM. [Signed 2-22-21](#).

Phillies: [Bryce Harper](#) – 13 years, \$330MM. [Signed 2-28-19](#).

Pirates: [Jason Kendall](#) – 6 years, \$60MM. [Signed 11-18-00](#).

Rangers: [Corey Seager](#) – 10 years, \$325MM. [Signed 12-1-21](#).

Rays: [Wander Franco](#) – 11 years, \$182MM. [Signed 11-27-21](#).

Red Sox: [David Price](#) – 7 years, \$217MM. [Signed 12-4-15](#).

Reds: [Joey Votto](#) – 10 years, \$225MM. [Signed 4-2-12](#).

Rockies: [Nolan Arenado](#) – 7 years, \$234MM. [Signed 2-26-19](#).

Royals: [Salvador Perez](#) – 4 years, \$82MM. [Signed 3-21-21](#).

Tigers: [Miguel Cabrera](#) – 8 years, \$248MM. [Signed 3-31-14](#).

Twins: [Joe Mauer](#) – 8 years, \$184MM. [Signed 3-21-10](#).

White Sox: [Yasmani Grandal](#) – 4 years, \$73MM. [Signed 11-21-19](#).

Yankees: [Gerrit Cole](#) – 9 years, \$324MM. [Signed 12-10-19](#).

Which of those deals do you think were worth it? I'm guessing the Cubs and Orioles would like a do-over and what do you think about Pirates largest contract was 21 years ago, the A's 17 years ago?

### **Five-Year Deals For Free Agent Starting Pitchers Rarely End Well**

Tim Diekres, mlbraderumors.com

Prior to the lockout this winter, three starting pitchers signed free agent deals for exactly five years:

- Mariners signed [Robbie Ray](#) for five years, \$115MM with an opt-out after third year
- Blue Jays signed [Kevin Gausman](#) for five years, \$110MM
- Tigers signed [Eduardo Rodriguez](#) for five years, \$77MM with an opt-out after second year

Free agent contracts of exactly this length are fairly rare. We saw a pair of five-year starting pitcher deals in the 2019-20 offseason for [Zack Wheeler](#) and [Madison Bumgarner](#). Before that, you have to go back to the 2015-16 offseason, when teams incredibly inked five of them. Interestingly, [Marcus Stroman](#) signed a three-year deal prior to the lockout even though we predicted five

I think free agent starting pitchers signing five-year deals have some commonality: the combination of their ability and age resulted in enough market pressure for exactly that number of years, no more and no less. I'd say it's generally a pitcher who is considered good or very good, yet something short of an ace. While it's true that market conditions may result in a five-year deal for a pitcher in a certain offseason and not another, these guys still seem to fall within the same bracket.

Going back to [Gil Meche](#)'s December 2006 contract with the Royals, 11 different free agent pitchers have signed five-year deals that are now completed. Spoiler alert: very few of these ended well. Stat note: [ERA- is a park and league-adjusted version of ERA](#), where 100 is average and lower is better.

[Jordan Zimmermann](#): five-year, \$110MM deal with Tigers

- Starts: 97
- ERA-: 127
- fWAR: 5.0
- bWAR: 0.9
- When Regret Set In: In Year 1, when Zimmermann posted a 4.87 ERA.
- How It Ended: Zimmermann made three September outings in the shortened 2020 season. He'd go on to make two appearances with the Brewers this year before retiring. By measure of bWAR, Zimmermann's performance was the second-worst of this sample.

[Jeff Samardzija](#): five-year, \$90MM deal with Giants

- Starts: 110
- ERA-: 103
- fWAR: 6.9
- bWAR: 7.1
- When Regret Set In: Samardzija was solid in three of the five years, including the fourth. So regret never really set in here.
- How It Ended: Samardzija made four starts in the shortened season. He has not pitched since.

[Mike Leake](#): five-year, \$80MM deal with Cardinals

- Starts: 124
- ERA-: 103
- fWAR: 8.6

- bWAR: 5.8
- When Regret Set In: Year 1, when Leake posted a 4.69 ERA. In August of Year 2, Leake cleared waivers and was traded to the Mariners along with \$17MM.
- How It Ended: Leake opted out of the 2020 season due to the pandemic, forgoing his salary. He hasn't pitched since September 24th, 2019.

[Wei-Yin Chen](#): five-year, \$80MM deal with Marlins

- Starts: 53
- ERA-: 129
- fWAR: 2.1
- bWAR: -0.6
- When Regret Set In: At some point in Year 1, in which Chen posted a 4.96 ERA.
- How It Ended: Chen was released with a year remaining on his contract, with the Marlins eating \$22MM in salary. He signed a minor league deal with the Mariners but was released in June 2020. Chen signed with the Chiba Lotte Marines and made four appearances in '20. He pitched for the Hanshin Tigers in 2021. Chen's Marlins contract was the worst of all of these five-year deals.

[Ian Kennedy](#): five-year, \$70MM deal with Royals

- Starts: 86
- ERA-: 102
- fWAR: 3.9
- bWAR: 6.3
- When Regret Set In: In Year 2, when Kennedy posted a 5.38 ERA.
- How It Ended: Kennedy was moved to the bullpen in the fourth year of the deal, saving 30 games. He struggled in 14 relief innings in 2020 to finish out the contract.

[Anibal Sanchez](#): five-year, \$80MM deal with Tigers

- Starts: 118
- ERA-: 109
- fWAR: 12.0
- bWAR: 7.0
- When Regret Set In: In Year 3, when Sanchez posted a 4.99 ERA.
- How It Ended: Sanchez played out the contract with the Tigers and posted a 6.41 ERA in 2017, the final season.

[C.J. Wilson](#): five-year, \$77.5MM deal with Angels

- Starts: 119
- ERA-: 102
- fWAR: 7.5
- bWAR: 5.7

- When Regret Set In: Wilson had a 3.89 ERA as late as Year 4 of the contract, so you could argue that regret didn't set in until he had season-ending shoulder surgery in August of that year.
- How It Ended: No one realized it at the time, but Wilson's career was over after that August 2015 surgery and he'd be injured for all of Year 5.

[Cliff Lee](#): five-year, \$120MM deal with Phillies

- Starts: 106
- ERA-: 76
- fWAR: 19.6
- bWAR: 20.2
- When Regret Set In/How It Ended: One of these things is not like the others, as Lee was an ace when he signed to remain with the Phillies. Lee made his last start for the Phillies, and of his career, on July 31st of 2014 – three and a half years into the contract. He left that trade deadline start with an elbow injury and never pitched again, yet he was so good in those three and a half years that it's fair to say the Phillies never regretted the contract.

[John Lackey](#): five-year, \$82.5MM deal with Red Sox

- Starts: 121
- ERA-: 106
- fWAR: 9.2
- bWAR: 3.6
- When Regret Set In: Quite soon, with Lackey posting a 4.40 ERA in Year 1 and a 6.41 mark in Year 2. At that point, Lackey underwent Tommy John surgery.
- How It Ended: Lackey's time with the Red Sox ended with a bit of a resurgence, as he posted a 3.60 ERA in 21 Year 5 starts before being traded at the deadline to the Cardinals for [Allen Craig](#) and [Joe Kelly](#). What's more, the Red Sox included a clause in Lackey's contract that triggered a league-minimum sixth-year option upon the Tommy John procedure. This turned into a six-year deal in which the Cardinals received a stellar 2015 campaign from Lackey for just \$500K.

