

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

1.22.2023

Good morning baseball fans,

Something to make you feel good on a cold winter morning--23 days 'til pitchers and catchers report.

This week an excellent piece from Jayson Stark on the impact of new rules, Hall of Fame stuff as we come up on Tuesday's announcements, stolen bases by decade and trivia.

Enjoy.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE

Three questions in ascending difficulty—good luck. Answers below.

I am a three-time All-Star, won the '07 NL MVP Award, four Gold Gloves and a Silver Slugger.

I was part of five straight NL East titles, two NL pennants ('08, '09) and the World Series ('08).

I am among the 19 players with at least 2,000 career games at shortstop, rank third in home runs, behind **Cal Ripken Jr.** (431) and **Derek Jeter** (260). Fourth and fifth on the list? **Barry Larkin** (198) and **Alan Trammell** (185), both Hall of Famers.

I am one of 11 players, and the only shortstop, in MLB history to hit at least 200 home runs and steal more than 400 bases. My 81.74% stolen base rate is the best of the group.

I hit 231 home runs and 470 stolen bases. Only four players had more homers and steals in their careers: **Barry Bonds**, **Rickey Henderson**, **Joe Morgan** and **Paul Molitor**.

I am one of six primary shortstops with at least 800 career extra base hits. The other five are in the Hall of Fame.

I am one of 13 players with at least 500 doubles, 100 triples and 200 home runs. Eleven of them are in the HOF.

I am one of only four players to hit at least 30 doubles and 20 home runs and steal at least 30 bases in four different seasons.

I am one of only two players to record at least 30 doubles, 20 triples and 30 homers in the same season. Hall of Fame first baseman **Jim Bottomley** also did it, 79 years earlier. **Willie Mays** is the only other player to hit 20 triples and 30 home runs in a season.

I am one of the four members of the 20/20/20/20 club: meaning 20-plus doubles, triples, homers and steals in a season, the only player to do that while also tallying 200 hits.

Who am I?

Bullet Joe Bush started World Series games on the mound for three teams—1913 & 14 Philadelphia A's, 1918 Boston Red Sox and 1922 & 23 Yankees.

Two other pitchers started World Series games for three different teams. Both right handers.

1984 Tigers, 1991 Twins, 1992 Blue Jays

2002 Angels, 2013 Red Sox, 2016 Cubs

22 pitchers have won the MVP award since 1911, three of them twice. Three franchises have had four pitchers win the MVP. Lets see how many of the sixteen you can come up with.

2014 Dodgers lefty starter

1963 Dodgers lefty starter, Hall of Fame

1956 Dodgers righty starter, lost games in 1948-55-56 World Series

1924 Dodgers righty starter, Hall of Fame

2011 Tigers righty starter, 3 Cy Youngs

1984 Tigers lefty reliever, 32 saves for World Series champs

1968 Tigers, the last pitcher to win 30 games in a season

1944-45 Tigers, along with **Walter Johnson** and **Carl Hubbell** 2x MVP.

1992 A's, Hall of Famer with 197 wins, 390 saves

1971 A's lefty starter, pitched for 3 Oakland World Series winners

1952 A's lefty starter, went 21-4 in his only 20-win season

1931 A's lefty starter, 300 game winner, Hall of Fame

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

Last week's Records Unlikely to be Broken piece generated a couple of responses:

Most Career Outfield Assists

(449) **Tris Speaker** (1907-1928). Many people believe that he was the greatest centerfielder ever. Played shallow and went back as well as anyone. Next closest was **Roberto Clemente** with 266 lifetime assists (1955-1973). Only four active players have more than 70 career OF assists—**Starling Marte** 92, **Andrew McCutcheon** 79, **Bryce Harper** 78, **Jayson Heyward** 73. All a very long way behind Speaker.

Triples

Last week we introduced **Chief Wilson's** 36 triples in 1912. Wilson never again hit half as many triples as he did in this historic year, pointing to how difficult this kind of campaign would be. No one hit more than nine triples in 2022. A subscriber came back with career triples leader **Wahoo Sam Crawford of the Detroit Tigers is the all-time career leader in triples with 309**. The Hall of Famer broke in with the Cincinnati Reds, but played most of his career—and hit most of his triples—for the Detroit Tigers. Three other Hall of Famers—Crawford's teammate **Ty Cobb** (297), **Honus Wagner** (252) and **Jake Beckley** (244)—rank second, third and fourth in career triples. Cobb is the all-time American League leader in triples and Wagner the all-time NL leader.

