

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

1.23.2022

Good morning baseball fans,

RIP Meatloaf, singer of what one could argue is the best baseball song of all time – “Paradise by the Dashboard Lights”. Some of Phil Rizzuto’s best work. If somehow you are not familiar, feel free to rock out. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C11MzbEcHlw>

While the billionaires stare down the millionaires over the CBA it also was a week when MLB rejected the idea of the Rays splitting time between Tampa and Montreal. Perhaps interests in Las Vegas and Nashville might have more \$ should the Rays (and the A’s) need a new home?

Hall of Fame election results will be out this week— On Tuesday Jan. 25, the BBWAA will announce the results of its 2022 Hall of Fame vote live from Cooperstown on MLB Network. (coverage begins at 4 pm eastern). Any electees will be inducted during Hall of Fame Weekend on Sunday, July 24, at 1:30 p.m. on the grounds of the Clark Sports Center in Cooperstown. In anticipation we feature this week Hall of Fame ballot explainers from two of my favorite baseball writers—Jayson Stark and Joe Posnanski.

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

Only two catchers in the Modern Era (since 1900) have led a league in triples in a season, one in the AL and one in the NL--Carlton Fisk (9 triples in 1972); NL: Tim McCarver (13 triples in 1966).

Purchasing the Yankees cost George Steinbrenner \$10 million in January 1973. In January 2022 the owners of the Triple-A Worcester Red Sox turned down an offer of more than \$50 million from a California company buying minor league teams.

Albert Pujols is 12th on the all-time hits list at 3,301. He needs 14 hits to catch Eddie Collins. If he could manage another 214 hits he'd climb all the way to 5th all time (behind Rose, Aaron, Cobb, Musial—rarified company).

The Blue Jays were in the 2021 race to the end, and their leader in RBIs wasn't [Vladimir Guerrero Jr.](#), [Marcus Semien](#) or [George Springer](#). It was Teoscar Hernández.

The Red Sox finished two wins away from the pennant, and their best reliever was a Rule 5 pick ([Garrett Whitlock](#)) while their sparkplug center fielder was a utility type they'd planned to use at second base (Kiké Hernández).

“Statistically the New York and Philadelphia dynasties were remarkably even: The Athletics had a record of 313-143 (.686) between 1929 and 1931; the Yankees, 302-160 (.654) between 1926 and 1928. And while the Athletics scored six fewer runs than the Yankees—2,710 -2,716, the Athletics had five fewer runs scored against them: 1,992-1,997, a difference of only one run. The Yankees had the best single season at the plate, hitting for a combined .307 batting average and scoring 975 runs in 1927. The Athletics' strongest offensive performance came in 1929, when they batted .296. On defense the Athletics were clearly superior; over their three-year American League reign they committed only 432 errors, 167 fewer than the Yankees. Catcher Mickey Cochrane was also especially adept at telling his pitchers how to pitch to opposing batters. The Yankees lost to St. Louis in the 1926 World Series, swept Pittsburgh in 1927 and St. Louis in 1928. The A's beat the Cubs in 1929 and St. Louis in 1930, lost to the Cards in 1931. Many veteran baseball observers believe that the Yankees' far more exalted status in history is due largely to the fact that they played in New York, where most of the national media is located.”

Luis Tiant's father (also Luis) was Minnie Miñoso's first roommate when both played for the New York Cubans of the Negro Leagues in 1946-47, Miñoso as a 20-year-old and the elder Tiant as a 39-year veteran.

The opening of Camden Yards in 1992 ushered an era of retro, baseball-only ballparks that transformed the aesthetics of the game and the fan experience. Cozy outfield dimensions — a product of where the park was built (the warehouse in right necessarily squeezed the field in that direction, resulting in the decision to install a high wall and scoreboard) and a desire to get fans low and close to the field.

With the fence in left-center at 364 feet from home plate, the park immediately became a haven for homers. Low, 7-foot fences (a nod to Camden's predecessor, Memorial Stadium) — designed for fan proximity and to generate excitement from home run robberies — further contributed to Camden's status as a launching pad.

This past week, the Orioles announced plans to make the outfield more spacious, moving back the fences in left-center and raising them to more closely approximate PNC Field in Pittsburgh. General manager Mike Elias told reporters that the team wanted to make the park play more evenly for pitchers and hitters, with plans to remove about 1,000 seats before Camden opens for its 30th anniversary March 31.

While Major League Baseball and the Players Association will have to negotiate COVID-19 protocols for the 2022 season, MLB doesn't need to negotiate protocols for minor leaguers who aren't on 40-man rosters. (Those players are not represented by the Players Association, and thus not party to collective bargaining between MLB and the MLBPA.) MLB required players in the Arizona Fall League to be vaccinated but has yet to issue a mandate requiring vaccinations for 2022. The league is still working through what potential vaccine requirements for minor leaguers might look like, while encouraging teams and players to stay up to date on vaccinations and boosters in the interim given the possibility of forthcoming requirements. Last year, all Red Sox affiliates except for Triple A Worcester reached at least an 85 percent vaccination rate.

11 STATS THAT SHOW WHY SANDY KOUFAX IS A LEGEND

(from mlb.com which has stripped mention of active players from its website)

Fifty years ago Wednesday, [Sandy Koufax](#) was officially voted into the Hall of Fame as part of the class of 1972, alongside Yogi Berra and Early Wynn. He was only 36 years old, a sign both of how dominant he was at his best and the premature end to his career.

Nearly 300 pitchers in AL/NL history have started more games than Koufax. Nearly 200 have racked up more wins. Eighty-one have accrued more wins above replacement ([WAR](#)), per Baseball-Reference.

But few have crafted a legacy as respected and enduring as the Dodgers left-hander, especially in so short a time.

Koufax only pitched in the Majors for 12 seasons and didn't truly find his form until the last six of those. He suited up for the last time before his 31st birthday. Yet Koufax's peak performance

was so breathtaking -- and his style so indelible -- that more than a half-century after elbow woes forced an early retirement, his name still conjures thoughts of greatness and glory.

Such great heights: An all-time peak

Koufax's career can be conveniently split into two halves, one before he harnessed his stuff and one after.

1955-60: 4.10 ERA, 3.94 FIP, 22.5% K-rate, 13.4% BB-rate, 6.7 WAR

1961-66: 2.19 ERA, 2.16 FIP, 26.5% K-rate, 6.4% BB-rate, 46.4 WAR

How overwhelming was Koufax in those last six seasons? During that time, he made the All-Star team every year and led the National League in the following categories: innings (twice), complete games (twice), shutouts (three times), wins (three times), ERA (five times), [ERA+](#) (twice), [FIP](#) (six times), WHIP (four times), strikeouts (four times), K-rate (five times), hits-per-nine-innings (five times), K-to-BB ratio (three times) and pitching WAR (twice). Koufax had a nearly 8-WAR lead over any other pitcher during that span and is one of just nine pitchers in the Live Ball Era (since 1920) with multiple 10-WAR campaigns.

Going out on top: 36 WAR in his last 4 years

What's perhaps most amazing about the second half of Koufax's career is that he was [frequently in agony during that time](#), after developing severe arthritis in his left elbow. Koufax tried all sorts of treatments, but medicine was hardly as advanced as it is today, and there was little he could do to escape the pain. Despite that, Koufax threw nearly 1,200 regular-season innings over his last four years and piled up 36.3 pitching WAR. The only pitchers in the Live Ball Era to do better over any four-season span are Lefty Grove (1929-32 and '30-'33), Randy Johnson (1999-2002) and Pedro Martinez (1997-2000). Nobody has come remotely close to Koufax over their *final* four seasons.

Most pitching WAR in final 4 seasons

1920-2021, per Baseball-Reference

1) Sandy Koufax (1963-66): 36.3

2) Cliff Lee (2011-14): 20.2

3) Brandon Webb (2006-09): 18.8

4) Roger Clemens (2004-07): 18.2

5) Don Wilson (1971-74): 18.0

Best of his ERA: Five NL titles

In each of his final five seasons, Koufax led the NL in ERA, making him the only pitcher in history to finish first in his league (AL or NL) in that category so many years in a row. (He also led in FIP in each of those five, not that anyone knew what FIP was at the time). Koufax's total ERA over those five seasons was 1.95, and he is the only pitcher in the Live Ball Era to post an ERA under 1.90 in three different qualifying seasons. Despite his slow start, Koufax's 2.76 career ERA ranks fourth in the Live Ball Era among those with at least 2,000 innings.

The King: Three MLB Triple Crowns

The Triple Crown is most famous with regard to hitters (batting average, home runs, RBIs), but there's one for pitchers, too (wins, ERA, strikeouts). Koufax not only won three NL pitching Triple Crowns (1963, '65, '66), he actually led all of MLB in the three categories in each of those seasons. According to the Elias Sports Bureau, Koufax is the only pitcher to finish first in the Majors in wins, ERA and strikeouts in the same season three different times since earned runs became an official stat in both leagues in 1913. Since Koufax's trifecta, all pitchers combined have accomplished the feat just three times (Dwight Gooden in 1985, Johan Santana in 2006 and Shane Bieber in a shortened season in 2020).

K is for Koufax: 382 in a season

With his blazing fastball and plummeting curveball, Koufax was a nightmare for hitters, especially in this era before the mound was lowered in 1969. He finished in the top 10 in the NL in strikeouts in each of his last 10 seasons (1957-66) and in the top three seven times. Koufax led the Majors in 1961 (269), '63 (306), '65 (382) and '66 (317), with Randy Johnson, Curt Schilling and Nolan Ryan the only other pitchers in the Modern Era (since 1900) to reach the 300 mark three times. That total of 382 in 1965 set a modern single-season record, since surpassed only by Ryan (383 in '73).

Home sweet home: Dominant at Dodger Stadium

Dodger Stadium didn't open until 1962, and it's not a complete coincidence that Koufax's career took off at about that point. The new ballpark was heaven for pitchers in those days, and Koufax was untouchable there. Here are his seasonal ERAs at Dodger Stadium, each of which came in more than 100 innings: 1.75, 1.38, 0.85, 1.38 and 1.52. That 0.85 mark is a Live Ball Era record at any ballpark (minimum 100 innings), and all five seasons rank in the top 100. Postseason included, Koufax made 88 career starts at Dodger Stadium and allowed more than three earned runs in just four of them (4.5%).

Lowest career ERA at any ballpark

Min. 500 IP, 1920-2021

- 1) Sandy Koufax: 1.37 (Dodger Stadium)**
- 2) Jacob deGrom: 2.10 (Citi Field)
- 3) Don Drysdale: 2.19 (Dodger Stadium)
- 4) Clayton Kershaw: 2.21 (Dodger Stadium)
- 5) Dean Chance: 2.24 (Dodger Stadium)

Cy collector: Three awards in four years

Koufax is one of 10 pitchers in Major League history to claim at least three Cy Young Awards, and he is the only one of the 10 to do so in the era when there was just one award (1956-66), instead of separate awards for the AL and NL. All three came in a four-season span and remain three of the [most impressive Cy-winning campaigns of all time](#). Koufax won unanimously in 1963 (when he was also the NL MVP), '65 and '66 and finished third in '64 (the Angels' Dean Chance was first). He was the first pitcher to [win in back-to-back years](#), a club that has now grown to 11. And Koufax is the only pitcher in MLB history to win a Cy in his final season.

Mr. Zero: Four no-hitters

The indestructible Ryan is the all-time record holder with seven no-hitters, the last of which came when he was 44 -- 14 years older than Koufax was in his final game. But besides Ryan, no pitcher can match [Koufax's four no-hitters](#), which amazingly all came in a span of barely more than three years, between June 30, 1962, and Sept. 9, 1965. Koufax is the only pitcher to throw one in four consecutive seasons, with three of those performances including at least a dozen strikeouts. The lefty joins Cy Young himself as the only hurlers to include a perfect game among a group of at least three no-nos. The perfecto came against the Cubs on Sept. 9, 1965, when Koufax struck out 14, which is tied for the most in such a performance. Koufax's 101 [Game Score](#) that day is [tied for the fourth-highest on record](#) in an outing of no more than nine innings.

Owning October: 0.95 postseason ERA

Koufax still boasts one of the most impressive postseason résumés in Major League history. He made eight career playoff appearances, including seven starts (all in the World Series, which back then was the only round), and threw 57 innings with a 0.95 ERA. That remains the lowest in history for a pitcher with at least five postseason starts and the second lowest for a pitcher with 40-plus innings, trailing only legendary closer Mariano Rivera (0.70). Koufax dominated. He struck out 61 batters in those 57 innings, threw four complete games and two shutouts, and allowed a mere .180/.223/.240 batting line (.463 OPS).