[A.J. Burnett](#): five-year, \$82.5MM deal with Yankees

- Starts: 159
- ERA-: 103
- fWAR: 12.2
- bWAR: 8.3
- When Regret Set In: In Year 2, when Burnett posted a 5.26 ERA.
- How It Ended: After three seasons of Burnett, the Yankees shipped him to the Pirates and kicked in \$20MM of the \$33MM still owed to him. Burnett flourished with the change of scenery.

[Gil Meche](#): five-year, \$55MM deal with Royals

- Starts: 100
- ERA-: 96
- fWAR: 8.6
- bWAR: 10.2
- When Regret Set In: In Year 3, when Meche posted a 5.09 ERA.
- How It Ended: Meche underwent shoulder surgery in July of Year 4, and the Royals planned to use him in relief in the final season of the contract. Instead, Meche [felt that he didn't deserve](#) the \$12MM he still had coming. He retired, letting the Royals off the hook for all of the money.

## Conclusion

It's not fair to take this 11-pitcher sample and say that the deals for Ray, Gausman, and Rodriguez won't work out. Teams are evaluating pitchers better, and the Chen contract doesn't have anything to do with how Ray will hold up. Perhaps we can set the bar for a successful five-year starting pitcher contract at 10 total WAR: 3 in Year 1, 2.5 in Year 2, 2.0 in Year 3, 1.5 in Year 4, and 1.0 in Year 5. By fWAR, Lee, Burnett, and Sanchez were able to accomplish that. By bWAR, only Lee and Meche got there. Over the life of their contracts, only those two produced an ERA better than league average.

How many of these 11 contracts ended with a useful pitcher still working for the signing team at the end of Year 5? Zero. However, five-year deals are given out because of market pressure, not because the team expects five strong years out of the pitcher. Lee produced 17.7 WAR in the first three years of his deal, so the rest didn't matter. Meche, Wilson, Samardzija, and Sanchez started off their contracts with a pair of strong seasons. Zack Wheeler isn't in this sample but he's well on his way to 10+ WAR for the Phillies despite a shortened 2020 season. Madison Bumgarner, however, seems like a long shot.

What do the Mariners, Blue Jays, and Tigers really expect out of Ray, Gausman, and Rodriguez? If they looked at these comparables, they're likely expecting two strong years and hopefully a third. If Ray or Rodriguez sees fit to opt out, the clubs will likely have gotten the best of them and could duck a few decline years.

# **HALL OF FAME DISCUSSIONS** **HEADING TO VOTE RESULTS ON** **JANUARY 25.**

## **JOE POSNANSKI ON THE PROS AND CONS (FROM JOEBLOGS.COM)**

There's something satisfying about this year's Hall of Fame ballot because it is the last time around for Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens (and Sammy Sosa, for that matter). Every year for a decade, the winter months have been filled with talk about steroids and HGH and cheating and morality, what we know and what we don't know, and it has been utterly exhausting. I'm so ready for it to end.

You would think after 10 years of talking about it, we would have made at least a little progress in making sense of the Selig/Steroid Era, but we really haven't. It has been obvious for the longest time that Bonds and Clemens are not going to get voted into the Hall of Fame even though they are two of the greatest players in baseball history. It has also been obvious for a long time that while most of the voters think those two should be in the Hall — they have each gotten well above 50% of the vote in each of the last five years and will get more than 60% this year — there is not a 75% consensus and, honestly, there will not be a 75% consensus for the foreseeable future.

And that's ... just the deal. The Hall of Fame — particularly when voted on by the BBWAA — is reserved for those players who rise above every argument. Was your career too short? Did you stick around too long? Was your peak high enough? Did you get on base enough? Did you win enough games? Can we tell the story of baseball without you? Did you hurt the game more than you helped it? Did you help your teams win? These questions, and many more like them, are designed to be harsh and judgmental and uncompromising because it is the Hall of Fame and it is meant to be guarded by a moat and a Cerberus and, scariest of all, cranky sportswriters who look at the incredible careers of, say, Eddie Mathews or Robin Roberts or Larry Walker and think, “eh, falls short for me now but maybe I'll change my mind later.”

What strikes me most about the Bonds-Clemens saga is how the arguments never change. They never evolve. They never lose even a little bit of their heat. They're exactly the same arguments of 2013, when those two first came on the ballot.

The con argument, as you know, is that they cheated, and cheaters shouldn't be in the Hall of Fame. The con argument is that PED use wrecked baseball in a way that is different from other drugs and other kinds of cheating and no proven PED user should be in the Hall. The con

argument is that their incredible achievements are not authentic, particularly when they got older and began doing things that no player had ever done before. The con argument is that they broke cherished records by cheating and, as such, wrecked a beloved part of baseball, which overshadows whatever good they might have done. The con argument is that electing them to the Hall of Fame would be tantamount to rewarding them for using PEDs, and that's simply vile and unworkable.

The pro argument, as you know, is that in their time, PED use was widespread and rampant and the people who ran the game did absolutely nothing about it — they TACITLY encouraged steroid use and perhaps encouraged it even more directly than that. The pro argument is that there are already multiple PED users from their era in the Hall of Fame, I don't think anyone doubts that. The pro argument is that the man who oversaw baseball during that era, Bud Selig, is in the Hall of Fame, and several managers who won with PED users are in the Hall of Fame, and it simply doesn't add up to reward all of them but cut out the two best players of the era. The pro argument is that Clemens and Bonds were clear Hall of Famers before they probably started using any drugs. The pro argument, inevitably, is that they were two of the greatest players who ever lived, and it's the BASEBALL Hall of Fame, and it's more than a little bit ridiculous to have a plaque room filled with hundreds of players who weren't even close to Bonds and Clemens.

Round and round the arguments go, but we never get anywhere. It's the Robert Frost poem come to life:

*We dance around in a ring and suppose  
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows*

Something semi-new did strike me this year — oh, I don't know if it's really new, but it is something that connects with David Ortiz, who is new on the ballot this year. I believe Ortiz is going to get elected, as he should, but he does have two strikes against him. The first is that he was basically a DH — he played 88% of his games as a designated hitter — and voters have historically been reluctant to vote in DHs. I do think that the election of Edgar Martinez has opened that door much wider, but the point is that designated hitters get extra scrutiny, and I believe they should.