Only 8 active players have 50 or more career triples led by **Dexter Fowler** with 82, That's a LONG way from 309.

The Cards better win this year. Four St. Louis starting pitchers — **Adam Wainwright, Miles Mikolas, Jack Flaherty and Jordan Montgomery** —are all free agents after this season.

Last year 1495 players appeared in an MLB game. entries. Ten years ago it was 1185 players. 26% in a decade seems like a lot of injuries and churn.

As a former play-by-play announcer I got a laugh-- in what could be bad news for radio and television announcers down the road, the Red Sox signed an 18-year-old righthander from the Netherlands named **Stijn Van Der Schaaf**.

2019 **Mariano Rivera** is named on all 425 ballots to become the first unanimous HOF pick. The next year **Derek Jeter** is named on 395 of 396 ballots (99.7%) to become second highest percentage pick.

Mariners CF **Julio Rodríguez**, one of just four players in MLB history to rack up 25 home runs and 25 stolen bases in a season by age 21, which Rodríguez did last season to join the ranks of **Andruw Jones, Ronald Acuña Jr. and Mike Trout** (who absurdly logged 25/25 campaigns in both his age-20 and age-21 seasons).

You'd be an impressive fan if you could name the 7 players who hit 100 HRs and had 100 stolen bases by age 24. Braves RF **Ronald Acuna Jr.** this year joined **Vada Pinson, César Cedeño, Darryl Strawberry, Andruw Jones, Alex Rodriguez, Mike Trout.**

And equally impressive if you know the five centerfielders in history with 300 HRs and 200 stolen bases. **Andrew McCutcheon, Steve Finley, Willie Mays, Mike Trout, Carlos Beltran.**

Dodger pitcher **Julio Urías** has this compelling statistic on his side: He's one of only three pitchers to have debuted since 1990, start 100 games before his age-26 season and carry a career ERA under 3.00. The other two are Hall of Famer **Pedro Martínez** and his teammate and future Hall of Famer **Clayton Kershaw.**

Astros slugger **Yordan Alvarez** finished third place in AL MVP voting last season, when he earned his first career Silver Slugger Award and All-Star appearance. His career 163 OPS+ ranks 19th all-time among hitters through their age-25 season or younger (min. 1,500 plate appearances). Twelve of the 18 players ahead of him are in the Hall of Fame. Another is **Shoeless Joe Jackson**, who would be if not for the 1919 Black Sox scandal, and two more (**Mike Trout and Albert Pujols**) will be someday.

Frank Thomas (not THAT Frank Thomas) died this week. Thomas hit 34 HRs for the 1962 expansion Mets. Thomas appeared in parts of 16 big league campaigns. He hit .266/.320/.454 across 1766 games. Thomas connected on 286 home runs, tying him for 177th on the all-time leaderboard. He doubled 262 times, drove in 962 runs and scored 792 times. He hit 30 HRs in 1953 for his hometown Pirates. The definition of journeyman, the outfielder also played for the Phillies, Cubs, Braves (twice), Astros, Reds, and Cubs (twice).

His Mets club record for HRs in a season lasted until **Dave Kingman** hit 36 in 1975. **Darryl Strawberry** hit 39 in 1987. **Todd Hundley** hit 41 in 1986 (later matched by **Carlos Beltran**). **Pete Alonso** holds the current record at 53 in 2019.

Among players with fewer than 3,000 plate appearances through their age-25 season, **Raphael Devers** ranks third all-time with 1,380 total bases, behind only **Giancarlo Stanton** and **Lou Gehrig**.

Shortstops have been landing huge deals and making headlines the last two off seasons. So it may be easy to overlook **Francisco Lindor** of the Mets. The only primary shortstop in MLB history to match both Lindor's number of home runs (184) and stolen bases (125) through his age-28 season is **Alex Rodriguez**. Lindor has achieved four top-10 MVP finishes and four All-Star Game berths, and won two Silver Sluggers and two Gold Gloves (including one Platinum Glove). He's also extremely durable, having missed only 68 games over the last seven years.

The Athletic has a cool history of Baseball Prospectus and how many alums went from interns at the innovative web site to senior front office positions. Its too long to include in the newsletter but if you don't subscribe and want to read it shoot me an email and I will get it to you.