A Fall Classic Favorite: Two-time World Series MVP

The Dodgers won three of the four World Series in which Koufax pitched (1959, '63, '65), and he had a lot to do with that. In the latter two of those series, Koufax was named the World Series MVP, making him one of three multiple-time winners, along with fellow Hall of Famers Bob Gibson and Reggie Jackson.

Against the Yankees in 1963, Koufax [set a postseason record](#) -- since equaled or bettered by six others -- with 15 strikeouts in Game 2 before coming back on three days' rest to finish off the sweep with a Game 4 complete game. Against the Twins in '65, when Koufax [famously sat out Game 1 in observance of Yom Kippur](#), he took a tough-luck loss in Game 2 but then came roaring back with shutouts in Game 5 (three days' rest) and Game 7 (two days' rest). Koufax remains the most recent of five pitchers to throw multiple shutouts in the same World Series, and he is the only one to twirl two starts with a Game Score of 88 or better in any single postseason series.

Hello, Hall: Inducted at 36

Koufax's peak was so impressive that even though he hung up his spikes at age 30, there was no doubt that he was [Hall of Fame-worthy](#). When Koufax first came on the ballot in 1972, he cruised past the 75% threshold, netting 86.9% of the vote. For the sake of comparison, that's a higher percentage than fellow lefty Warren Spahn got on his first ballot a year later (83.2%) or than another southpaw, Whitey Ford, got on his *second* ballot in '74 (77.8%). Koufax was only 36 at the time, which makes him the youngest inductee in Hall history, and he's now been enshrined in Cooperstown for exactly 50 years.

WITH JON LESTER'S RETIREMENT WE ASK: HOW DO YOU DEFINE A HALL OF FAME STARTING PITCHER?

Interesting thoughts from Alex Spier of The Boston Globe

Is **Jon Lester** a Hall of Famer? In the wake of the lefthander's retirement, speculation on that topic commenced about a 16-year big leaguer who finished his career with a 200-117 record, 3.66 ERA, five All-Star appearances, a no-hitter, and a dazzling postseason record that helped guide three teams to championships.

Yet to answer that question, it's necessary to examine a broader one: How do you define a Hall of Fame starting pitcher? One day before the news of his retirement, Lester mulled that.

He identified **CC Sabathia**, **Max Scherzer**, **Clayton Kershaw**, and **Justin Verlander** as shoo-ins. But Lester also wondered whether the longevity, durability, and consistency of peers such as **Mark Buehrle** and **Tim Hudson** was being properly appreciated.

"There's two different types of Hall of Famers. I think there's the people that obviously are the 1-percenters, the top-of-the-top guys that just dominate for years," said Lester. "And then I think there's the second-tier Hall of Famers that may not necessarily get in on the first ballot, but I think deserve to be in, the Mark Buehrles and Tim Hudsons that may not necessarily have dominated their entire career, but for 20 years or 18 years or whatever they were consistently above good."

But based on vote tracking by **Ryan Thibodaux**, Buehrle (214-160, 3.81 ERA, 117 ERA+, 3,283⅓ innings) and Hudson (222-133, 120 ERA+, 3.49 ERA, 3,126⅔ innings) may both fall shy of the 5 percent voting standard that would keep them on the ballot next year. Same goes for two-time Cy Young winner **Tim Lincecum**, who will join multi-Cy guys **Johan Santana**, **Bret Saberhagen**, and **Denny McLain** as non-Hall of Famers.

Andy Pettitte is likely to stay on the ballot for a fifth year, but with just over 10 percent of the first 165 votes tracked by Thibodaux in his favor, the lefthander faces little likelihood of induction. Meanwhile, after 10 controversy-filled years of voting, **Roger Clemens** and **Curt Schilling** will drop off the Hall of Fame ballots mailed to BBWAA voters next November.

The question of starting pitchers' Cooperstown credentials has always been a thorny one, with rotation members held to almost impossible standards for decades. After the BBWAA elected six pitchers with fewer than 300 wins to the Hall between 1981-91, that plateau reemerged as a prerequisite from 1992 through 2010, when the entity didn't elect a single starting pitcher with fewer than 300 victories to the Hall.

While seven pitchers have been elected by the BBWAA since 2014 (**Tom Glavine, Roy Halladay, Randy Johnson, Greg Maddux, Pedro Martinez, Mike Mussina, and John Smoltz**), none are likely to sniff consideration until Sabathia becomes eligible in 2025.

So, what does it take to be a Hall of Famer? Will Lester or **Cole Hamels** merit election? Will a brightly and quickly burning candle such as two-time Cy Young winner **Corey Kluber** merit consideration?

How much more does **Chris Sale** — with seven All-Star nods and seven top-six Cy finishes, and a 114-74 record with a 3.03 career ERA, as well as one of the highest strikeout rates in history — need to do to get to Cooperstown? For that matter, how will the Hall-worthiness of pitchers who are just now reaching the big leagues be judged?

Until Clemens, 300 wins resulted in automatic induction — but that standard hearkens to the earliest days of the game, when starting pitchers took the ball and didn't give it up unless someone tore a limb from their body, and sometimes, not even then. The pitcher's claim of a "decision" seemed appropriate.

"My father used to tell me when I was growing up, 'You're not telling anyone you can't pitch. When you go in there, you better stay in there. You better finish the game,' " reflected **Luis Tiant** (229-172). "I finished 187 games. That's a lot of games. It's never going to happen again."

Three pitchers tied for the major league lead with three complete games last year. It's no longer just nine-inning outings that are rarities. Increasingly, pitchers don't even last the five or six innings needed to be in line for a win. In 2021, just 27.7 percent of starts resulted in a pitcher being credited for a victory.

Whereas it used to be that a starter would get a "W" roughly four out of every nine trips to the mound at the start of the 20th century, that's the case for just over one out of every four starts now — in an age of bullpen games and openers and two-times-through-the-order before handing the baton to a succession of overpowering relievers.

Starting lines

Starter wins have become increasingly infrequent over the course of baseball history as the role of bullpens has steadily — and then more recently, drastically — increased. Using the 1901-10 decade as a baseline, here's a look at the equivalent of 300 wins — historically a guarantee of Hall of Fame election — in every decade, adjusted for each decade's standard frequency of starting pitcher wins.

<u>DECADE</u>	<u>% OF STARTS YIELDING A WIN</u>
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1901-1910	44.8%
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1911-1920	41.8%
1921-1930	40.7%
1931-1940	39.6%
1941-1950	39.4%
1951-1960	36.9%
1961-1970	36.4%
1971-1980	37.2%
1981-1990	35.8%
1991-2000	35.0%
2001-2010	35.1%
2011-2020	33.4%
2021	27.7%

Put another way: Adjusting for the diminished frequency of starts resulting in wins, the equivalent of 300 wins in 1901-10 would be 185 starting pitcher victories, based on how pitchers were deployed.

Of course, “wins” and “losses” were already imperfect statistics for judging pitcher performance based on elements beyond the pitcher’s control, including offensive support and the defense behind him. Still, the shifting nature of the starting pitcher’s role, which will affect other cumulative stats such as WAR, innings, and strikeouts, will make it ever more difficult to use current Hall members as a basis for judging future Hall-worthiness.

“Are you going to judge all the modern-day pitchers based on the past or the present, the years they pitched? . . . You can’t compare eras anymore,” said Hall of Fame pitcher **Jim Palmer**. “People are going to have to recalibrate what it takes to be a Hall of Fame pitcher.”

In 2010, at his first All-Star Game, Lester expressed his desire to win 300 games and to be a Hall of Famer. With experience, he laughed at the standards he’d once considered attainable.

“Three hundred wins is I think impossible now,” he said. “Now I feel like you’re only relied upon to get 12, 15 outs. So if that’s the case, heck, 100 wins is unfathomable for some guys. Three hundred is just a whole other stratosphere.”

IN THE BEGINNING -LESTER GOT OFF TO A ROUGH START

Jon Lester expressed satisfaction and gratitude at having reached 200 career victories at the end of the 2021 season, which he finished with the Cardinals after a July trade from the Nationals. He suggested the milestone reflected longevity, durability, and the quality of his teams.

“That helps motivate you to stay accountable for what you need to do on a day-to-day basis to try and go out and win,” he said.

Lester’s retirement makes it fascinating to think back to the beginning of his career. It was 20 years ago that the Red Sox drafted him after he fell to the second round out of high school over signability concerns and inconsistency as a senior. He signed late and appeared in just one game at the end of the minor league season with the rookie Gulf Coast League Red Sox.

Lester, working on a 25-pitch limit, allowed six runs (one earned) while recording two outs before manager **John Sanders** pulled him.

“He was nerved up, overthrowing,” said Sanders. “I walked out and when I got to the dirt, I remember distinctly, I clapped my hands and said, ‘Johnny, I gotta come get you.’ He said, ‘No, Skip, no. That’s never happened to me.’ I said, ‘I think you’re just a little bit worked up over this moment. That’s OK. There’s gonna be a lot of starts and finishes for you in the big leagues.’ And he looked at me and he started grinning.”

Lester fulfilled that prophecy, though not without overcoming his cancer diagnosis and treatment in his rookie season of 2006. At that point, as much as there was relief that his form of lymphoma was treatable, there was considerable uncertainty about his future and what the cancer treatment might mean for his career.

But by the end of 2007, when Lester closed out the World Series with a victory over the Rockies in Game 4, the view of his elite potential had returned. That made him a target of the Twins in conversations about a trade that would have sent **Johan Santana** to Boston.

“I said, ‘No way! Don’t do that!’ ” former Sox pitching coach and manager **John Farrell** recalled.

The faith of Farrell and the team was soon rewarded when Lester broke through in 2008. He arrived as a star with his no-hitter against the Royals on May 19.

“In the bullpen prior to the game, he threw, like, six pitches off the back wall getting loose,” laughed Farrell. “I remember we just had a brief conversation like, ‘Hey, you’re just trying to get

loose, don't worry about where it's going.' Well, he goes out and throws the no-hitter. It was a dominating performance, like many others that he had.

"I just look at a guy who's got incredible personal resolve. To come back from and beat cancer and to develop into one of the game's best pitchers, that's no small feat. And to thrive in Boston I think speaks to how committed and concentrated he was to being the best possible personal pitcher that he ended up being.

"I just marvel at the physical abilities as well as the commitment that he put in . . . He never took a shortcut in anything. He logged the time, put in the work, and obviously reaped the benefits."

With Lester's retirement, one of the great Red Sox prospect groups in generations may be at the end of its run. In 2005, Lester was one of seven players on the Double A Portland Sea Dogs that went on to have big league careers of at least 10 seasons: Lester, **Dustin Pedroia**, **Hanley Ramirez**, **Jonathan Papelbon**, **David Murphy**, **Brandon Moss**, and **Aníbal Sánchez**.

Sánchez — traded from the Sox to the Marlins with Ramirez in the **Josh Beckett** deal after that season — is the only active player from that team. He's deciding whether to retire or pursue a comeback.

Sánchez (the American League ERA champion in 2013) struggled in 2020 and then sat out the 2021 campaign when he couldn't find a big league offer. According to a major league source, he's on the fence about retirement but felt rejuvenated after the time off, throwing with what appears to be more velocity than in recent years. In the next couple of weeks, he'll throw in front of a scout with a radar gun to decide whether to attempt another shot at the big leagues.

JOE POSNANSKI ON THE NUMBER OF PLAYOFF TEAMS

OK, so as you probably know, when baseball returns — whenever that happens to be — there will be more teams making the playoffs. The specifics are still up in the air, nobody has agreed on anything, but it looks like 14 MLB teams will start making the playoffs beginning in 2022. That's 14 out of 30. That's almost 50%.

Here's a quick timeline of how many baseball teams make the playoffs:

1884 (or so)-1968: 2 teams

1969-1980: 4 teams

1981 (strike year): 8 teams

1982-1993: 4 teams

1994 (strike year): 0 teams

1995-2011: 8 teams

2012-2019: 10 teams

2020 (COVID year): 16 teams

2021: 10 teams

2022: 14 teams?

I long ago stopped fighting the baseball playoff fight because it's clear that I'm just not in the same place as most baseball fans. American sports fans, in general, love playoffs. And I get that. Hey, I love October baseball as much as anybody.

It's just that, I love regular-season baseball even more, and the more teams that make the playoffs, the less that baseball from April through September means. I can't for the life of me make sense of playing 162 games basically to eliminate the Pirates, Orioles, Diamondbacks and Marlins. I've always believed that so much of baseball's joy is wrapped in a regular season that truly matters and pennant races with everything at stake.

But, like I say, I'm out of step with most people on that, and the baseball playoffs, like the universe, will keep expanding — I sincerely doubt it will stop at 14 teams for very long, especially because the only way to have a 14-team playoff is to mess around with byes and homefield advantage, and it won't hold. I predict there will be a 16-team playoff, four series in each league, sooner rather than later.