*\*This is an aside, but I find the “Hey, designated hitter is a legal position,” argument to be unconvincing. Yes, it is a legal position as is kicker in football and middle reliever in baseball. But it is a position with limitations. Only the **very best** kicker should get into the Hall of Fame. And I’m not sure even the **very best** middle reliever should get in. With Ortiz, it was determined he was not good enough play the field on a regular basis, and as such he did not offer any defensive value. That absolutely should be taken into consideration. Now, in Ortiz’s case, he was such a good hitter who had so many epic moments that he’s a sure Hall of Famer. But, in my mind he HAD to be that good to clear the higher bar that comes with being a DH.*

The second strike, as you know, revolved around a 2003 failed Ortiz drug test that was leaked to the media. We can go into all the details about how that test was supposed to be anonymous and how unreliable the leak is and how Ortiz has denied ever using steroids, but the point is that leaked test swirls around his Hall of Fame case and will be considered by each and every voter. There will be those who do not vote for Ortiz because of it. And there will be those who will vote for Ortiz even though they generally vote against steroid users because of the questions surrounding that test.

Finally, there will be those who will vote for Ortiz regardless because they believe, for any of a number of reasons, that steroid use should not eliminate a player from the Baseball Hall of Fame.

And what strikes me is that the Ortiz case demonstrates just how silly this whole thing has become. What are we even doing here? Are we really parsing the validity of an illegally leaked drug test and what it means in a time when there was no punishment for using PEDs in baseball? Why? What value is this? How did this become the essence of Baseball Hall of Fame voting?

Sammy Sosa’s failed drug test was also illegally leaked — exactly the same situation as Ortiz’s even if he has not received anything close to the same support.

Barry Bonds never failed a drug test — but he was convicted of obstruction of justice and that conviction was overturned.

Roger Clemens never failed a drug test — and he was found not guilty in his perjury trial.

Mark McGwire never failed a drug test — he did a full interview with Bob Costas admitting he took steroids and apologizing profusely for it. As far as I know, he's still the only prominent player to do so.

PED whispers surround numerous players who are already in the Hall of Fame — I don't need to say their names, you know who they are, and you know that they did a good enough job denying steroid use that 75% of the voters voted them in.

And where do we end up? Do we even know what the argument is anymore? I've heard PED stories from numerous players that completely, utterly and unconditionally crash against the narratives that everyone just seems to accept about "clean" and "dirty" players. And, of course, that's true because those narratives are based entirely on innuendo and believability and simply what we choose to consider true. Everybody (except McGwire) has denied using steroids. Some are better at denying than others.

Is that what the Hall of Fame is about now — voting in those who are better at denying it? Is the Hall of Fame about baseball or plausible deniability?

Look: Nobody — or, anyway, almost nobody — is happy that players used illegal drugs to get stronger and better at playing baseball.

Nobody — anyway, almost nobody — is happy that MLB and the Players Association and many others looked the other way and refused to put real drug testing in place.

Nobody — anyway, almost nobody — is happy that some cherished home run records were shattered with steroids at the center of it all.

And as I've written many times, if someone simply doesn't want to vote pre-testing PED users into the Hall of Fame, that's certainly their right and I totally get their motivation. I just don't think it's feasible unless they want to be one of those people who sends in empty Hall of Fame ballots every year — and who wants to be THAT person?

More to the point, I don't think it's much fun.

Did David Ortiz use steroids? I have absolutely no idea. I know about the leaked test. I know he was tested many, many times after MLB finally put in testing and none of those came back positive. I know that his career was on the brink after the Twins released him and that a lot of players, particularly power hitters, used steroids in that time. I know that he has denied using steroids again and again.

So, really, when it comes to all that, I don't know anything.

But I DO know he was one of the greatest hitters I ever saw, maybe THE greatest clutch hitter I ever saw, a force for good in so many ways and particularly after the Boston Marathon bombing, the difference maker between Boston's Curse of the Bambino years and their World Series championships. I know you cannot fully tell baseball's story without him.

I believe that guy should have a plaque in the Hall of Fame. And I believe he will get that plaque in the same year that Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens fall off the ballot. "Fate, it seems," Morpheus said, "is not without a sense of irony."

## DESPITE QUESTIONS, MY HALL OF FAME BALLOT ADDS JIMMY ROLLINS, DAVID ORTIZ

Dan Connolly in The Athletic

This year's National Baseball Hall of Fame ballot should be printed in gray.

Of all of the years I have done this task, this is the most difficult.

Because there's not one name on this ballot who doesn't have a question or two tied to his candidacy. And there are several more gray-area candidates added this year. As harsh as this may be, there's not one name on this ballot that I truly feel good about selecting.

There are no Larry Walkers or Jim Thomes or Mariano Riveras or Derek Jeters or Cal Ripkens. Guys who I thought were Hall of Famers while they played and ones that remained rather unscathed as the Hall voting process continued.

Just about every candidate for 2022 induction has more warts than a cartoon witch. And that's problematic for a big Hall guy like myself. I typically have a full ballot of 10; partially because I

factor defense highly into the mix, and there have been some great defenders on the ballot in recent years since the “Steroid Era” logjam subsided some.

As I’ve written before, my way of handling PED-suspected candidates is twofold: One, I place less emphasis on power statistics and look at all aspects of the players, which means I give more credit for great defense than many of my peers. Two, I try to consider a player’s body of work before he may have begun using steroids — but that’s become harder nowadays.

It’s all become harder. The inconsistency in my ballot is palpable. And I hate that. But I’m not alone. I’ve talked to several voters — as I do each year — and we all believe it’s impossible to remain completely consistent with our own personal criteria this year. There are too many factors. Too many gray areas.

So, before you crush me for voting for one guy and not another based on similar factors, just know: You’re right. It’s all contradictory. But also know I don’t take this responsibility lightly. I pore over stats and articles. I give everyone a fresh eye each year. And then I go with my gut. Yes, sometimes character plays a part. Sometimes excellent defense owns the day. Sometimes there are numbers I can’t ignore. Ultimately, I try to be confident in my picks, if not consistent.

This year’s ballot: Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens, Todd Helton, [Torii Hunter](#), Andruw Jones, David Ortiz, Scott Rolen, [Jimmy Rollins](#), Gary Sheffield, Billy Wagner.

Last year’s ballot: Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens, Todd Helton, Torii Hunter, Andruw Jones, Scott Rolen, Curt Schilling, Gary Sheffield, Omar Vizquel, Billy Wagner.

## **2022 carryover picks**

### **Bonds and Clemens**

I’ve written about these two often, and they are easy to group together. Yes, I’m bothered by the steroids usage. Yes, I consider it cheating. But I believe they excelled in their careers before taking performance enhancers. I think they are two of the best players of their generation and most of their careers occurred before [MLB](#) testing. I don’t think they will make it in this, their final year on the ballot. I’m OK with that. But they’ve always gotten my vote. I’m not changing now.

### **Helton, Hunter, Jones and Rolen**

As I wrote in the intro, I tend to shift my Hall focus toward all-around players and, therefore, those who played good defense get my attention. This quartet could really play D, and their offensive numbers were solid or better. The weakest candidacy of the four, in my opinion, is Hunter’s. But I think he’s a guy who should remain on the ballot for deeper consideration as names fall off the ballot. And so, I’m keeping him on. He’s probably my 10th of 10.