Oakland A's were the only team in MLB to average less than 10,000 fans per game last season.

Teams that averaged over 35,000 fans were the Dodgers (47K), Cards (41K), Yankees (40K), Braves (38K) and Padres (37K).

D'backs (19.9K), Tigers (19.6K), Orioles (17.5K), Reds (17.5K), Guardians (17K), Royals (16K), Pirates (15.5), Rays (14K) and Marlins (11K) all joined Oakland below 20,000 per game average.

Johnny Cueto who signed this week with the Marlins was the last Red to lead the league in strikeouts (242 K's in 2014, tied with the Nationals' **Stephen Strasburg**)

Mookie Betts. (213 home runs, 1,306 hits, 158 stolen bases). Only five players can match his home run, hit and stolen base totals through age 29: **Alex Rodriguez, Mike Trout, Ken Griffey Jr., Willie Mays and Frank Robinson**.

The last place Colorado Rockies actually had a winning record at Coors Field last year, 41-40. But 27-54 on the road wasn't pretty. Boston had the "best" record of the 6 last place teams at 78-84. Washington was worst at 55-107. Oakland 60-102, Reds and Pirates 62-100, Royals 65-97. On opening day everyone is tied for first at 0-0. Hope springs eternal.

Other standings notes-- Arizona had a 22-game improvement last season after a disastrous 110-loss season in 2021. Washington is 92 games under .500 since winning the World Series in 2019.

The Colorado Rockies just wrapped up their 30th season, and not once in those three decades have they finished in first place. They do have five postseason appearances, even a pennant, and the Rocky Mountain region has supported the team incredibly well -- ten seasons of at least three million tickets sold, the last in 2018. Still, in an era of baseball with small divisions and rules tilted in favor of bad teams in small markets, the Rockies have never won the NL West, and they've won 90 games on just three occasions. Since they made their debut, just five teams have worse records. Since that Rocktober run in 2007, they have won one playoff game.

Nolan Arenado first infielder ever to win Gold Gloves in each of his first 10 seasons. He is tied for second most as a 3B with **Mike Schmidt** and chasing **Brooks Robinson** at 16. He also recorded his seventh season with 30 or more home runs; only Schmidt (12 seasons) and **Eddie Mathews** (10) had more 30-homer years among third basemen.

The Twins traded the AL batting champ **Luis Arraez** in a deal with the Marlins headlined by starting pitcher **Pablo López**. Arraez hit .316/.375/.420 in a career-best 144 games in 2022, persevering through a hamstring injury to clinch his first batting title in the season's final game.

It was only the third time in the divisional era (since 1969) that the reigning batting champion was traded the following offseason. The last time such a trade happened was 44 years ago and the Minnesota Twins were the dealing team in that move, too. **Rod Carew** was traded from the Twins to the Angels in 1978. In 1976 the Cubs traded batting champ **Bill Madlock** to the Giants.

In between Arraz and Carew the Twins had two other batting champs-- **Kirby Puckett** (1989) and **Joe Mauer** (2006, '08, '09)

From the 'what might have been' file, **Chris Sale**. For a seven-year period between 2012 to '18, Sale made the All-Star team every season, twice led the AL in strikeouts and never finished below sixth in Cy Young voting, though without ever actually bringing home the hardware. That made the flamethrowing lefty with the funky delivery one of just 10 pitchers in MLB history to rack up 100 wins and 1,700 strikeouts with a career ERA under 3.00 through his age-29 season.

Commissioner Manfred has said that once Oakland and Tampa figure out if they can solve their stadium issues, it makes sense to add two teams to reach 32. Manfred and the owners want to balance exclusivity (keeping prices for franchises high) with increased revenue.

Last week I ran a piece from MLB.com talking about the demographics of potential expansion cities. It covered the available population for Orlando, Sacramento, Charlotte, Las Vegas, New Jersey and Montreal. This week The Athletic ran a series reviewing Montreal (no public stadium funding is a big hurdle but the Bronfman family which owned the original Expos has \$billions.), Portland (available downtown stadium site and Nike money behind the bid), Nashville (good demographics and leadership team) and Las Vegas (following Raiders success likely to happen but A's could relocate rather than expansion).

I love growing the game. But think about 50+ AAA players now major leaguers. The union loves it but we need to think about the product.

Cleveland had a luxury-tax payroll of \$66.4 million last season, won 92 games, and took the Yankees to Game 5 in the Division Series. Every other team that made the playoffs had a payroll of at least \$98 million and the average was \$191 million.