It comes down to what my friend Bill Hancock — executive director of the College Football Playoff — calls “bracket creep.” His theory is that once you start adding teams to the playoffs, there will always be immense pressure to add more. It’s a never-ending cycle.

All of which brings us to the wild, ridiculous, fun, boring, mismanaged, silly, intense, poorly officiated and often illogical first weekend of the new 14-team NFL playoff winter blowout. It’s a 14-team playoff, but only 12 teams are actually playing this weekend — the last two, the Rams and Cardinals, are playing tonight — because two teams, the Packers and Titans, got byes.

Now you ask: Why did THOSE two teams get byes when two other teams with the exact same records did not?

Ah, welcome to the homeandautobundlextravafestasaveathon.

It’s funny because the NFL probably had the closest thing to the perfect playoff system. Football is such a violent game that the season needs to be much shorter than all other sports. So, the season was 16 games — a nice round number, divisible by two and four — and 12 teams made the playoffs. Each of those 12 playoff slots got something different from the rest.

No. 1 seed: A bye and homefield advantage throughout the playoffs.

No. 2 seed: A bye and homefield advantage the first game.

No. 3 seed: Homefield advantage against the worst team to make the playoffs.

No. 4 seed: Homefield advantage against the second-worst team to make the playoffs.

No. 5 seed: At least they didn’t have to play the better team in the first round.

No. 6 seed: Come on, just lucky to even make the playoffs.

That system really worked. Sure, there are always quirks with a short 16-game season, and the NFL had to invent all sorts of progressively less cogent tiebreakers to seed the teams, but all in all the best two teams got a bye, the next two teams got a home game, the last two teams got a chance to pull off the upset, and you can’t really do much better than that.

But, yes, bracket creep — and the NFL as a multi-multi-multi-billion-dollar business run by greed is particularly susceptible to it. The owners wrecked the whole thing just to cash in a few billion more. They added a 17th game to the regular season for no reason at all except that they could. And they added a seventh playoff team in each conference and took away one of the byes.

And now the system makes very little sense, but the owners know this: Who is going to complain about more football?

You can mark it down right now: There will be 16 playoff teams in the NFL in the next five years. And there will probably be 18 NFL games in the regular season to go with it. Everything about this current system feels like nothing more than a weigh station. You can get ready now for an early-March Super Bowl. It's coming.

And in many ways, I almost admire the NFL for the ruthless way they go about expanding the shield — they don't hem and haw and hesitate the way baseball people do. They will throw out any and all traditions in order to draw more fans and cash larger checks. Baseball will spend years arguing about whether the pitcher should have to throw the four pitches for an intentional walk, while football will change any rule, try any new technology, cater to any audience and follow any path to make the next dollar.

HALL OF FAME

JAYSON STARK

examines the four burning PED questions on the 2022 Hall of Fame ballot.

Why Four Questions?

Let's begin with this history lesson: Would you believe that messy "*Do PED guys belong in the Hall of Fame?*" debate has been raging since way back in 2007?

Mark McGwire debuted on that 2007 ballot. Jose Canseco debuted on that 2007 ballot. And with that, the hangover from the PED era proceeded to hold all Hall of Fame conversations hostage ... *for the next decade and a half.*

But this just in: Especially this year.

The decisions facing voters on this ballot aren't just a PED debate waiting to happen. They're the Coachella of PED debates.

Your aging, rocking and rolling legends of the 1990s are still occupying center stage. Barry Bonds! Roger Clemens! Sammy Sosa! It's their farewell Hall of Fame tour. So don't miss it!

But also ... it's A-Rod time! It's David Ortiz and the Big Papi Chorus! It's their first appearance in this arena, and they'll be with us all month. Heck, in A-Rod's case, he's booked all the way through 2031!

Meanwhile, we'll have Manny Ramirez to keep us entertained *through 2026*! And Gary Sheffield *through 2025*! Yes, the PED era's classic rock stars are everywhere, just to make sure we keep wallowing in the same swamp we've been stuck in since 2007.

As baseball writers fill out our ballots, we can still hear your voices, off in the distance, the ones screaming: *Keep all the cheaters out of the Hall of Fame!* I wish we could. But how? So you know what struck me as I waded through this ballot?

It isn't that simple.

In truth, it's never been that simple. But especially with a group of candidates like this. So that question — *Do PED guys belong in the Hall of Fame?* — doesn't cover it anymore.

All "PED guys" are not created equal. Which means their Hall of Fame cases aren't equal. And we're making it obvious, just by the way we vote, that all these things are not the same.

So that, friends, is why we need to ask *four* burning PED questions on the 2022 Hall of Fame ballot. Beginning with ...

1. How do you explain all those Bonds and Clemens votes?

Here, as of Tuesday morning, are the latest vote tabulations of the seven players people seem to view as The PED Guys in this election, courtesy of [Ryan Thibodaux's tracker](#) of public Hall of Fame ballots:

David Ortiz: 83.6 percent

Barry Bonds: 77.2 percent

Roger Clemens: 76.0 percent

Gary Sheffield: 46.2 percent

Alex Rodriguez: 40.9 percent

Manny Ramirez: 38.0 percent

Sammy Sosa: 24.6 percent

I easily could have started this four-question parade with the man at the top: Ortiz. But let's save him for last, because that will be the easiest way to distinguish what makes him different from everyone else in this group.

I'm also not including Sheffield in this opus. I'll talk more about him in the ballot column Friday.

So we should kick this off with Bonds and Clemens, who are about to extend their streak of not getting elected to 10 years in a row, a development that puts their chances of ever making it to Cooperstown on potentially permanent life support.

Nevertheless, this will be the *sixth* consecutive election in which they've each collected at least 238 votes and at least 53 percent of all ballots cast. So that separates them from every other PED-tainted legend who has ever appeared on a Hall of Fame ballot.

Let's leave out players like Mike Piazza and Pudge Rodriguez who never failed a test and eventually got elected. If we're talking significant, documented PED stains of pretty much any size or shape, here's how Bonds' and Clemens' highest vote totals compare with a sampling of other prominent candidates who fit that description:

Barry Bonds: 61.8 percent (2021)

Roger Clemens: 61.6 percent (2021)

Manny Ramirez: 28.2 percent (2021)

Mark McGwire: 23.7 percent (2010)

Sammy Sosa: 17.0 percent (2021)

Rafael Palmeiro: 12.6 percent (2012)

The most votes any of those other guys ever attracted in an election is 128 (McGwire). Bonds and Clemens have essentially doubled that — for the last five years in a row. They're also so closely linked, in the voters' brains, that over the last three elections, their vote totals have never been more than two votes apart.

So why have voters like me voted for them but not the other men on that list above? I can't speak for everybody who checks their names. But I look at Bonds and Clemens this way:

(1) They played most of their careers in the era before testing, which means many of us evaluate them differently than players who have been caught and disciplined since testing began.

(2) There's a persuasive argument that we're talking about the greatest hitter and pitcher not just of their own time but also of the last 100 years. So a Hall of Fame without Barry Bonds and

Roger Clemens is a Hall of Fame that fails to tell the story of an unforgettable time in baseball history.

(3) And their transcendent talent was evident from the first day they set foot on a major-league field. So they've always exuded what my friend Bob Costas likes to describe as "authentic" greatness, even if there's so much strong evidence that they turned to PEDs late in their careers.

Full disclosure: I haven't voted for Bonds and Clemens every year they've been on the ballot. And it's still an uncomfortable feeling to cast those votes, knowing what we know. But there's no good way to handle those ugly pre-testing times. And as voters, I think we've proven we flamed out multiple times in playing the who-did/who-didn't guessing game.

So I'd rather just vote for the greatest players of that era and — if they ever get elected — let the Hall of Fame figure out how to deal with that (*truth on the plaques!*), because clearly, as voters, we've proven we're never going to cut it in the Morality Police Force.

2. Are Manny and A-Rod doomed?

It was precisely two sentences ago that I wrote the words: *I'd rather just vote for the greatest players of that era*. Yet I've never cast a vote for Manny Ramirez. And while I'm not ready to reveal, until Friday's ballot column, whether I voted for Alex Rodriguez, just check the math on that [Hall of Fame vote tracker](#) because it paints a clear portrait of how other voters feel.

We know from the tracker that the vote totals for Bonds and Clemens are nearly double those of A-Rod. So, numerous voters are drawing an unmistakable line between two eras that span the period of massive PED use. More on that in a moment.

Like Bonds and Clemens, Manny and A-Rod are players whose careers rank alongside the all-time offensive greats. That's not even in dispute. Here's the complete list of right-handed hitters with at least 550 homers, 2,500 hits and a 140 OPS+:

Willie Mays
Henry Aaron
Frank Robinson
Albert Pujols
Alex Rodriguez
Manny Ramirez

Heard of any of those guys? They comprise the short list of the greatest right-handed bat artists of the live-ball era, with Jimmie Foxx, Joe DiMaggio, Rogers Hornsby, Frank Thomas and [Miguel Cabrera](#) also lurking in there someplace.

So if you're one of those people who believe it's illogical to vote for Bonds and Clemens but *not* Manny and A-Rod, I get that. If you want to confront me with my own words — and ask me how the Hall of Fame can tell the story of the last three decades without Manny and A-Rod — hey, I get that, too.

But now let's circle back to that unmistakable line so many voters have drawn to split the PED era in two.

Before testing, we have no idea who did what. Yeah, I've noticed that thousands of people on Twitter think they have that all figured out. But in reality, the only thing we truly know *for a fact* is that hundreds of players were using something or other, not just the same 10 or 12 guys we talk about incessantly. And nobody has furnished us a list, or ever will.

So all we're doing with that group is playing the Let's Guess Who the PED Users Were game. And seriously, isn't it obvious we're the Jacksonville Jaguars of playing that game?

On the other side of that line, though, is the era for which we have actual evidence, the era of testing and discipline. And in Manny and A-Rod, we have guys who are proven multi-time offenders.

No other player on this ballot failed *any* test or served *any* suspension for *any* variation of PED offense. So Manny and A-Rod have carved out their own special space in this debate. And they deserve each other.

So I expect that for the next few years, they'll be the Bonds and Clemens of this voting cycle. At the moment, Manny and A-Rod are separated by only five votes in the tracker's exit polls. I'll bet they stay that closely connected through 2026, when Manny becomes the next PED legend to drop off the ballot.

3. How come nobody votes for Sammy Sosa?

Bonds and Clemens aren't the only members of the PED Patrol who are appearing on this stage for the final time. How the heck can we forget Sammy Sosa?

Let me tell you, I once would have thought it was absurd to think a dude with 609 home runs and the most 60-homer seasons (three) in baseball history was *not* a Hall of Famer. Yet here I am, 10 years in and other than his first year on the ballot ... *I've never voted for him.*

A few weeks ago, in [a column explaining his ballot](#), Ken Rosenthal compared Sosa with Big Papi. Two larger-than-life figures. And both were reported to have tested positive in the supposedly anonymous 2003 survey testing but never did in the age of serious testing that began in 2004. So there's a connection there, but in my eyes, it's only a circumstantial connection.

Sosa's career cratered (with a sub-average 99 OPS+) after real testing kicked in. On the other hand, those same years (2004-16) were when Ortiz built his legend, while never testing positive — over 13 more seasons and dozens of tests. But let's put that part of the comparison aside. Just based on numbers alone, Big Papi was the vastly superior offensive force.

Player	OPS+	WPA	Post-season OPS
Ortiz	141	50.6	.947
Sosa	128	25.0	.818

So in truth, it isn't Ortiz we should be comparing Sosa with. And it shouldn't be Bonds or Clemens we compare him with, either. No, his closest comp is actually the guy he dueled for the home run record in 1998: McGwire. And once again, if you just stack up their bodies of offensive work, it's not a contest.

Player	OPS+	WPA	OWAR
McGwire	163	53.4	65.4
Sosa	128	25.0	50.9

I understand that their total Wins Above Replacement figures, factoring in base running and defense, are closer (62.2 for McGwire, 58.6 for Sosa). Still, remember that McGwire *never came close* to getting elected. Even if he'd tripled his votes in his best year on the ballot, he still wouldn't have had enough to get elected. And that means it's been obvious, from the start, that a vote for Sosa was always a "wasted" vote.

So why has Sosa never come within 230 votes of that plaque gallery in Cooperstown? It makes perfect sense to me when you look at it through this lens.

4. Does Big Papi deserve to be a first-ballot Hall of Famer?

In February 2015, I asked Rob Manfred an important question: What advice would he give us, the PED-weary Hall of Fame voters, about how we should deal with those players. The commissioner had some thoughts! And they still apply, particularly to David Ortiz.

Manfred advised us to draw a clear distinction between two types of players. In one group, he said, are "players who tested positive and were disciplined." In a very different group, though, are "players where somebody has surmised that they did something or other."