## **Wagner**

I'm not biased against closers. They have a job to do and if they do it well, consistently and for a long period of time, they deserve Hall consideration. Rivera was a slam dunk for me. Trevor Hoffman was a guy I thought belonged. And if that's my standard, Wagner is right there.

## **Sheffield**

This is the second consecutive year I've had Sheffield on my ballot. He triggered the inconsistencies in my ballot that are now a runaway train. Sheffield has the connection to PEDs and a poor defensive reputation. But he was one of the most dangerous offensive threats for the better part of two decades, and it's impossible for me to ignore the .292 average, .393 OBP, .514 slugging and .907 career OPS. With Ortiz coming onto the ballot this year, it seemed wrong to leave Sheffield off, considering Ortiz barely played defense at all.

## **2022 new additions**

### **Ortiz**

I've thought a lot about this one. He barely played the field — 278 games at first base in 20 seasons — and he reportedly tested positive for PEDs in what was supposed to be anonymous testing in 2003 before penalties were in place. And there's — wait for it — some gray there, too, as to what could have triggered positive tests that year. So, there are two reasons why I shouldn't vote for him. I get why others won't. But Big Papi is one of the most important players during my time covering the sport. He was a bigger-than-life personality with the numbers to back it up (a career .931 OPS, 632 doubles and 541 homers). And he was about as disruptive as any player in the game during his peak. In the mid-2010s, [Orioles](#) manager [Buck Showalter](#) would purposely keep lefty reliever [Brian Matusz](#) available in late innings just in case Ortiz would come up in a big spot because Matusz had success against the lefty slugger. He was a guy baseball had to game plan for, and that especially showed up in big moments. In 59 plate appearances spanning three World Series, Ortiz batted .455 with a 1.372 OPS. That's what a Hall of Famer does.

### **Rollins**

I'm probably on an island here, similar to the one for Torii Hunter last year. I think Rollins, a first-timer on the ballot, deserves to be a candidate for the next few years so we can properly dissect his career. So, in a sense, he gets my checkmark to make sure he has a better chance of appearing on 5 percent of submitted ballots. But I'd select him anyway because I'm all about well-rounded candidates, and he was the whole package. Rollins could hit, could run, had pop, played great defense, had off-the-charts character (2014 Roberto Clemente Award winner) and absolutely hated to lose. He's one of those guys, especially paired with double-play partner [Chase Utley](#), who seemingly willed a team to win. His overall numbers are a little light for a Hall of Famer but add in the extras and he has my vote.

## **Dropped from my 2022 ballot**

### **Schilling**

I think Schilling's credentials make him a borderline Hall of Famer that sways toward yes for me, and I've voted for him multiple times, including last year. Sure, character plays into the equation, but politics and journalistic opinions shouldn't. Schilling is a past recipient of the Clemente Award (2001), so we shouldn't forget this is someone who was recognized as a player for his character and community achievements. That must be a consideration, too. Therefore, I've always weighed his case on what he did and not what he's said. But I'm switching that up this year. Schilling was clear last January that he didn't want the writers' votes this time, his last year on the ballot. And I am obliging him. If he doesn't want to be inducted by the writers, I'm not going to waste my vote on him when I can give it to someone else just as deserving. No spite. No hard feelings here. I wish him luck with the veterans committee.

### **Vizquel**

This is the toughest omission for me. This is Vizquel's fifth year on the ballot and the first time I have not voted for him. I have been a supporter of his candidacy because, unlike defensive metrics (that I typically don't trust), I believe he was among the best defensive players to ever handle shortstop. I also believe, offensively, he was what teams wanted in a No. 2 hitter in the era he played. He had nearly 2,900 hits and another 256 sacrifices; he could bunt, get on base and steal a base. I also gave him points for character — for being a good teammate and a mentor to many of the game's young shortstops. But in light of two ugly reports about [his off-field conduct](#), that character check has switched spots on the ledger. I'm not the moral police. And I know the Hall isn't filled with choir boys. But there are some offenses that shouldn't be overlooked. And, even in a supporter's mind, he's a borderline candidate who needed a positive check from the character clause. I'll continue to research his case and wait for more information, but I no longer feel confident in voting for Vizquel, knowing the allegations against him.

## **Just couldn't do it this time**

### **Jeff Kent and [Mark Teixeira](#)**

Next year is now or never for Kent and my ballot. He's right there for me due to his power bat at second base, but the defensive limitations have been too much for him to grab my 10th spot. My ballot should open a little in 2023, his last shot. So, we'll see. Teixeira fits better for me maybe than for some other voters because of the outstanding defense he brought to the game. There were multiple years when he was the best defensive first baseman in the sport while hitting his share of bombs. His overall offense, however, may be a little light for a Hall of Fame first baseman. I really could go either way. I believe he'll get enough support from others to remain on the ballot and I'll have more time to consider his candidacy and how he fits into my top 10.

## Just won't do it ever

### Manny Ramírez and Alex Rodríguez

Here are two players who absolutely, positively have the numbers to be in the Hall of Fame. Two players I loved watching play in their primes — well, I loved watching Rodríguez play the game; I just loved watching Ramírez hit. But two-time PED losers, including suspensions after protocols were set, is too much for me. Suspected/accused of steroids once, I'm still considering. A second time? Nope for me.

I INVESTIGATED BONDS AND CLEMENS. YES, THEY BELONG IN COOPERSTOWN.

Jeff Novitzky, NYT

Friday is the last day for voters in the Baseball Writers' Association of America to submit their 2022 Baseball Hall of Fame ballots. Listed on those ballots are two players in their 10th and final year of Hall of Fame eligibility who truly dominated their era but haven't been voted in: Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens.

Undoubtedly, this is because toward the end of their careers, both men faced allegations that they had used performance-enhancing drugs (P.E.D.s) banned by their sport. But as a federal agent who investigated both men for years and, as The New York Times [reported](#) in 2007, "dug up the evidence that a grand jury used" to indict Bonds on charges related to those allegations, I've come to this conclusion: Bonds and Clemens played at a time when the widespread abuse of P.E.D.s in baseball was a result of a collective failure — of Major League Baseball, teams, players, the players' union, the media and even the fans. To varying degrees, a lot of us were complicit in sitting back and watching the hitting and pitching marvels of that time and turning a mostly blind eye. When evidence was presented during Bonds's and Clemens's federal criminal trials, they and other players wound up bearing the brunt of that collective failure and the selective aftermath, and, unfairly, they still are. (Bonds's 2011 obstruction of justice conviction [was overturned in 2015](#); in 2012, [Clemens was acquitted of all charges](#) related to his 2008 congressional testimony.)

The two men should be in the Hall of Fame.

[Bonds was](#) a career .298 hitter, an eight-time Gold Glove winner, seven-time National League most valuable player and, most notably, M.L.B.'s all-time leader with 762 home runs. [Clemens was](#) a six-time Cy Young Award winner and the 1986 American League M.V.P., with a 354-184 win-loss record and 4,672 career strikeouts. Despite statistics and accolades that clearly place both at the top of their era — and among the greatest across eras — in past years of eligibility, they've both failed to garner the necessary 75 percent of the Baseball Writers' Association vote needed for induction into the Hall. Clearly, it's because they became poster children for baseball's "[steroids era](#)," when drug testing went from practically nonexistent to still woefully

inadequate, and many players used P.E.D.s with abandon. I know these circumstances well because it became my job to investigate them.