Braves manager **Brian Snitker** has quietly won the NL East five times in a row and is 20-12 in the playoffs the last three years. He needs only 38 victories to be third in franchise history (behind **Bobby Cox** and **Lum Harris**).

Bob Melvin (Padres), **Bruce Bochy** (Rangers), **Buck Showalter** (Mets) have a combined 65 years and 10,043 games of managerial experience.

The Red Sox were one of six teams that exceeded the luxury-tax limit and were fined by Major League Baseball. The Dodgers, Mets, Padres, Phillies, and Yankees made the playoffs. The Sox went 78-84 and were taxed \$1.2 million, according to the Associated Press.

The real cost was the Sox received two fourth-round draft picks for losing qualified free agents **Nate Eovaldi** and **Xander Bogaerts** instead of two picks after the second round.

STEVE COHEN, FRIEND OR FOE?

Our subscribers send questions and offer interesting content every week. These interactions also give me access to many great email debates. One of our subscribers has direct knowledge

of front office goings on (we don't share email addresses, don't share names). On one of our threads the question was posed—what do the other owners think of Steve Cohen of the Mets? Thought you'd enjoy the response.

The other owners hate it. Several respect Cohen, a few like him, but most of them hate him as a partner because he is singlehandedly raising salaries to a level that is legitimately above the level of the competition of many of them.

The issue is that most of the country does not truly understand owner wealth. All of these men are legitimately billionaires, many of them through their ownership of a MLB club. But not many of them have the type of liquid wealth of Cohen. Cohen can sustain hundred million dollar annual losses for the Mets and look at it as a part of doing what he loves. Most other owners purchased the clubs as a trophy, some of them inherited the club. Almost none have the passion of fanhood like Cohen. He aspired to own the Mets as the payoff for his success. So he'll treat the team as win first. You can count on one hand how many other clubs do this (MAYBE the Dodgers?).

When George did this in the 80's, the salary benchmarks were less obvious. He paid the most for players, often setting incremental records. But nothing that was out of complete sight by other owners. Cohen is doing that- he's competing at a level that legitimately only 5 or 6 teams can compete at.

Is this good for the game? I'd argue yes and no. It's absolutely good to have an owner that cares more about winning than franchise value, though he might argue he's doing both. It's good for Mets fans, and I'd argue it's good for baseball fans because it creates a hero or a villain--depending on your viewpoint. He's playing by the rules, he's willing to be punished for hitting limits, etc.

*You could argue Dombrowski's **Trea Turner** sign was the one that kicked over the cow, however. He stretched big time on years. Cohen previously paid tons, without the long-term commitment unless the player was young like **Francisco Lindor**.*

*The biggest concern the other owners have right now is in a few years for the next CBA. Cohen is hurting them here, and I now think they're going to push for salary cap in some form- which the union will strike over. The only way this works out for the owners is if **Carlos Correa** and some of the other huge signs get hurt early and badly.*

STOLEN BASES BY DECADE

I took an on-line quiz this week on sporcle.com—name the top three base stealers by decade from 1880 in ten minutes. Must admit I came up very short. How many would you have gotten?

Besides **Honus Wagner** (1st for the 1900's), **Ty Cobb** (1st for the 1910's), **Billy Hamilton** (1st for the 1890's) it was a lot of less familiar names up to 1950. From there you should do pretty well.

1950s

- 1 **Willie Mays** 179
- 2 **Minnie Minoso** 167
- 3 **Ritchie Ashburn** 158

1960's

- 1 **Maury Wills** 535
- 2 **Lou Brock** 387
- 3 **Luis Aparicio** 342

1970's

- 1 **Lou Brock** 551
- 2 **Joe Morgan** 488
- 3 **Caesar Cedeno** 427

1980's

- 1 **Rickey Henderson** 838
- 2 **Tim Lincecum** 583
- 3 **Vince Coleman** 472

1990's

- 1 **Otis Nixon** 478
- 2 **Rickey Henderson** 463
- 3 **Kenny Lofton** 433

2000's

- 1 **Juan Pierre** 459
- 2 **Carl Crawford** 362
- 3 **Ichiro Suzuki** 341

HALL OF FAME CHATTER

Lots of back and forth as we await vote results on at 6 pm Tuesday. Last week I posted the players on the ballot and asked for feedback. Only a few sent emails but some interesting comments.