Without some sort of proof of PED use, he said, it's "unfair" for us to withhold votes for any player just because we suspect them.

"I just think it runs contrary to a very fundamental notion in our society, that you're innocent until somebody proves you're guilty," Manfred [said that day](#).

So that brings us to Big Papi. Do we have that "proof" or not?

In 2016, Manfred shared some thoughts on that, too. Without mentioning Ortiz's name, the commissioner essentially exonerated him, by casting doubt on the validity of the reports on the 2003 survey test, which Ortiz reportedly failed.

There were "10 or 15" players whose tests came back positive, Manfred said, who actually had not used a banned substance. So those players, he said, "probably or possibly (had) a very legitimate explanation" for how they showed up on that list.

Now add in the fact that none of those names was ever supposed to leak in the first place. And the commissioner was obviously telling us *not* to use that report as a reason to not vote for Ortiz.

So why is Big Papi raking in more than 83 percent of the public votes so far, and positioning himself either to be elected on the first ballot or to cruise in next year? I think that covers it.

Unless you're a conscientious DH objector, there's no baseball reason not to vote for him. And based on the commissioner's words, unless you're a voter who won't vote for anybody remotely suspected of PED use, there's no pharmaceutical reason not to vote for him, either.

So even though Ortiz's first year on the ballot also happens to be Alex Rodriguez's first year, the comparison stops there. I've already shot down the links to Sosa. And Bonds and Clemens are in a category all their own. So the best comps to Big Papi are players like Piazza and Pudge Rodriguez, don't you think?

If we follow the guidelines laid down by the commissioner, this isn't complicated. Those players all have the numbers. And if they're connected by whispers, shouldn't we be handling the Ortiz whispers exactly the way we processed the Piazza/Pudge whispers?

We elected both of them! We even elected Pudge on the first ballot, though just barely (by four votes).

Now it's David Ortiz who is gliding along that same track. If he gets in this year, it will be close. If he doesn't, it won't be a shock. But either way, we'll be treating him similarly to how we've handled players almost exactly like him in the past. And that's how this process is supposed to work.

Keep all the cheaters out of Cooperstown? Sure. We'd love to. But I don't know anyone in baseball who doesn't believe we've already flunked that assignment. And the reason we whiffed is one the 2022 ballot has reminded us of one more time:

It's impossible!

So the best we can do, unfortunately, is what I've tried to explain here: take it case by case, try to be consistent, and fully understand we're going to make everybody mad no matter how we vote.

PETER GAMMONS—EXCERPTED FROM A PIECE ON LABOR NEGOTIATION, RELEVANT AS YOU THINK ABOUT HALL OF FAME VOTING

There is, however, a tie worth mentioning between baseball labor negotiations and the Hall of Fame voting. When the two sides were headed towards a strike deadline in August 2002, one of the most divisive issues was drug testing. After the steroids explosion of the 1990s, Bud Selig felt he had to get drug testing. The MLBPA fought back. Selig also told close associates that the game could not afford a strike seven years after ending the longest winter, 1994-95. As the clock to the August 30 deadline ticked down, a compromise was reached that those of us who were there for the first strike in March 1972 still cannot believe.

Gene Orza and Michael Weiner of the Players Association worked off an Orza blueprint and crafted a compromise with Manfred that there would be anonymous testing (hence no punitive ramifications) in 2003, and that if five percent of players tested positive, formal and punitive drug testing would begin in 2005.

The MLBPA was supposed to have disposed of all the results, but the government got involved, some 104 results were seized, but without all the nuance surrounding these tests, including one key complication.

The test results were administered by a California testing company. One problem occurred because tests often showed positive test results for two substances which were not actually illegal, so players had to take a second test five-to-seven days after the first, to allow time for those substances to get out of their systems. Hence, the company had results for players who tested positive the first time, and then negative on the second. When the government seized the tests, this may have resulted in the government noting some individuals as positive whose positive tests actually returned results for legal substances. And that then could explain why Manfred essentially cleared a name (or names) from some of the reports the New York Times listed.

The only two people who knew all the test results were, and presumably are, Orza and Manfred. Anonymity was guaranteed, so while Orza would have liked to have given clarification on a name made public, he couldn't.

A decade later, we have media members asserting they would not vote for anyone whose name was ever associated publicly with steroids. *Mention* hence is tantamount to proof.

Orza and Manfred never have betrayed their remarkable compromise. Some of us believe that the second test issue is what caused Manfred to give David Ortiz gray-area shelter. As individuals have been judged — guessed, in many cases, by hearsay — as clean or not, all either has said is what Orza maintains: “Only Rob and I know the names, and all I can say is that there are players currently in the Hall of Fame who tested positive, and there are several players who voters have kept out that never tested positive.”

I did not vote for Sammy Sosa. It troubles me that I may have wrongly judged him. I'm certain there are players in the Hall of Fame who tested positive, and I feel no remorse.

Suspended is one thing. Rafael Palmeiro, Manny Ramírez, Robinson Canó and [Alex Rodriguez](#) were all suspended, their cases upheld after the drug testing regulations went into place in 2005. *Judgment* based on speculation can be considered abuse of the right to vote for the Hall of Fame.

8 HALL OF FAMERS YOU MAY HAVE FORGOTTEN WERE TRADED

From mlb.com

A general manager's worst nightmare has to be rooted in regret. No one wants to be remembered for trading a player who goes on to become an icon elsewhere. That's perhaps where some of the strongest apprehension lies when considering dipping into their prospect pools.

Yet such stories are littered across baseball history, some of them among the most well-chronicled. And while we all know examples like the [Curse of the Bambino](#), we wanted to dig a little deeper.

Which players were traded so early in their careers that the transaction might've been forgotten among the mainstream? We looked at eight such instances by shock value with the luxury of hindsight, and listed them in reverse chronological order. The criteria: All players were dealt before accruing three years of [service time](#) and then put themselves on a Hall of Fame track with their acquiring club.

Padres fire sale wasn't all bad

Padres got: Trevor Hoffman, Andres Berumen, José Martínez

Marlins got: Gary Sheffield, Rich Rodriguez

Date: June 24, 1993

This one isn't forgotten by Marlins or Padres fans, but given how synonymous Hoffman became with San Diego and that the reaction was centered on Sheffield, it deserves mention here. Hoffman had pitched in just 28 mostly low-leverage games for the Marlins in 1993, but he'll never forget his first few with the Padres, as Friars fans rained boos on Hoffman as a sign of disapproval of the trade. It took a while to win them over, but the trade led to a win-win for both parties.

Sheffield helped the Marlins win the 1997 World Series and continued his own Hall of Fame trajectory, receiving 40.6% of the vote in 2021, his sixth year on the ballot. Hoffman pitched 16 seasons in San Diego, set the MLB saves record (since broken by Mariano Rivera) and joined Tony Gwynn as the only players in Cooperstown enshrined as Padres.

Pack your bags

Astros got: Jeff Bagwell

Red Sox got: Larry Andersen

Date: Aug. 30, 1990

Bagwell -- born in Boston and raised in Connecticut -- went from describing himself immediately after the trade as "one of the saddest guys you'll ever see" to later saying, "the worst moment of my life turned out to be the best moment of my life," [according to Sports Illustrated](#).

Bagwell, 22, was dealt for Andersen, 37, in a move justified by the Red Sox due to their dire need for bullpen help in a pennant chase, and Andersen did prove to be valuable. He posted a 1.23 ERA in 15 games and Boston won the division, though Andersen went on to sign with the Padres that offseason.

At the time a third baseman, Bagwell was blocked by Hall of Famer Wade Boggs in Boston and eventual All-Star Scott Cooper at Triple-A Pawtucket. And, as Bagwell later said, if the Sox ever needed, they could always buy free agents. That gave the club little pause to trade Bagwell, who went on to win the National League Rookie of the Year Award the following year, his first of 15 seasons in the Majors -- all for the Astros.

Smoltz heads south

Braves got: John Smoltz

Tigers got: Doyle Alexander

Date: Aug. 12, 1987

The Tigers were in a pennant race, in need of starting pitching and set on acquiring Alexander from Atlanta, which, according to Baseball-Reference, had its initial four-player request denied. That's when a Braves scout who had seen Smoltz in the Minors suggested that Atlanta center talks on the righty, who wasn't exactly a bluechip prospect. The 20-year-old Smoltz had labored to a 5.68 ERA and 1.631 WHIP at Double-A that season and just two years prior was a 22nd-round Draft pick.

It's worth noting that Alexander wasn't an afterthought. He went undefeated, going 9-0 with a 1.53 ERA in 11 starts with Detroit after the trade to help the Tigers reach the American League Championship Series. The following season, he was an All-Star.

But the Tigers wouldn't reach the postseason again until after Smoltz's 20-year career in Atlanta concluded, over which he pitched in 40 postseason games. To add further shock value: Smoltz is Detroit born-and-bred and could've become as homegrown of an ace as they come.

Ryno to Chicago

Cubs got: Ryne Sandberg, Larry Bowa

Phillies got: Iván de Jesus

Date: Jan. 27, 1982

Maybe the Phils were intent on extending a golden era by acquiring MLB-ready talent. It at least seems clear that they didn't know just what they had in Sandberg. Instead of moving him from shortstop, where he played in the Minors, to second, which the Cubs did upon acquiring him, the Phils shipped the then-prospect Sandberg and an aging Bowa to Chicago in exchange for de Jesus.

Sandberg was one of many shortstop prospects in line to replace Bowa, along with Julio Franco, and moving Sandberg to third was out of the question, with Mike Schmidt on a Hall of Fame trajectory. de Jesus also played short and was seven years younger than Bowa, and the Phils had been [shopping Sandberg](#) to other clubs, so he wasn't exactly a "throw-in" to the trade.

But the hindsight has to still sting. De Jesus posted a 78 [OPS+](#) in three underwhelming seasons with Philly, while Sandberg became an MVP, a 10-time All-Star and one of the greatest second basemen of all time.

Not so Amazin'

Angels got: Nolan Ryan, Frank Estrada, Don Rose, Leroy Stanton

Mets got: Jim Fregosi

Date: Dec. 10, 1971

"The Mets finally gave up on Nolan Ryan's wandering fastball," read the [New York Times' lede](#) the day that the club traded Ryan and three prospects to the Halos for star shortstop Fregosi.

It's easy to highlight this as a huge Mets blunder, but at the time, one could at least entertain their logic.

The Mets were coming off third- and fourth-place finishes in 1970 and '71 and felt they needed a jolt to their pedestrian offense. Fregosi was a six-time All-Star and had a career 115 homers. Ryan, despite averaging nearly a strikeout per inning, had a ghastly walk rate of 15.4% and had lost more games (38) than he'd won (29), which were stats teams lived by back then.

- [The legacy of the Ryan trade, 50 years later](#)

Yet even though Ryan had pitched parts of five seasons by then, he was still just 24 years old, threw absolute gas and was oozing with potential. Ryan's command would remain an issue -- his career 12.4% walk rate is [by far the highest among Hall of Famers](#) -- but that would take a back seat en route to him becoming the game's all-time strikeout king. Fregosi, meanwhile, hit just .233/.319/.328 for New York and was shipped to Texas the following season.

Whoa, Nellie

White Sox got: Nellie Fox

A's got: Joe Tipton

Date: Oct. 19, 1949

Fox had a pedestrian .632 OPS in three partial seasons backing up A's second baseman Pete Suder. That prompted Connie Mack to trade Fox for White Sox catcher Tipton, which led Fox to another backup gig in Chicago -- this time behind All-Star Cass Michaels.

But Fox caught a break when the White Sox dealt Michaels to the Senators, which paved the way for Fox to finally get consistent at-bats. Yet even then, he had a .608 OPS in his first year in 1950 and was clearly a player who required patience. Finally, Fox hit his stride in '51, when he was an All-Star for the first of 11 straight seasons.

Mack was widely known as one of the best talent evaluators ever, and Fox was more of a diamond in the rough, but it's clear that he misjudged here. Tipton was just a .204 hitter when he was acquired, which perhaps shows the ballpark in which they valued Fox.

Brooklyn's Little Colonel

Dodgers got: Pee Wee Reese

Red Sox got: \$35,000 and two [players to be named later](#) (Red Evans, Art Parks)

Date: July 18, 1939

Had it not been for positional incumbency, Reese might have gone on to be a Red Sox great instead of the captain of The Boys of Summer Brooklyn Dodgers. Reese was surging through the Minors with the Louisville Colonels, who had no MLB affiliation, when Boston owner Tom

Yawkey purchased the club -- many reports suggest -- solely to retain Reese's rights. But, as Roger Kahn postulates in "The Boys of Summer," then-manager Joe Cronin was also Boston's starting shortstop and wanted to retain his position. So he pushed to trade Reese.