In 2002, I helped start a series of investigations into the proliferation of P.E.D.s throughout professional sports. I dug through the trash of the Bay Area Laboratory Co-operative, known as BALCO. I worked with former Senator George Mitchell on the so-called [Mitchell Report](#) that chronicled M.L.B.'s steroids problem. Later in my career, I investigated P.E.D. use in cycling, including [helping initiate a federal investigation](#) of Lance Armstrong while he was a member of the U.S. Postal Service-sponsored team. In 2015, I went to work for Ultimate Fighting Championship, better known as UFC, the top mixed martial arts organization, and started developing what I now consider to be one of the best antidoping programs in professional sports.

Here's what I see: Neither Bonds nor Clemens was charged with using or possessing P.E.D.s. They were charged with making false statements and later cleared. As The Times [reported in 2007](#), the Mitchell Report "tied 89 Major League Baseball players" to "the use of illegal, performance-enhancing drugs." Bonds and Clemens were mentioned in the report, but they were far from alone. As The Times [reported in 2008](#), U.S. attorneys had "documents that link more than 100 Major League Baseball players to positive tests for steroids conducted in 2003." I've had many conversations with M.L.B. players from that era, and based on those conversations, along with those numbers, I believe that a major portion of M.L.B. players used P.E.D.s before the league and the players' union agreed to put forth their now-credible anti-P.E.D. program. For a long time, P.E.D. abuse wasn't an aberration as much as it was part of a larger culture within the sport.

Did M.L.B. officials ultimately take the steps necessary to clean up their sport? Yes. But along the way, it took 10 baseball players and executives [testifying under oath](#) before the House Committee on Government Reform in March 2005, at a daylong hearing that increased pressure on the league to get serious about combating P.E.D. use. Before that, from my point of view as a federal investigator, there wasn't enough proactivity. As an executive for a sports league today, I think it's incumbent on management and player representatives to set standards and eliminate ambiguity so that athletes can focus on setting and maintaining an example for current and future competitors.

The Mitchell Report concludes that "the use of steroids in Major League Baseball was widespread. The response by baseball was slow to develop and was initially ineffective," and goes on to say: "Obviously, the players who illegally used performance enhancing substances are responsible for their actions. But they did not act in a vacuum. Everyone involved in baseball over the past two decades — commissioners, club officials, the Players Association and players — shares to some extent in the responsibility for the steroids era."

I'd add many of us to that list — we savored every towering home run and viselike shutout.

Yes, the Hall of Fame, M.L.B. and the Baseball Writers' Association are separate organizations. And yes, the Hall of Fame [selection criteria](#) include "integrity," "sportsmanship" and "character," not just stats and ability — no doubt, some baseball writers place a great deal of weight there. But if we're going to deny Bonds and Clemens, then there's something amiss with the integrity of the whole Hall of Fame process and the record of a time when baseball itself didn't live up to Hall of Fame standards. Bonds and Clemens represented the best on-field performers in baseball — and represented the era in which they played. When you add that up, they should be in Cooperstown, enshrined in the Hall alongside the game's other greats.

### **Why Barry Bonds, Alex Rodriguez are on my 2022 Baseball Hall of Fame ballot**

Keith Law in The Athletic

I voted in this year's Baseball Hall of Fame election, my fourth year with this honor. I added two new names to my ballot while returning six, but for the first time, I also removed one player.

There's a good chance we don't see anyone elected by the writers again this year, which is a mild embarrassment given the number of qualified players still on the ballot. With one no-doubter coming to the ballot next year in [Carlos Beltrán](#), we shouldn't have another shutout in 2023, at least.

Here's my explanation of my ballot, covering the eight players for whom I did vote, and two notable players I omitted.

**Barry Bonds:** The all-time home run king, fourth all-time in WAR among all players (behind only Babe Ruth, Walter Johnson and Cy Young — all of whom played before baseball was integrated), recipient of seven MVP awards and deserving of two more, seventh all-time in on-base percentage, eighth all-time in slugging percentage, still the only member of the 500 HR/500 SB club ... this isn't about Bonds' statistical case, though. His Hall of Fame candidacy has become a referendum on the "steroid era," which is a misleading moniker, at best. We don't know who did or did not use performance-enhancing drugs in most cases. Bonds himself never tested positive for anything, and the vast majority of players who tested positive were decidedly less than superstars. The only argument whatsoever to omit Bonds from a ballot is based on a broad reading of the character clause, and in his case, I don't think that argument suffices to keep out of Cooperstown one of the best players in [MLB](#) history and someone who was on a Hall of Fame track even before his physical appearance seemed to rapidly change.

**Alex Rodríguez:** A-Rod's use of performance-enhancing drugs is not in question, but his on-field credentials are more than enough to earn my vote. If a candidate's production was on the borderline, I might consider admitted steroid usage as a deciding factor under the character clause, but that is not the case here. This is also not an endorsement of A-Rod the announcer, or the pro-owner activist, or anything else about him off of the field. He was the best player in

baseball at age 20, a year when he was robbed of the MVP for the first (but not the last) time, and was still the best player in his league a decade later, up through his last MVP season in 2007. I can better understand a decision to omit him, given his year-long suspension from MLB and the circumstances of those infractions, though.

**David Ortiz:** I had long said Ortiz, whose Hall of Fame case is far more borderline than his adherents might admit, would not get my vote if Edgar Martinez, the best designated hitter in MLB history, was not already enshrined. But the writers elected Martinez in his last year of eligibility, so that particular obstacle (of my own creation) was cleared. Had Ortiz played a position even adequately, he'd be a no-brainer. But playing almost 90 percent of his career games as a DH puts a dent in measures of his overall value. He gets no credit for defense, and he is compared to a higher offensive standard than hitters at any other position. He's at 55 career rWAR, 51 fWAR, which puts him below several players who didn't get enough support from voters to stay on the ballot for more than one year – Jim Edmonds, Lou Whitaker, Kenny Lofton and Bobby Grich – as well as being below Todd Helton and Scott Rolen just on this year's ballot. I voted for Ortiz because I think he's just barely over the line, but when he gets in – and he will, if not this year then very soon – his inclusion should lead us to reexamine the cases of many better players who didn't get a fair shake.

**Scott Rolen and Andruw Jones:** Jones has a strong argument that he is the best defensive centerfielder ever, while Rolen ranks somewhere between fourth and sixth, behind Brooks Robinson (in), Adrián Beltré (will be in), and Buddy Bell (should be in). Rolen is eighth all-time among third basemen in rWAR, and everyone ahead of him is in or will soon be. Jones had 61 WAR through his age-30 season, which puts him 28th all-time, more WAR than George Brett or Mike Schmidt had through their age-30 seasons ... and that was it for Jones, who had a knee injury, got heavy and was done as a regular at that point. That alone shouldn't disqualify him. Ken Griffey Jr. was a below-average regular after age 31 and nobody holds that against him. The question becomes whether Jones did enough before that to get in. His WAR total should get him over the line, but being the best defender ever at your position is a strong enough argument to get him on my ballot.