After Reese was dealt to the Dodgers, he finished his season in Louisville, then broke into the Majors the following year. He went on to become a team captain, a 10-time All-Star, a 1955 World Series champion, and perhaps most notably, a champion for Jackie Robinson and integration.

Christy the Redleg?

Giants got: Christy Mathewson

Reds got: Amos Rusie

Date: Dec. 15, 1900

Mathewson's story begins and ends with him as a Giant, and as such, it's quirky. After going winless with a 5.08 ERA in an abbreviated first MLB season, the Giants demoted Mathewson to the Minors, which led the Reds to select him in the Rule 5 Draft. But before he'd ever suit up for Cincinnati, Mathewson was dealt back to the Giants for Rusie, who was in the twilight of his Hall of Fame career.

So there went the chance for Mathewson to blossom within the Redlegs' rich history. Or was it?

According to [SABR](#), the Giants would've had to pay the Minor League team \$1,000 to take Mathewson, and the Reds only paid \$100 to draft him away. So the entire ploy was to save \$900 and send away Rusie, who made just three starts for the Reds.

JAYSON STARK'S HOF BALLOT EXPLAINED

If I'm doing the math correctly, it's been more than 5,000 days since Barry Bonds last swung a bat in a big-league game, or since Curt Schilling and Roger Clemens last rocked and fired one last big-league pitch. Yikes, that's a lot of days.

It's incredible to think we're still trying to figure out what to make of them.

But this is it, their 10th and final time on the baseball writers' Hall of Fame ballot. Meanwhile, it's David Ortiz's first shot to step into our batter's box. And it's clear that if anybody is going to get elected Tuesday, when the ballots are revealed, it'll be him.

So here we are, in the middle of a baseball work stoppage. Yet the last time I looked, the two columns I've already written about Hall of Fame voting this month have inspired more than 650 reader comments. Amazing.

I never stop appreciating how much all of you care about the Hall of Fame. That's true whether you agree with every name on my annual ballot or think I'm the biggest knucklehead ever. I'm almost never offended if you disagree with my votes. And you know why?

You're supposed to disagree!

It's the intensity of this debate that reminds us why this matters. It's also the reason that every January, I feel a responsibility to let you know how I voted and why. I don't have to write this column. I write it because I think I owe you this column.

The only difference this year is that I didn't want this whole discussion to turn into another familiar trip down the performance-enhancing drugs rabbit hole. So I wrote a separate column earlier this week on the Four Burning PED Questions on this ballot. If you're curious about why, for instance, I think Big Papi is being evaluated differently than Alex Rodriguez and Sammy Sosa, you can wriggle down that rabbit hole [here](#).

But in other news, here's my ballot — a look at the 10 players I voted for and five I didn't, despite many weeks of studying and thinking about them. Thanks in advance for agreeing with every word of this!

The 10 Names on My Ballot

Let's begin with the 10 players I voted for. Here's a quick breakdown:

Eight holdovers from last year

Barry Bonds
Roger Clemens
Curt Schilling
Scott Rolen
Billy Wagner
Todd Helton
Jeff Kent
Gary Sheffield

Two first-timers

David Ortiz
Jimmy Rollins

Voted for him last year but not this year

Omar Vizquel

You should know that I spent many hours, over the course of four weeks, deliberating over all of those names (and more), because that's how this is supposed to work. So now, here's ...

How I got here

I've explained my philosophy on Hall of Fame voting many times before. Would you like to hear it again? Always happy to oblige. Skip ahead if you've heard me sing this tune before.

When baseball writers vote on the greatest players who ever lived, here's the deal: We owe them fairness. We owe them respect. We owe them honesty. We owe them consistency. And we also owe them transparency.

So I take time to examine the Hall credentials of every player on this ballot, because they deserve that. And once I've finished that process, I ask myself the only question that should matter:

Do I think this guy was a Hall of Famer, or not?

I've long believed that if that answer is yes, I should vote for that player every year. I've always been troubled by the idea of: How 'bout I'll vote for this guy this year, then skip next year, but then get back to him the following year. No.

I don't want to be That Voter who votes for, say, Larry Walker nine years in a row but then decides, "I think Derek Jeter should go into the Hall alone this year, so I'm not voting for anybody else." Was he a Hall of Famer or not? That's the question. The only question.

So why did I vote again for Schilling, Bonds, Clemens, Rolen, Wagner, Helton, Kent and Sheffield? That's why. If I thought they were Hall of Famers last year, why would I think they weren't Hall of Famers this year? I'd better have a hell of a thoughtful answer to that question!

That said, I've had to make exceptions from time to time. Life is tricky like that. Omar Vizquel was one of those exceptions this year — for off-the-field reasons I'll discuss shortly.

Then there are those years when three or four obvious first-ballot Hall of Famers show up on the ballot but we can check only 10 boxes. Those years can force us to make ballot-management decisions we should never have to make. There's nothing I hate more than that, but the Hall isn't budging on that Rule of 10. So they give us no other option. The next time that means I have to push a player off my ballot *and that player then calls me* (yep, that's happened), I really should forward the call to Cooperstown.

But that's my process. This year, after I'd voted for my eight holdovers, it left two open spots. One — Big Papi — was easy. The other — Rollins — was so hard, it held up my ballot for days. I'll explain that one in detail shortly.

So let's get into those 10. Starting with ...

David Ortiz

So what's a logical, thoughtful reason *not* to vote for Big Papi? I think there are only two.

One is the PED elephant in this voting booth, which I've written about exhaustively in my [Hall of Fame PED column](#). As I covered in that piece, commissioner Rob Manfred has already told us, in a rare foray into this debate, that in his view the 2003 survey testing is not a valid reason to label David Ortiz as "a cheater."

Obviously, I'm aware that isn't going to stop most of you from thinking what you already think, so fine, keep thinking it. I'm done diving into that pool.

As I wrote, based on what we know and don't know, we should be handling Ortiz's PED whispers the way we handled players such as Pudge Rodriguez and Mike Piazza. And don't forget *we elected both of them*.

So the only other reason not to vote for Ortiz would fall under the header of "DH Hating." David Ortiz was a Designated Hitter in 88.3 percent of his career starts. Which means he gets zero extra credit on the defensive side of the ball. Got that. If that's your baseball reason to avoid checking his name, OK, do what you need to do.

But DH is an actual position. That's a fact, right? It's been a fact for nearly half a century now. And once we almost certainly emerge from this lockout with a DH in both leagues, it's safe to assume it'll be that way forever.

So maybe there's some brilliant logic in that *No DHs in the Hall* voting philosophy that I'm missing. But I don't get it. I once heard the same talk about relief pitchers. And then a relief pitcher (Mariano Rivera) was *the first unanimous Hall of Famer in history*. So I'm just judging the greatest players at every position when I vote. And DH is one of them.

Which means David Ortiz is a Hall of Famer. An easy Hall of Famer. Because ...

HIS PEAK LASTED 15 YEARS! I don't see many other observers who believe Ortiz's peak truly began the year *before* he landed in Boston. But I see 20 homers and a 120 OPS+ in limited playing time in 2002, his final season with the [Twins](#). So I measure his peak years from 2002 to 2016 — during which he mashed 503 home runs, had a .950 OPS and fired off *nearly 300 more extra-base hits* (1,076) than any other left-handed hitter on Earth. That's a decade and a half of incredible dominance.

HE WAS AN EXTRA-BASE-HIT MACHINE! Over those 15 seasons, Big Papi *averaged* 34 home runs and 72 extra-base hits. You know who has never had *any* seasons with 34 homers and 72 extra-base hits? Oh, only [Mookie Betts](#), [Andrew McCutchen](#), [Anthony Rizzo](#), [George Springer](#) or [Justin Turner](#), among many other active stars. But also ... did you know that just two left-handed hitters in AL/NL history ever had more seasons with at least 30 homers and 80 extra-base hits than David Ortiz? He had five of them. The only two left-handed hitters with more? That would be two nobodies named Babe Ruth (nine) and Lou Gehrig (eight).

HE HAD 10 DOMINANT SEASONS! Ortiz had 10 qualifying seasons with an OPS+ of 140 or better. Just nine other left-handed AL/NL hitters in the live-ball era can say that. They were pretty good. One was Barry Bonds. You can learn more about the other eight in the plaque gallery in Cooperstown: Ruth, Gehrig, Stan Musial, Ted Williams, Mel Ott, Jim Thome, George Brett and Reggie Jackson.

HE CRUSHED IT IN OCTOBER! Finally, when I think of Big Papi, the first thing I think about is the month when his legend was born — by which I mean October. Leaving aside all of his freeze-frame moments in the Division Series and ALCS, there's a case to be made that David Ortiz was *the greatest offensive force in the history of the World Series*.

This was a man who towered over three epic, curse-demolishing World Series. He made 59 trips to home plate in those three World Series. He reached base in 34 of them! And also ...

Best career World Series OPS in history*

David Ortiz	1.372
George Springer	1.295
Reggie Jackson	1.212

(*minimum 50 PA)

So does it really even matter that Big Papi wore a glove only six or seven times a year? You'd still be on ridiculously shaky ground to try to argue this man was not one of the most game-changing, franchise-altering hitters of the 21st century. In other words, this is easy. David Ortiz: Hall of Famer.

Jimmy Rollins

I've already taken a much [deeper look at Jimmy Rollins](#), a man who got more hits than any player in the history of a [Phillies](#) franchise that has existed since 1883. And why did I devote that much attention to a player who won't come close to getting elected this year?

Because, as I wrote, there has never been any other shortstop whose career included all of this:

An MVP award ... *and* four Gold Gloves ... *and* more than 2,400 hits ... *and* more than 200 homers ... *and* more than 400 steals ... *and* 857 extra-base hits ... *and* the most hits in the history of his franchise ... *and* the longest hitting streak by a shortstop (38 games) since 1894 ... *and* his role as the energizer centerpiece of a team that won a World Series in the midst of a stretch in which it basically bludgeoned its league for half a decade (2007 through 2011).

But having said all that, I'm still not certain Jimmy Rollins is a Hall of Famer. His below-league-average 95 career OPS+, his below-HOF-average 47.6 Wins Above Replacement and, frankly, most other modern metrics suggest he's not.

So I know what you're thinking: *If you're not certain he's a Hall of Famer, why did you vote for him?*

Perfect question. Here's my two-pronged answer:

(1) Because, as a Philadelphian, I spent so much time watching him play. And until the back end of his career, I felt like I was watching a special player whose impact on great teams isn't properly summed up by the metrics, as much as I respect those metrics. A Phillies coach once told me: "I just look at Jimmy, and I think we're gonna win." I know for a fact Rollins had many, many teammates who felt the same way.

(2) We've had far too many awful examples of one-and-done players who dropped off the ballot way too soon in recent years ([Johan Santana](#), Carlos Delgado, Jim Edmonds, Kenny Lofton, Bernie Williams, David Cone, Lance Berkman, etc.). Frankly, I didn't want Rollins to join that list.

I couldn't be sure, when it came time to vote, that Rollins was going to get the 5 percent necessary to get another spin on this ballot. So in the end, I cast this vote to make sure he did.

I've done that before with other first-timers — most recently, I believe, with Mike Mussina, who went on to get elected. Just part of the ballot-management game we're forced to play between the 5 Percent Rule and the Rule of 10.

If you disagree, hey, sorry. But it gives us all another year to think about a player with a fascinating case. Which means we get to resume this discussion next year at this time.

That's not true, however, of these next three guys. So let's look at ...

Why I still vote for Schilling, Bonds and Clemens

It's Year No. 10 on the ballot for all three of those men. It's not going to end well.

There's a decent chance that Curt Schilling, Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens are about to finish 1-2-3 in the non-Ortiz portion of this vote. But that won't be enough. All three are likely to top

60 percent. But in this election, with the high-jump bar set at 75 percent, that constitutes a rejection.

So for all three, it'll be on to the Today's Game era committee, probably later this year. It should be highly revealing to see how a different group of voters views them. But as for me ...

Why Schilling?

Look, he's not running for mayor. He's in the running for the Baseball Hall of Fame. So, for me, this is a place to tune out all the other noise Curt Schilling generates. It's a place to tune in on his baseball career, which I've felt for a decade was miles above that Hall of Fame line.

Many of my fellow voters can't bring themselves to handle it that way, and that's their right. But I can pretty much guarantee that the folks who wrote the Hall's character-and-integrity clause weren't anticipating there would be any such thing as Twitter. And however objectionable Schilling's comments over the years may have been to many voters and non-voters, I'm not here to elect him to the Hall of Twitter. I'm here to remind you of the on-the-field reasons why Curt Schilling belongs in the Hall of Fame:

- Because he was the most dominant postseason starter I ever covered: 11-2, 2.23 ERA, a WHIP under 1.00 overall — and 4-0 with a 1.37 ERA in five elimination games in which he averaged nearly eight innings a start *and his teams won every one of those games*.
- Because, if his timing had been better, we'd be looking at a three-time Cy Young Award winner. Instead, he's a three-time runner-up whose three most historic seasons had the misfortune of running into even more historic seasons by Randy Johnson (2000 and 2001) and Johan Santana (2004).
- Because he's a pitcher who was so consistently dominating, over every healthy season he ever had, that he finished his career with nine seasons with an ERA+ of 130 or better. That's more than Pedro Martinez, Tom Seaver or Bob Gibson.
- Because he was a strike-throwing machine whose career strikeout/walk ratio (4.38 to 1) ranks No. 1 in the modern era among all pitchers with 3,000 innings or more.

So I cast my vote for *that* Curt Schilling. I've done it for a decade. After this, his Hall of Fame worthiness will be somebody else's decision. He said last year that's [how he prefers it](#). So great. He'll get his wish. But what I wish is that all of this had followed a different path.

Why Bonds and Clemens

Are we still doing this? Hoo boy. Been here, done this so many times with these two men. But here we are again. We're stuck in a moment, and we can't get out of it.

Just a few days ago, I wrote about [what separates Bonds and Clemens](#) from the PED pack. Feel free to delve into those words now if you want more nuance.

So why do I vote for them, knowing what I know? For one thing, because most of their careers came before testing, in an era that nearly everyone believes has already produced Hall of Famers who used something or other. Since we've proven it's impossible for us to guess who did what in that era, I've chosen to vote for the greatest players of that time and let the Hall do whatever it opts to do to sort all that out.

On that note, I think this portion of that PED column presents the reason that overpowers all the reasons not to vote for them:

"There's a persuasive argument that we're talking about the greatest hitter and pitcher not just of their own time but also of the last 100 years. So a Hall of Fame without Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens is a Hall of Fame that fails to tell the story of an unforgettable time in baseball history."

This isn't the Vatican, friends. It's a baseball museum. And what do museums do? They tell the story of a period in time, as accurately and completely as possible.

So if Bonds and Clemens ever do get elected by the Today's Game committee, I urge the Hall to tell their story as accurately and completely as it can. In other words, they might need to include more than just numbers on their Hall of Fame plaques.

Why Rolen and Helton are this ballot's shooting stars

Just the way you once could see the Hall candidacies of Tim Lincecum, Edgar Martinez and Larry Walker gathering energy, that's happening again now. It's happening for Scott Rolen and Todd Helton, two exceptional talents whose road is leading them to Cooperstown. Slowly. Steadily. Deservedly. I've voted for both multiple times. It's now so much easier to see why.

Scott Rolen

I've known Scott Rolen since he was 20 years old. I covered him in Philadelphia as his career was just getting rolling. Even then, it was something to see.

A teammate of Brooks Robinson once told me Rolen was *a better third baseman than Brooks*. Mike Schmidt, owner of more Gold Gloves (10) than any third baseman not named Brooks Robinson (16), told me that Rolen was *a far better defender at third than he ever was*.

That seemed almost sacrilegious at the time. But more than 20 years later, I can't say they were wrong. If you can imagine J.J. Watt playing third base, that's what it was like to watch Scott Rolen patrol his little corner of the field. He devoured baseballs passing through his neighborhood with a fury unlike any other third baseman I've ever watched.

There wasn't a ball hit between the shortstop hole and the Liberty Bell that he didn't think he was going to catch. And if he could catch it, he had the arm strength to throw you out from, well, wherever: the coach's box, Tina Fey's house or the Art Museum steps once scaled by Rocky Balboa. That's how I remember it. And the defensive data backs that up.

Here are Baseball-Reference's rankings of the top three defensive third basemen in AL/NL history, through the prism of most defensive runs above a replacement-level third baseman:

Brooks Robinson: 293.1

Adrián Beltré: 217.7

Scott Rolen: 175.4

Good group! But what people seem to underestimate is how valuable Rolen was on both sides of the ball. Does this sum up his two-way impact vividly enough for you?

Most seasons: Gold Glove, 120 OPS+ at 3B

Schmidt	10
---------	----

Rolen	8
-------	---

Arenado	6
---------	---

Santo	5
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All right, one more thing. The most common reason I hear from voters for why they don't vote for Rolen is some variation of: *He was always hurt*. Hmmm. Are they sure about that?

That may have been true at the tail end of his career, thanks to back issues that were a direct result of the fearless defensive kamikaze he was in his early years. But before that, there was an eight-year stretch (1997-2004) in which he *led every third baseman in the sport* in games started (1,154) and games played (1,148).

So for me, Rolen checks every box a Hall of Fame third baseman ought to check. Glove. Bat. Character. Historic impact at his position. And it's all leading him to an induction weekend in Cooperstown, maybe even as soon as 2023.

Todd Helton

It took 27 seasons into the invention of the artistic, altitudinous ballpark known as Coors Field. But I think we've finally figured out what Coors Field is and, more importantly, what it isn't.

(A) It doesn't turn everybody in a purple cap into Ted Williams. And (B) we can thank Larry Walker for proving that just because you ever made a call from the 303 area code, you're not instantly disqualified from being elected to the Hall of Fame.

Walker's induction day arrived four months ago. It now seems obvious that Todd Helton's day is just over the horizon.

Have you ever spent more than a 90-minute airport layover in Colorado? If you have, you know how physically challenging life at altitude can be. Well, Helton spent 17 years playing baseball in Colorado. So nobody knows that better than he does.

Helton pushed himself to play more than 150 games in nine different seasons. Only two NL first basemen in the last 50 years have more 150-game seasons: Steve Garvey (11) and Adrian Gonzalez (10). And they didn't have to play half those games a mile above the rest of Planet Earth.

But Todd Helton has gotten no credit for the physical demands all those games at altitude exacted on his body. Instead, his greatness has often been minimized by a torrent of anti-Coors bias that isn't supported by the facts.

The facts say Helton finished his career with a spectacular .316/.414/.539 slash line. Can I take a moment to explain just how spectacular that is? *Everyone else* in AL/NL history with that slash line and at least 5,000 plate appearances is a Hall of Famer:

Ty Cobb
Rogers Hornsby
Ted Williams
Babe Ruth
Lou Gehrig
Stan Musial
Jimmie Foxx

Nobody else on that list has played in a major-league game in nearly 60 years. And no one holds *that* against *them*. But that means nobody else on that list has played at Coors, either. And Helton has now spent four years on the ballot trying to power through all the off-base assumptions people have made about his home park.

Aren't we lucky, though, that we live in an age that gives us tools to measure the impact (and non-impact) of Coors? So I used Baseball-Reference's indispensable Stathead tool to do a little measuring.

There's Adjusted OPS+, which accounts for every player's ballpark and era. Here is where Helton's 133 career OPS+ ranks among all retired AL/NL first basemen in the modern era with at least 2,000 games played:

Gehrig: 179
Foxx: 163
Helton: 133

Or there is the Baseball-Reference's Stats Neutralizer tool, which allows us to take any player and transport him to a different time, place and home park. So I used it to transport Helton into the time, place and park conditions of another 21st-century Hall of Fame first baseman, Jeff Bagwell.

If Helton had played his whole career under the same conditions as Bagwell's 2000 [Astros](#), with half his games in the park now known as Minute Maid, would you even be able to tell the difference between Helton's actual Coors-aided stats and these stats, through this magical Bagwellian filter? I couldn't!

Helton	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	HITS
Actual	.316	.414	.539	369	2,519
Houston Filter	.317	.415	.539	364	2,524

Or we can keep this simple and just look at Helton's .855 career OPS in games played *everywhere except Coors Field*. Here's a fun list of five of the many players from the last 25 years whose road OPS is lower than that:

Mookie Betts: .853

Ken Griffey Jr.: .849

Jose Altuve: .815

Derek Jeter: .799

Ichiro Suzuki: .751

Two years ago, Larry Walker took a sledgehammer to the Coors myths and convinced us he was a Hall of Famer. He has a thank you coming in July 2023 or 2024, when Todd Helton joins him on the Cooperstown stage and begins delivering a speech that's already long overdue.

The Rest of My Ballot

I've written in other years about Billy Wagner, Jeff Kent and Gary Sheffield. So let me concisely explain why I checked their names.

Billy Wagner

What does a Hall of Fame reliever look like if he's *not* Mariano Rivera? He'd better look pretty frigging dominant. Well, check out Billy Wagner. Is *this* dominant enough for you?

Opponents batting average .187 lowest since 1900

WHIP	.998	best in live ball era
ERA	2.31	best by LHP in live ball era
K/9 IP	11.92	best all time

(*minimum 900 IP; source: Baseball-Reference's [Stathead](#))

There's also this tremendous nugget, tweeted recently by our friends from Codify Baseball:

No pitcher in baseball history ever struck out more batters in any given inning than Billy Wagner in the ninth!

936 K's Billy Wagner	9 th inning
845 Nolan Ryan	1 st inning
843 Nolan Ryan	2 nd inning
838 Mariano Rivera	9 th inning
838 Trevor Hoffman	9 th inning

OK then. Any more questions?

Jeff Kent

What does a Hall of Fame second baseman look like? The writers have elected only three of them whose careers have begun in the last 50 years: Ryne Sandberg, Craig Biggio and Roberto Alomar. None of them are very Jeff Kent-like.

So Kent's only Cooperstown path is to fit some other Hall of Fame mold, by staking a claim to historic offensive greatness at his position. Well, guess what? He clearly has.

More home runs than any AL/NL second baseman in history (351). ... More RBIs than any AL/NL second baseman in history (1,428). ... More 100-RBI seasons (eight) than any AL/NL second baseman in history. ... Highest slugging percentage (.509) by any second baseman since Rogers Hornsby retired *more than 100 years ago*.

I recognize that Kent was no leatherworking wizard. I also recognize that many voters barely acknowledge RBIs as a legitimate stat these days. But there's enough here, in my view, to fit that definition of historically great. So if I've voted for Jeff Kent before whenever I've had room on my ballot, I'm not stopping now.

Gary Sheffield

Full disclosure: Before last year, I'd never voted for Gary Sheffield, for lots of reasons: Overcrowded ballot ... the portion of the game [that involved that glove on his hand](#) ... his Bonds/BALCO connection, never fully explained ... the odd way he bounced through eight teams, including ugly/messy/controversial departures from at least four of them.

But let's get back to that concept of historic greatness. You know how many players in AL/NL history have pounded 500 home runs and matched or beaten Sheffield's career slash line (.292/.393/.514)? That would be just eight.

Six of them are Hall of Famers: Babe Ruth, Mickey Mantle, Ted Williams, Mel Ott, Jimmie Foxx and Frank Thomas. The other two are Bonds and Manny Ramirez, whose exclusion from Cooperstown sure isn't because their numbers were a problem.

Gary Sheffield was as terrifying a presence at home plate — bat wagging, eyeballs glaring — as any of them. What I see clearly now is that he had the Hall of Fame numbers to match every bit of That Look.

But now, let me take a little time to discuss a handful of players I didn't vote for.

Why I stopped voting for Vizquel

Once I cast a Hall of Fame vote for any player, I hate the whole idea of yanking that vote away. It's happened a few times because the ballot got way too overloaded with historically significant players. It has almost never happened because of, well, anything else.

But in Omar Vizquel's case, that anything else was too disturbing to allow me to check that box next to his name. Not this year.

I wrestled with my conscience, then voted for Vizquel a year ago, even after *The Athletic's* [reporting on domestic-violence allegations](#) made against him by his now ex-wife. That was uncomfortable enough. Since then, he has also been sued for sexual harassment by a former minor-league batboy. The details in that case are alarming too. The White Sox fired him after one year of managing in their system.

So it's time to take a step back, let that lawsuit play itself out and await the findings of [Major League Baseball's](#) investigation. But it seems almost unimaginable now that I could change my mind and vote for him again someday.

Why not A-Rod, Manny, Andruw or other first timers

And now a quick word about some of the other great players I didn't vote for.

ALEX RODRIGUEZ: I explained this in detail in [my PED column](#). One of the most talented players I've ever laid eyes on. But I place players whose PED crimes came after the dawn of testing and discipline in a whole different category. And A-Rod got pounded with an emphatic 162-game suspension, lied about PED use multiple times and embarrassed himself by suing the [Yankees](#) and his sport, while paying his "fans" to protest outside the courthouse. I can't get past that.

MANNY RAMIREZ: This will sound familiar after that A-Rod rant. But Manny's case as one of the great right-handed batsmiths of modern times is busted by multiple PED offenses and all sorts of outrageous, unprofessional theatrics.