**Gary Sheffield:** If he's ever inducted into the Hall, Sheffield might be the worst defensive player ever to earn that honor. But even losing about 20 WAR to fielding, he still ended up at 60 WAR – more than Ortiz, more than current Hall of Famers Vlad Guerrero, Mike Piazza and Willie Stargell, to name a few. I feel more strongly about Sheffield than many similar candidates because of That Swing – from the massive bat wag to the electric bat speed, his swing was iconic, and I mean that in the original sense of something leading to a religious experience. I want that swing in Cooperstown.

**Manny Ramírez and Todd Helton:** My last two yes votes are not that interesting. Ramírez was off my ballot when I needed the 10 spots for other players, and I used his two positive performance-enhancing drug tests as a separator to put him below those players. Now that there aren't 10 worthy players on the ballot, I have room for him. Helton is another just-over-the-line case for me, a superb hitter across the board whose accomplishments should not suffer

for the fact that he played half his games in Coors Field, since advanced metrics that take ballparks into account still give him 55+ WAR in his career.

## Not on my ballot

**Roger Clemens:** Clemens did not appear on my ballot, which I think is the first time I have stopped voting for a player for whom I voted in the past. We've known for a while now that Clemens had an inappropriate relationship with the late country singer Mindy McCready, which the [New York Daily News reported](#) began when McCready was 15 and Clemens was 28. McCready confirmed to the Daily News that the two had an affair, though she later said that it didn't begin until she was 18. I was wrong to vote for him in the past. The character clause is not well defined by the Hall of Fame, and there are players in the Hall whose character was questionable and players on my ballot whose character was questionable. But if Clemens' transgressions with McCready don't call for invoking the character clause, then we might as well remove it entirely. That's why I declined to vote for him now, a small and perhaps futile stand on principle in his last year of eligibility.

**Bobby Abreu:** Abreu is the one player who was borderline for me but didn't make the cut. I could change my mind at some point, but even as someone who argued that Abreu was underrated during his career, I see a Hall of Fame case lacking enough of a peak to get my vote. Abreu was never the best player at his own position in any year of his career, and that's enough of a reason for me to keep him off my ballot when he was already on the border (60 WAR in both systems).

## How The MLB Luxury Tax Thresholds Have Changed By Year

Tim Dierkes in [mlbtraderumors.com](#)

There was a time when the MLB players' union felt that a luxury tax is just a salary cap in another form, with is why they rejected such proposals back in 1994. Nonetheless, in the first post-strike collective bargaining agreement, executive director Don Fehr "finally said yes to the luxury tax – the first time the union agreed to any form of payroll restraint since free agency changed everything in 1976," to quote Jon Pessah's book *The Game*.

Though Pessah called that CBA a "huge victory for Fehr and the union" for other reasons, the owners did get their foot in the door on the matter of a luxury tax. The luxury tax wound up snowballing into a major problem for the players in recent years.

In that CBA, the tax thresholds were set like this:

- 1996: no luxury tax
- 1997: \$51MM

- 1998: \$55MM, a 7.8% increase
- 1999: \$58.9MM, a 7.1% increase
- 2000: no luxury tax
- 2001: if MLBPA exercises its option for '01, no luxury tax

Mechanisms were also put in place that could allow the 1997-99 thresholds to be higher, depending on where the fifth and sixth-highest payrolls in the game landed. Tax rates were set at 35% on the overage for '97-98 and 34% for '99.

While that CBA technically ended with two years sans luxury tax, it became part of all future agreements. The agreement that began in 2003 saw the luxury tax rebranded as the “competitive balance tax.” The MLBPA was able to achieve an initial major increase in the thresholds from where they left off in '99:

- 2003: \$117MM, a 98.6% increase from '99
- 2004: \$120.5MM, a 3% increase
- 2005: \$128MM, a 6.2% increase
- 2006: \$136.5MM, a 6.6% increase

For this CBA, a concept was introduced to penalize second, third, or fourth-time offenders with a higher tax rate. The first-time offender rates were set at 17.5% in '03 and 22.5% in 2004-05, yet was removed entirely for '06. 30-40% tax rates were set for teams that exceeded the threshold multiple times during that CBA.

For the CBA beginning in 2007, the tax thresholds were set as follows:

- 2007: \$148MM, an 8.4% increase
- 2008: \$155MM, a 4.7% increase
- 2009: \$162MM, a 4.5% increase
- 2010: \$170MM, a 4.9% increase
- 2011: \$178MM, a 4.7% increase

Here after an initial “new CBA” leap, we start to see the tax thresholds moving up more slowly. The tax rates were set at 22.5%, 30%, and 40% and began penalizing teams for exceeding the thresholds in consecutive years, introducing the concept of teams “resetting” its rate by getting under the threshold for one season.

For the CBA beginning in 2012, these were the tax thresholds:

- 2012: \$178MM, no increase
- 2013: \$178MM, no increase
- 2014: \$189MM, a 6.2% increase
- 2015: \$189MM, no increase
- 2016: \$189MM, no increase

Here, the players' union made large concessions that had a compounding effect they're still feeling today. If the MLBPA had achieved simply a repeat of the increases from the previous CBA, the 2016 tax threshold would have sat at about \$232MM.

The next agreement introduced the concept of luxury tax tiers, adding first and second surcharge thresholds after the base tax one. For example, 2021 included thresholds at \$210MM, \$230MM, and \$250MM. This CBA also introduced penalties involving the draft.

- 2017: \$195MM base tax threshold, a 3.2% increase
- 2018: \$197MM, a 1.0% increase
- 2019: \$206MM, a 4.6% increase
- 2020: \$208MM, a 1.0% increase
- 2021: \$210MM, a 1.0% increase

While better than the previous CBA, the MLBPA again agreed to tiny increases in the base tax threshold. A simple 5% increase per year beginning in 2012 would have put the 2021 base tax threshold around \$290MM, yet it sat only at \$210MM. Not coincidentally, only the Dodgers and Padres exceeded a \$210MM payroll this year. You can see the restraint this put on a club like the Yankees, which had a lower 2019 Opening Day payroll than it had in 2005.

In the current negotiations, MLB made an initial proposal that included *lowering* the base tax threshold to \$180MM. [According to Gabe Lacques and Bob Nightengale of USA Today](#), "In final proposals exchanged Wednesday, players requested a \$245 million luxury tax threshold, with no progressive penalties for offenders; owners are offering a \$214 million threshold, rising to \$220 million in the final year of a five-year agreement."

With a request to jump to \$245MM, the MLBPA is proposing a 16.7% jump over the '21 threshold, which would only begin to make up the ground they lost due to the non-existent or miniscule increases from 2012 onward. MLB, meanwhile, would like to increase the base tax threshold by 1.9% for 2022 and is proposing average annual increases of less than 1%.