ANDRUW JONES: Andruw remains my toughest call. Early in his career, there was nothing more breathtaking than the sight of this guy gliding around center field in Atlanta, transforming all those gappers into outs. What stops me from voting for him is that cliff his career hurtled over in his 30s.

Between ages 30 and 35, Jones' total Wins Above Replacement, according to Baseball-Reference, was a horrendous 4.7 — *over six seasons*. You know how many Hall of Fame outfielders have fewer Wins Above Replacement after turning 30? Yessir. That would be zero.

I plowed through this in a lot more depth in [last year's ballot column](#). And I still thought about Jones' candidacy long and hard. But it's that 30-something portion of his career that still troubles me enough that I still can't convince myself to check his name.

JOE NATHAN: As a longtime Billy Wagner voter, there was a time in this process when I thought I'd wind up voting for Nathan, too. Maybe he wasn't quite as unhittable as Wagner. But you didn't have to watch the Twins every night to know that Joe Nathan was one of the very best closers of his era.

Over the 10 seasons from 2004-13, Nathan was a remarkably close second to that Mariano guy in just about every metric we use to measure a reliever's work: Saves, WAR, ERA+, Opponent OPS and WHIP. And he actually had a better strikeout rate and lower opponent average than the Great Mariano.

It's a shame Nathan didn't discover his bullpen niche before age 29. If he'd had even two more dominating seasons, I suspect he'd have crossed my Hall of Fame threshold. Unfortunately, he fell just short.

You should also know there were quite a few other first-time candidates I took a long, analytical look at: Mark Teixeira, Carl Crawford, Ryan Howard, Prince Fielder, Tim Lincecum and A.J. Pierzynski. I bet their careers, in almost every case, were better than many of you think.

But I remind myself every year, as I study players like them, that it's never an insult to say anyone was "not quite a Hall of Famer." These are men who may never give a speech on

Induction Sunday. But if they even made it this far, they deserve to call themselves one of the very best players of their — or any — time.

SOME FUN FACTS FROM BLEACHER REPORT VIA A SUBSCRIBER

CONTRIBUTION—KEEP THE INTERESTING STUFF YOU COME ACROSS

COMING—THANKS.

Fact: Jimmy Piersall celebrated his 100th home run by running the bases backwards.

Jimmy Piresall was eccentric to say the least; his life became the basis for the book & movie *Fear Strikes Out*, which chronicles his battle with bipolar disorder.

Some of Piersall's stunts include, walking up to bat wearing a Beatles wig, talking to the monument of Babe Ruth at Yankee Stadium, and climbing a grandstand roof to heckle an umpire.

The granddaddy of all his stunts occurred while playing for the Mets; in the fifth inning of a game against the Phillies, Piersall hit the 100th home run of his career, and promptly ran the bases in correct order...just facing backwards.

Needless to say, Mets manager Casey Stengel was not amused; Piersall was quickly given the pink slip.

Fact: Don Baylor played in three straight World Series....for three different teams.

Don Baylor was a world-class manager and a very good player for a number of teams, winning the MVP in 1979 and three silver slugger awards. Baylor is regarded as one of the most underrated players of all-time.

Baylor made the World Series three times in his career, and they just happened to be consecutively, in 1986 (Red Sox), 1987 (Twins), and 1988 (Athletics). Only the Twins won him a championship in 1987, a year he was seldom used.

Fact: Bobby Richardson won the World Series MVP for a losing team.

The team he played for was the Yankees in the historic 1960 World Series. Coming off a down year the Yankees chewed up the league, and going into the World Series against the Pirates; people had already given the Yanks another title.

It was not meant to be, as we all know the script: Bill Mazeroski hit a home run to win it for the Pirates and pull off a major upset. Richardson stole the show, however; batting .367, driving in 12, and hitting a grand slam.

Richardson is the only player to win an MVP on the World Series runner-up.

Fact: Gaylord Perry hit a home run after his manager said they'd put a man on the moon first.

Debuting in 1962, Perry played in an era where pitchers weren't only expected to pitch but hit as well.

Talking to reporters over his pitcher's inability to hit, San Francisco Giants manager Alvin Dark joked "*They'll put a man on the moon before Gaylord Perry hits a home run.*"

During a game on July 20, 1969; a mere 20 minutes after Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon, Perry stepped up to bat and hit his first career home run.

Fact: Ken Ash won a game on only one pitch.

On July 27, 1930 Reds pitcher Ken Ash was brought into a game against the Cubs with two on and no outs. Facing what any reliever dreads (a runner in scoring position and no outs), he delivered the pitch and the Cubs promptly delivered a triple play.

Ash was pinch-hit for in the bottom of the inning, and the Reds staged a rally to win the game 6-5. Thus getting the no-name Ash into the history books as the only man to win a game on only one pitch.

Fact: The Garbank brothers finished a season with the exact same batting average.

If you've never heard of the Garbanks, don't feel bad; 99.9 percent of fans haven't, either. The year was 1944, and the brothers who would go down in history were Bob and Mike Garbank.

Mike played for the Yankees while Bob played for the Athletics, Mike played in over 80 games while Bob only got in 18, yet both posted a respectable .261 average.

The odd occurrences don't stop there; they were both catchers in the American League, and they both threw out 39 percent of would-be basestealers in their careers!

Did I mention they almost had the same number of games played for their careers?

Fact: Clarence Blethen injured himself with his own false teeth.

In 1923, Clarence Blethen was a rookie pitcher for the Red Sox; he also happened to wear false teeth. When he was pitching, Clarence thought that he would look meaner if he took his teeth out, which he would place in his back pocket.

Running the bases one day, Clarence forgot about his false teeth in his pocket. As he went to steal second, his teeth clamped down, thus making Clarence Blethen the only man to be injured by biting himself in the butt.

Fact: Jack McCarthy threw out three runners at home plate in the same inning.

While playing for the Cubs in 1905, outfielder Jack McCarthy was possibly a little angry with his team's inability to get anyone out. So McCarthy decided to take matters into his own hands.

He threw out not one, not two but three runners trying to score. It is such an amazing feat that nobody has come close to matching it in the 108 years since, and unless the outs per inning expand to four, no one will ever have a shot at eclipsing him.

Fact: No one had an RBI in the 1968 All-Star game.

In 1968, the All-Star Game was played indoors for the first time at Houston's famous Astrodome. In the bottom of the first, the National League put a runner on third with no outs. Willie McCovey then stepped up and hit into a double play that scored the runner on third.

After Hank Aaron walked, Ron Santo was retired on a ground-out, the game remained 1-0 for the remaining eight innings, and since no RBI is awarded on a fielder's choice; the NL won without an RBI.

Oh yeah, who was the runner on third base?....Willie Mays, who won the MVP.

Fact: The Dodgers and Cubs once traded their entire minor-league teams.

Late in the 1957 season, the Dodgers were getting ready to move out west (unknown to their fans), and the Cubs were going nowhere (as usual).

Each team deciding they needed some new blood down on the farm (plus the Cubs farm team was already in Los Angeles), traded not one, two, or even three players, but the entire 25-man roster.

While it certainly wasn't the strangest trade ever, it definitely took the title for the biggest!

Fact: Joel Youngblood recorded a hit for two different teams in two different cities on the same day

Joel Youngblood was a center fielder for the Mets; in 1982, they were playing the Cubs in Chicago, Youngblood struck out his first at-bat but knocked a single his next.

After the Cubbies had retired the Mets in the top of the inning, Youngblood was informed he was traded to the Expos (now defunct), he arrived in Philadelphia (where the Expos were playing the Phillies) mid-way through the game.

Coming in as a pinch hitter, Youngblood recorded his second hit of a very long day!

Fact: Warren Spahn had as many career wins as hits.

Warren Spahn is one of the greatest pitchers in the history of baseball, winning 20 games 13 times to go with a Cy Young in 1957.

"Spahny" was no slouch with the bat, either, as he belted 35 career home runs with 189 RBI and a .194 lifetime average.

Spahn recorded his first win in 1946; 21 years later he retired with 363 wins; his first hit came four years prior in 1942, and when he retired, his career number of hits was...363.

Fact: Al Woods hit a home run in his first at-bat in the Blue Jays' first game

Al Woods was a rookie for the expansion Toronto Blue Jays. On April 7, 1977, the Blue Jays played their first game, which they incredibly won.

However, that was not the story of the game; in the bottom of the fifth with the Jays holding a 5-4 lead, Woods stepped up for the very first time and blasted a two-run home run.

It was the only time a player hit a home run in his and his team's debut.

Fact: The Minnesota Twins turned two triple plays in the same game.

On July 17, 1990, the Twins entered the history books when they turned the ultimate rally killer twice!

Playing the Red Sox, the first triple-dip occurred in the bottom of the fourth inning, and they did it again in the bottom of the eighth.

Incredibly, they both occurred in the same fashion of 3B-2B-1B; even more incredibly, the Twins actually managed to lose the game!

The next day, the Twins and Red Sox set even more history: they combined for the most double plays ever, a game the Twins also managed to lose.

JOE POSNANSKI ON UNANIMOUS (AND ALMOST UNANIMOUS) MVP'S

It's interesting. Willie Mays was never a unanimous MVP. Neither was Ted Williams, Joe DiMaggio, Stan Musial, Henry Aaron, Roberto Clemente, Carl Yastrzemski, Albert Pujols, etc. It's a pretty rare thing — it has happened only 16 times, the last being Shohei Ohtani in 2021.

I thought it would be fun to go down the list to see what seasons had unanimous MVP awards (and, as a bonus, throw in a few seasons where the player ALMOST was unanimous).

And you know what? It is fun. Here you go — all the unanimous MVP seasons:

1953: Al Rosen

— Totally deserved, Rosen just about won the Triple Crown in '53 along with some pretty stellar third base defense. He missed the Triple Crown, by the way, because his .336 batting average was .0016 points behind Mickey Vernon — one gained hit by Rosen or one lost hit by Vernon would have given Rosen the TC.

It's fun to look, by the way, if Vernon would have lost one hit.

Vernon: .33552632 average

Rosen: .33555927 average

The battle title would have gone to the FIFTH decimal point.

Anyway, Al Rosen was clearly the league MVP in '53, and he was unanimously chosen so.

1956: Mickey Mantle

Mantle DID win the Triple Crown and he posted 11.2 WAR and nobody was even close.

ALMOST: Frank Robinson in 1961

Robinson finished one vote shy of unanimity — and that vote, bizarrely, went to his teammate Joey Jay, who finished 21-10 with a 3.53 ERA. The Jay thing makes sense on one level because

1961 was the year the Reds surprised everybody by winning the pennant and the MVP balloting in those days was heavily influenced by team success.* But it makes no sense on any other level since (1) Robinson was on the Reds and (2) Jay wasn't especially close to being the best *pitcher* in the league — he finished sixth among NL pitchers in B-R WAR that year — much less the best overall player.

**Dick Young used to call the award the MVPW — the Most Valuable Pennant Winner.*

ALMOST: Zoilo Versalles in 1965

Versalles has often been singled out among the worst players to win the MVP award, but it isn't fair — he was terrific in '65, leading the league in runs, doubles and triples and playing Gold Glove defense at shortstop. Looking back, I feel sure he was the right choice for MVP and I don't really see anyone who was all that close to him. The closest was probably his teammate, Tony Oliva, who got the one first-place vote that Versalles missed.*

Fun fact: Versalles credited a Twins coach for his success. Can you name that coach? It was — Billy Martin!

Frank Robinson, 1966

Another Triple Crown winner with the unanimous vote. Can't really see anybody else that year who had an especially compelling MVP case.

Orlando Cepeda, 1967

Here's the first real head-scratcher — how did the voters ALL think Cepeda was MVP in '67? I don't mean to denigrate his season, it was obviously very good — .325/.399/.524, led the league in RBIs — but it so vividly wasn't as good as Roberto Clemente's season (Clemente hit .357), it wasn't as good as Henry Aaron's season (Aaron led the league with 39 homers and 113 runs), it really wasn't as good as Ron Santo's season (.300/.395/.512, Gold Glove defense at third).

But the '67 Cardinals ran away with the National League so it HAD to be a Cardinal. Those were the rules in 1967. That team had a lot of MVP candidates — Tim McCarver (who finished second), Lou Brock (who finished 7th), Julian Javier (who finished ninth), Curt Flood (who

finished 13th) and pitchers Nelson Briles and Dick Hughes (who finished 15th and 17th, respectively). But Cepeda had the best season of that group so I guess in the 1967 way of thinking, he had to be the MVP.

This really was a Dick Young MVPW special.

Cepeda, incidentally, became the first National Leaguer to unanimously win the MVP award.

ALMOST: Carl Yastrzemski in 1967

If you get *The Baseball 100* (remember you can get an inscribed copy from Rainy Day Books!) you can get the full story of how Yaz won the Triple Crown in 1967 and had what can be argued to be the greatest season in MLB history but did not win the MVP unanimously. One voter, incredibly, chose Cesar Tovar.