## **WHIFFLE BALL**

**MLW Wiffle Ball started as a neighborhood league among friends. Now it's a burgeoning business**

Stephen Nesbitt in The Athletic

One summer day in 2009, an argument arose between neighbors in a front yard in Brighton, Mich. Five kids, ages 7 to 12, halted their home run derby to debate whether a batted Wiffle Ball had landed beyond an imaginary line in the grass. After a few minutes of the batter pleading his case, 10-year-old Kyle Schultz, seeing the issue with swinging for the fences when there are

none, found a garden fence in his family's garage and set it up across the front lawn to settle all future disputes.

"That's how it all started," Schultz says now, 12 years later, "with a controversial call in a random, makeshift home run derby."

The fence stayed up. The following spring, the five of them formed a two-team league from neighboring households: the Western Wildcats (Kyle Schultz and Tommy Coughlin) and the Eastern Eagles (Daniel Schultz, Brendan Schultz and Rachel Coughlin). They'd grown up playing outside together, competing in bike races, frisbee golf, driveway hockey and, like generations of kids before them, Wiffle Ball.

They set up a field in the Schultz family's front yard — towering pine tree for a left-field foul pole, hockey net for a backstop, Chevrolet and Under Armour ads pinned to the fence — and ordered team T-shirts. Then, unlike the generations before them, they created a YouTube channel for sharing highlights.

That was back when Wiffle Ball was just a game, not a business. Now it's both.

Major League Wiffle recently aired its 12th season. This is not your garden variety neighborhood league anymore. MLW has 293,000 [YouTube subscribers](#), more than 42 million total views, and another 520,000 followers across [TikTok](#) and [Instagram](#). There's now a merchandise line — selling caps, bats, jerseys, hoodies, strike zones and more. There are MLW tournaments across the United States. And the original league has expanded to eight teams and 50 players, including some who drive several hours on game days. It's a colorful cast of characters hitting rockets, flipping bats and throwing pitches so preposterous they'd make [Pitching Ninja](#) pass out. (And while [Major League Baseball](#) is in a lockout, Major League Wiffle is not. Big leaguers are always welcome to take batting practice in Brighton.)

For Kyle Schultz, now a 22-year-old University of Michigan graduate, running the league is his full-time job. The self-taught video-editing skills he picked up as a 10-year-old with a tiny YouTube channel have brought him here, to long days and late nights creating game breakdowns (complete with a play-by-play voice, graphics, replays and umpire video reviews), award shows, drafts and [mock "30 for 30" documentaries](#). He also rakes. Schultz has won six World Series, seven MVPs, five Cy Youngs and is MLW's home run king, with 228.

This fall, Schultz was in line for the restroom at Michigan Stadium during a Michigan-Washington football game, when he heard his name. He turned and saw a man wearing Washington gear looking at him.

"Kyle Schultz?" the man asked. "MLW?"

This was not the plan.

Kyle Schultz and Tommy Coughlin were middle schoolers when they started the league. They hadn't counted on MLW existing beyond that first summer, yet now hundreds of thousands of fans around the world have watched them grow up on YouTube. The initial viewing audience was just family and friends. Expectations were low. If other kids found and followed the channel on YouTube, cool. If not, also cool. The league didn't feel like a job because it wasn't one.

"We were so young," Coughlin says. "We didn't get ahead of ourselves. We were five kids living within 30 yards of each other who could easily just get together whenever we wanted with a simple phone call saying, 'Hey, let's play.'"

Each summer in the early years, a few more kids would learn about the league and form a new team, so MLW grew to three teams, then four and then six. Minivans pulled into the Schultz driveway, and players poured out of the backseat. Parents bought in because Wiffle Ball kept their kids active and outdoors on sunny afternoons.

But there was a natural end point to all this.

In August 2017, as the eighth MLW World Series wrapped, the co-founders left for college — Schultz to Michigan to study sport management, Coughlin to Michigan State for engineering. They hadn't talked much about MLW's future, but both knew their careers eventually would complicate things. Most paths meant giving up MLW. So, one day that fall, Coughlin texted Schultz: *We have two choices here. We can forget it now or we can go absolutely all in.*

During winter break, they met in the Schultz's basement to decide MLW's fate. They had a devoted following — not massive, but not nothing. On YouTube, Schultz and Coughlin saw other creators making a living from similar content. That was their dream, too. They felt that if they continued uploading quality content consistently, there was potential for significant growth. Maybe a day would come when they couldn't carry classwork and the channel at once. But this was not that day. Coughlin told Schultz: "We're only 18. We have four years until we have our college degrees. We might as well put everything we have into this. If it develops into something, great. If not, at least we can say we gave it our all."

So, they went absolutely all in.

As Schultz and Coughlin sketched MLW's second act, expanding its reach, the first step was finding a permanent field in Brighton. To that point, all league games had been played at Cultz Field (a combination of Coughlin and Schultz) — also known as, the Schultz family's front yard. MLW needed a new home.

A few weeks after committing to keep MLW alive, Schultz was searching for green space on Google Maps. He came across an open field in Huron Meadows Metropark, not far from his family's house. He and Coughlin took a drive, winding through the woods until the trees cleared. There it was. "Whoa," Coughlin said. "This is perfect." So, they emailed the park director.

"In my head I'm thinking, there's no way they're going to let us build something on their property for us to use," Coughlin says now.

On an icy January day, Schultz and Coughlin made their pitch. They wore suits. The park director wore a winter jacket and a beanie. “Are you the Wiffle Ball guys?” he asked when they arrived. He heard their proposal — a field for MLW games that is otherwise open to all — and within 10 minutes approved it.

“We were like, that’s it?!” Coughlin recalls.

“He loved it,” Schultz says.

The Meadows was born, and MLW began to take its current shape. In some ways, game play has remained the same: three-inning games, three fielders, no gloves, runners can be pegged or tagged, regulation yellow bats (taped barrel is allowed) and Wiffle Balls (scuffing is also allowed). But some changes were necessary to accommodate the fact the players are now adults, not children. The pitcher’s mound was once 27 feet from home plate; now it’s 38 feet. The fences have moved back almost 15 feet over the years. And there’s a speed limit of 73 mph — pitchers receive a warning for their first offense, then an automatic ball.

The play that put MLW on the wider map came at the end of the first season at The Meadows, with the Wildcats’ Zac Peurach crashing into the left-field fence for a home-run robbery in Game 2 of the 2018 MLW World Series. Two days after that game aired on YouTube, Coughlin and the Schultz boys [stayed up until 1 a.m.](#) to see that clip on SportsCenter’s top-10 plays of the day. Coughlin recalls, “When we were 10, we’d upload videos that got 15 to 20 views and say, ‘We’ve gotta get a top-10 play!’ I’ll remember that one forever.”

As more fans flocked to MLW’s YouTube channel, with viewership rising by millions year over year, the way forward was clearer than ever. Schultz’s goal was to make MLW his full-time job by the time he graduated from Michigan in 2021. He planned to increase other revenue streams — merchandise, sponsorships, tournament fees — but the main value was YouTube.