The Baseball 100 ~ Hardcover Autographed by Joe Posnanski | Rainy Day Books

1968: Denny McLain

I don't actually think McLain should have been MVP in '68. Yaz was clearly more valuable, and I feel pretty sure that Luis Tiant was a better pitcher that year too. But he won 30 games — and 30 wins is 30 wins. When someone does something that is a crazy outlier like this, the voters will respond (see Ohtani, 2021).

1973: Reggie Jackson

A great season for Reggie — he led the league in runs, homers, RBIs and slugging percentage. WAR actually seems to prefer Bobby Grich's season slightly because of all the things Grich did in the field, on the bases and at the plate, but Grich hit .251 that season and, as such had 0.0% chance of winning the MVP. He finished 19th in the voting. It was Reggie and Reggie alone.*

*MVP voters liked Reggie a lot, actually. They gave him MVP votes in 13 different seasons, and on a couple of different occasions he received votes that prevented other players from winning the MVP vote unanimously.

1980: Mike Schmidt

Just a sensational year from Schmitt — led league with 48 homers, 121 RBIs and a .624 slugging percentage. You could argue his only real MVP competitor that year was his teammate, Steve Carlton, who went 24-9 with a 2.34 ERA and 286 Ks.

ALMOST (sort of): George Brett in 1980

Brett didn't come all that close to unanimity — he received only 17 of the 27 first-place votes — but I'm including him here because I was a bit surprised. I mean, Brett's 1980 season is an all-timer. He did almost hit .400 for the pennant-winning Royals. But I did not take into account that Brett missed more than 50 games with injury that season, so Reggie, Goose Gossage and Willie Wilson all got first-place votes as well.

ALMOST: Robin Yount in 1982

Yount was incredible in '82. He hit .331/.379/.578 — that slugging percentage led the league, as did his 210 hits and 46 doubles. Plus he won the shortstop Gold Glove. Plus he led the Brewers to the pennant. Nobody was even close to him, and he still fell one vote shy of unanimity — that vote going to Reggie Jackson, who had what was for him nothing more than an average season (.275/.375/.532, league-leading 39 homers).

That non-Yount vote was so odd that the voter — Toronto's sportswriter and horserace handicapper Jim Golla — was asked to explain his vote (he not only didn't vote for Yount, he put him FOURTH), which he was more than happy to do.

His explanation is a classic of the genre:

"I base my MVP selection on a method I use for handicapping horses. Can the horse, or player, carry the weight of a team the distance? Can he carry a team an entire season?"

“Does he do something special in the stretch? Does he lift himself up to the occasion and maybe make the other horse or players around him that much better by forcing the pace? To me the answer to all those questions was ‘Yes’ with Reggie Jackson. It wasn’t with Robin Yount.”

This whole thing is so wonderfully scrambled and illogical on its face — I love how he keeps saying “horse or player” as if they’re same thing — but on top of that he was so clearly wrong about Yount. The Brewers had a two-week stretch in September when the Orioles were making a run to try and take the division title away from them. This was the critical moment. And the Brewers went 10-3 to put the title away.

During those 13 games, Yount hit .370/.436/.667 with 19 RBIs. I don’t know, that seems pretty special to me.

1988: Jose Canseco

As mentioned, special and rare achievements (Triple Crowns, 30-game seasons, having a dominant season as both a hitter and pitcher) tend to get MVP voters excited. In 1988, Canseco had baseball’s first ever 40-40 season. It’s hard to fully express how much that meant in ’88. Everybody was pretty consumed by homer-stolen base numbers — the 30-30 season had taken on enormous importance.

And now a guy had a FORTY-FORTY season. Incredible!

Canseco led the league in homers, RBIs and slugging too.

And because of those shiny numbers, nobody really noticed that Wade Boggs — who hit .366 with 125 walks — was probably the more valuable player.

ALMOST: Barry Bonds, 1990

Bonds fell one vote shy — that vote going to his teammate Bobby Bonilla. His reaction to falling one vote short of unanimity was, actually, quite touching.

“I’d spit it in half if I could,” he said. “I wish I could share it with Bobby. To me, he’s just as much the MVP as I am.”

Nice, right? In truth, Bonds was incredibly gracious after winning that MVP award. People forget that he could be like that. This is what he said:

“I think I had an MVP season. This was just an unreal year. I don’t know if I can ever do this again, but I can tell my kids and grandkids that for six months, I was up there with the best of them.”

How much better it all might have been if he’d let us see that side of him more often.

1993: Frank Thomas

It’s funny, at the time this unanimous vote made perfect sense. Thomas was an incredible blend of power and plate discipline, he was larger than life, he led the White Sox to the playoffs, his unanimous MVP selection felt pretty appropriate.

Looking back, however: I have absolutely no idea how it happened. He didn’t lead the league in anything that year, not homers (Juan Gonzalez), not RBIs (Albert Belle), not runs (Rafael Palmeiro), not batting average (John Olerud), not on-base percentage (Olerud), not slugging percentage (Gonzalez).

Looking back,. I have no idea whatsoever how he won the award over Ken Griffey Jr., who hit more home runs, played an incredible centerfield and was the very face of baseball.

Ken Griffey Jr: 8.8/8.4 WAR

Frank Thomas: 6.2/6.3 WAR

I guess you could say that maybe team success made the difference there since the White Sox won their division and the Mariners were a .500-or-so team. But then what of Olerud? His Blue Jays won the division, and he too had a significantly better season.

John Olerud: 7.8/8.1 WAR

Frank Thomas: 6.2/6.3 WAR

This isn’t necessarily the most baffling of the unanimous MVPs, but it has not aged well at all.

1994: Jeff Bagwell

Strike year, so it's not that interesting — Bagwell was obviously on his way to an all-time monster season with his 1.201 OPS and 116 RBIs in 110 games. But he got hurt, so even without the strike, this is where his season would have ended.

1996: Ken Caminiti

It was certainly a fine season from Caminiti (.326/.408/.621 and he won a Gold Glove) but Barry Bonds was so much better, and a bunch of other guys such as Mike Piazza, Ellis Burks, Jeff Bagwell, Gary Sheffield, Chipper Jones, Bernard Gilkey, heck, Lance Johnson were probably just about as good.

Other than Bonds, Caminiti was as worthy an MVP as any of them ... but how in the world was this a unanimous choice when so many players had similar years? It came down to the Padres being surprise division winners after finishing with a losing record in 1995. When a team comes out of nowhere like that, the MVP voters tend to be super-impressed.

1997: Ken Griffey Jr.

Finally. It took a year when Griffey hit 56 home runs and led the league in runs, RBIs and slugging, but finally Griffey won the MVP award after several near-misses. The only real contender that year, I think, was Roger Clemens, who won pitching's triple crown and had an almost-impossible-to-believe 12.1/10.7 WAR.

But this was before WAR came along and voters have always been reluctant to give starting pitchers the MVP (plus they already gave an MVP to Clemens back in '86).

ALMOST: Sammy Sosa in 1998

It's kind of funny looking back — the home run was the only story of 1998, it was covered like, perhaps, no other baseball story ever. It was all anybody could talk about. And so it was no secret that Mark McGwire won the home run race.

It was also no secret that McGwire was a more valuable hitter that year because he walked NINETY MORE TIMES than Sosa.*

**McGwire's RBat that season — WAR offensive Runs above average — was 87; Sosa's 54. It really wasn't close.*

And yet, it seemed like the voters almost all had the same epiphany that, despite how it might look, Sosa was actually MORE VALUABLE. How? Well, the evidence seemed to be that Sosa's Cubs were better than the Cardinals (they ended up getting the wild-card spot) and that Sosa was a better fielder who had more RBIs and runs scored. And so 30 out of 32 voters chose Sosa for MVP.

Just a weird bit of groupthink, I guess. McGwire, in my view, clearly had the better season.

2002: Barry Bonds

It is kind of wild that during Bonds' absurd four-year MVP stretch — he set the home run and slugging records in one of those years, set the on-base record in two of those years, set all sorts of intentional walk records in three of those years — the only time he was elected unanimously was 2002.

I mean, don't get me wrong — 2002 was a bananas season. Bonds hit .370 that year with a .582 on-base percentage. He was intentionally walked 68 times. His 1.381 OPS was the highest in baseball history up to that point.

But ... he wasn't unanimous the year before when he hit 73 home runs (Sammy Sosa got two votes). And he wasn't unanimous in 2004 when he was intentionally walked 120 times (he actually finished eight votes shy that year — Adrian Beltré, Pujols and Scott Rolen all got first-place votes).

Just kind of interesting.

ALMOST: Joey Votto in 2010

Votto fell one vote shy — that vote going to Albert Pujols who basically had an identical season to Joey. This is a good opportunity to share with you a text exchange I had with Votto a couple of days ago;

2014: Mike Trout

By now, people started having access to WAR — and since Trout had led the league in WAR the previous two seasons but had not won the MVP award, it was so clearly his turn. The funny thing is he actually DID NOT lead the league in Baseball-Reference WAR in 2014 — it's the only season between 2012 and 2016 that he didn't.

Corey Kluber led the league in bWAR in 2014. Klu-bot finished 11th in the MVP voting.

2015: Bryce Harper

Harper really was, more or less, the only choice in 2015, when he led the league in runs, homers, on-base percentage and slugging percentage. It looked like he might win every MVP award for the next decade.

Instead, he bounced back and forth between good years and so-so years and bad years ... until 2021. He wasn't as good this past season as he was in 2015, but he was plenty good and still won his second MVP award.*

**Being honest and a big Harper fan, I still probably would have voted for Juan Soto.*

ALMOST: Kris Bryant in 2016

Somebody voted for Daniel Murphy instead of Bryant, which was weird. I mean, Murphy had a great season, he hit .347 and led the league with a .595 slugging percentage. But considering both offense and defense, he surely wasn't as valuable as Bryant ... but even more to the point, that year was SO ABOUT the Chicago Cubs, I just wonder how anybody passed on Kris Bryant that year.

2021: Shohei Ohtani

It was a season unlike any other in baseball history, and, as mentioned, such seasons get a lot of love from MVP voters.

But it's almost like Shohei was his own category rather than the Most Valuable Player. He was a force as a hitter, bashing 46 home runs AND a league-leading eight triples, but Vlad Guerrero Jr. had what looks to me like a significantly better offensive season.

And Ohtani was a force as a pitcher, striking out 156 batters in 130 innings. But he wasn't anywhere close to the best pitcher in the league; he didn't get a single Cy Young vote, even way downballot.

Add it up, absolutely, nobody can match the value. But it's just a really odd mathematical equation — superb hitter + excellent pitcher = MVP. Nobody else is in that particular formula. And so I'm a little surprised that there wasn't one voter who cut against the grain and voted for Guerrero Jr.; you could argue that he was enough of a better hitter that the pitching didn't quite make up the gap.

Then again, I'm not all that surprised. We all LOVE Shohei Ohtani, he's one of the best things to happen to MLB in years. and I imagine nobody wants to be THAT person.

A NATIONAL ANTHEM ANSWER FOR JON STEWART

Why do fans stand? The tradition dates back to the 1918 World Series.

(from WSJ via a newsletter subscriber)

The other day Jon Stewart questioned why fans at sports events stand for the national anthem. "Does anyone know when that started?" he asked. "It's such a weird ritual."

The custom has its roots in the 1918 World Series between the Boston Red Sox and the Chicago Cubs. There was reduced interest in baseball, so the Cubs were interested in tying the opening game to wartime patriotism. Accordingly, during the seventh-inning stretch, a band began to play the national anthem.

Red Sox third baseman Fred Thomas, who was on a brief furlough from the Navy, immediately snapped to attention and saluted. The crowd noticed and began to stand and sing. When the band finished, there was an enthusiastic roar, and the Cubs management was quick to realize what had happened. When the series moved to Boston, the Red Sox also had the anthem played, and thus tied the knot between the national pastime and patriotic emotions. In time, the anthem was moved to the start of games, and the live band has given way to some lovely and some cacophonous performances.

One reason the tradition has lasted is that most of us find rituals to be rich and rewarding. My father always stood when a woman entered the room, and his Victorian manners and respect have led me to believe in the symbolism of the standing gesture.

Patriotism isn't a political policy; a government isn't a nation. Is it possible Mr. Stewart is ignoring the essence of solid citizenship by confusing patriotic gestures and symbols with political messages?

Standing is a luxury I no longer have. But to honor my country, I doff my cap and sit quietly in my wheelchair while thinking of those who made this into the noblest of nations, in which Mr. Stewart is free to ask his irreverent question.

Mr. Vincent was commissioner of baseball, 1989-92.