“I knew that if I really doubled down on our YouTube channel and focused on the content, then everything about MLW is going to stem from there,” he says. “Opportunities will grow from there because (people) love the content.”

So, he spent countless Friday and Saturday nights in college cutting clips and piecing together videos. He studied other creators and worked to make each production more cinematic. He came to campus carrying a mountain of footage, finding a few minutes before class to import files from his hard drives and trim them. His social life took a hit, but his dream was on track.

“There were so many times when my neighbors were blaring music at 3 a.m. and I’m trying to edit this video,” Schultz says, laughing. “I’d be driven up the wall, but I knew it’d be worth it.”

One day last September, 20-year-old Jimmy Knorp was watching MLB Network before class at Schoolcraft College in Livonia, Mich., when he got a FaceTime call. It was from Schultz, who

almost always texted. Knorp answered, and Schultz cut to the chase. He asked, “How would you like to fly with me to Atlanta to pitch to Pedro Martínez, [Jimmy Rollins](#), [Curtis Granderson](#) and Ernie Johnson on TV?” Knorp had questions, but those would have to wait.

“My jaw just dropped,” he says.

Two weeks later, Schultz and Knorp were in the TBS studios shooting a segment for the NLDS broadcast. They were seeing stars. Schultz grew up idolizing Granderson. Knorp considers Martínez the greatest starting pitcher of all time. Johnson started the segment by introducing Schultz as “the GOAT” and Knorp as “the [Shohei Ohtani](#) of MLW.” Before long, Schultz was striking out Granderson, and Knorp was schooling Martínez on pitch grips.

“I could never have imagined that two years ago,” Knorp says. “Me teaching Pedro Martínez how to throw a Wiffle Ball? It blows my mind.”

See, two years earlier, Knorp was just a kid whose baseball days were behind him. He’d been cut from his high school team. He was a solid contact hitter — nothing more, nothing special. But then his buddy Jonah Heath showed him an MLW video. The two of them lived in Livonia, a half hour from Brighton, and had been playing Wiffle Ball in Knorp’s backyard since they were 5.

“I instantly got hooked,” Knorp says. “I was obsessed with MLW.”

Today, Knorp is one of the most popular players in the league — topping the jersey sales list alongside Kyle Schultz, Daniel Schultz and Drew Davis. Drafted second overall by the Downtown Diamondbacks in 2020, Knorp already is one of the best hitters and pitchers in league history. The first thing you notice about Knorp is the resemblance to Tim Lincecum, from the shoulder-length hair to the wiry frame, the wry smile and the chin stubble.

He is a force on the field and a character always. Take, for example, his game day routine. Knorp starts with a bullpen session in the backyard; he even built his own strike zone. He takes this very seriously. (And he is teased for it.) Knorp tests each pitch — riser, drop ball, slider, slide-drop and screwball — tweaks here and there, then thinks through the opposing lineup and throws a simulated game. Every so often, Knorp gets the sinking feeling even major-league pitchers sometimes have in the bullpen: *I just don’t have it today.*

“We were driving to the first game of the playoffs,” Knorp says, “and Jonah goes, ‘Did you throw your bullpen today?’ He likes to give me a hard time for it. I’m like, ‘Yeah, man. Honestly, I’m not feeling that great. I feel like I’ve only got one pitch today.’ When we got to the field, it was the same thing. Jonah looks at me and goes, ‘Oh, man, you weren’t kidding. It’s going to be a long day.’”

Like any ace, Knorp figured it out. He, Heath and the Diamondbacks won that game, then the series. They wound up in the 2021 MLW World Series against Schultz’s Wildcats and won that, too, in walk-off fashion.

Driving to The Meadows for each game, Knorp and Heath listen to — and this is the official name — “The Jimmy Knorp Hype It Up Playlist.” The selections include “a lot of classic rock, a lot of Imagine Dragons, and then there’s weird songs” like SpongeBob’s [“Goofy Goober Rock”](#) and The Killers’ “Mr. Brightside.” The playlist has become part of MLW lore. It’s here to stay.

“If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” Knorp says. “We’re going to listen to it next year, too.”

This month, MLW hosted a tournament in Houston.

Next month, they’ll have one in Phoenix.

These tournaments — spreading in recent years from Michigan to Ohio, Illinois, Massachusetts, New York and beyond — feature three age divisions (10 to 12, 13 to 15, 16 and up), a three-game guarantee and a \$130 buy-in per team. MLW will take over a baseball/softball complex for the weekend, set up a handful of Wiffle Ball fields and film the whole thing for YouTube.

“It’s kind of a break for all these kids from their baseball teams, where everything is all serious and everyone is so tense,” Schultz says. “The Wiffle Ball tournaments are a really cool atmosphere because it’s very fun and the kids are running the teams by themselves, making substitutions and getting all into it. It honestly reminds me of myself as a kid.”

The tournament circuit also is part of a strategic vision for MLW’s future. Eventually, Schultz and Coughlin would like to have many leagues around the United States under the MLW umbrella, with each regional winner qualifying for a national tournament. More exposure will mean more views, more merchandise sales, more tournament fees, more sponsorships and, perhaps, more players working full-time for MLW. They feel like they’re still scratching the surface of MLW’s potential.

“I don’t see any reason, based on other content I see, that we can’t get to a million-plus subscribers,” Coughlin says. “That would open up a lot of different doors for us in terms of funding more of our ventures.”

The more that’s heaped onto Schultz’s plate — he is MLW’s CEO, director of league operations, social media coordinator and head of videography, editing and marketing — the more one wonders how long he’ll stay on an active roster. Not to worry, Schultz says. He’s not going anywhere so long as he’s healthy; he ices after every outing and hits taters with a low-stress, compact swing.

“I definitely don’t feel like quitting anytime soon,” he says.

“And if Kyle isn’t stopping anytime soon,” Knorp adds, “why should I?”

Rather frequently, Schultz will hear from adult viewers who tell him how much MLW reminds them of their days playing Wiffle Ball with friends. The videos hit a nostalgia sweet spot. But

MLW's main demographic is middle and high schoolers, mostly 10- to 15-year-olds, Schultz says. That's why the one thing you'd expect to hear when a bunch of 20-somethings square off in a competitive setting — lots of bad language — is noticeably absent from MLW content.

This is not a coincidence. Schultz carefully edits the videos. Coughlin cautions players to watch what they say in games and on social media. Parents say they appreciate it, Coughlin says, and kids look up to their favorite MLW players.

Knorp estimates 60 percent of his social media followers are MLW fans. "I think about that before making any post, that it's nothing bad for kids to be looking at," he says. "I love being a role model. I take it to heart, for sure." When Knorp went to a [Tigers](#) game last summer, he was stopped by about 15 kids asking for a photo with him. His dad beamed with pride.

Twelve years after the league began, the Schultz parents still live in the same house in Brighton. This summer, a group of younger kids in the neighborhood, inspired by MLW, started their own Wiffle Ball league down the street.

"I look at them and go, oh my God, this was us 10 years ago," Schultz says. "It's our past selves being relived in our neighborhood."