If there are 780 players in MLB shouldn't we honor the top 1%? That's 7 per year.

Writers are (somewhat understandably) against guys who were jerks. **Albert Belle** put up some good numbers. **Kevin Brown**, baseball's first \$100 million contract, 3,256 1/3 innings pitched over 19 seasons. The guy was a horse. From 1996-2003, he had a 2.60 ERA. Those were the final eight seasons before PED testing began. 211 wins, 72 complete games, twice led league in ERA. Four seasons of 7+ WAR. He got nowhere in the voting.

More subscriber comments:

Helton
Jones
Kent
Rolen
Rollins
Wagner

Can't let ARod and Rodriguez in if Sosa, McGuire and Bonds are not in.

One person said none with Beltran the closest to getting his vote.

Scott Rolen would get in if it was up to those subscribers who emailed. No other strong consensus.

Interesting on-line Hall of Fame argument this week about **David Cone**. While Cone made five All-Star appearances, a Cy Young, three other top-four finishes and five World Series rings he "only" had 194 wins when voters were looking for 250-300 wins. Cone's 3.46 ERA was high, but he pitched virtually half his career in the AL East during the pre-PED testing era.

As analytics now tell us wins are far less important than stats that compare players to contemporaries like Adjusted ERA (ERA+) that takes into account opponents and ballparks, WAR (wins against replacement) and JAWS (looks at peak seasons and Hall of Famers). Cone's WAR for his peak seasons was 43.3, the average HOF starting pitcher is 40.6. He compares with **Juan Marichal and Don Drysdale** compared to other starters from his era.

The same piece brought up **Keith Hernandez** vs. recently elected **Fred McGriff**.

Hernandez: 60.3 WAR and 50.8 JAWS

McGriff: 52.6 WAR and 44.3 JAWS

Keith had a 128 OPS+ and was a fantastic defender. Fred had a 134 OPS+ and was a poor defender.

Lots of talk this week about which active players are headed to Cooperstown. Don't forget managers—**Terry Francona, Bruce Bochy and Dusty Baker** are decent bets.

A look through the online vote tracker BBHOF Tracker for the ballots of some of my favorite writers.

Jayson Stark's ballot:

Carlos Beltran, Todd Helton, Jeff Kent, Scott Rolen, Jimmy Rollins, Gary Sheffield, Billy Wagner

Peter Abraham:

Beltran, Helton, Rolen, Wagner

Peter Gammons:

Beltran, Helton, **Andruw Jones**, Kent, Rolen, Sheffield, Wagner

Jay Jaffee:

Bobby Abreau, Beltran, Helton, Jones, Rolen, Sheffield, Wagner

Keith Law ballot:

Beltran, Helton, Jones, **ARod**, Rolen, Sheffield

Ken Rosenthal ballot:

Helton, Jones, Kent, Rolen, Sheffield, Wagner

Eno Sarris ballot:

Abreau, Beltran, Helton, Jones, Kent, Rolen, Sheffield, Wagner

As of Saturday there have been four blank ballots cast, which is allowed by the Hall of Fame. But because the results are based on a percentage, a blank ballot devalues the vote of other writers.

If a voter truly feels no player is worth selecting, simply don't cast a ballot. To me, the object is to select those players you feel are worthy, not sabotage those you feel aren't.

BALANCED SCHEDULE

Below you will read about other rule changes. One that doesn't get as much attention but will have a real impact on wins and losses is the new balanced schedule.

Amongst all the changes you'll notice on the field in 2023 -- the pitch clock, the positioning ban, the larger bases, the pickoff limits -- there's another quietly meaningful one that might not be quite so obvious if you weren't looking for it. For the first time since Interleague Play arrived in the Majors in 1997, the schedule will be balanced. Every team will play the other 29 teams at least once annually and also visit each city at least once every other year.

It's meant to be fairer for the Wild Card race, and to prevent things like "five fanbases *still* haven't ever seen **Shohei Ohtani** come to town," as is currently the case. Long-term, it's clearly going to fulfill those goals. But for 2023, there's a more interesting question, particularly in the fact that teams will be playing 24 fewer games against their own divisions than they did before, and that question is, "How will this affect the playoff races?"

Think about the Phillies, who got to feast on the Nationals (16-3) as they won the final Wild Card slot by a single game. Think about the Guardians, who were a mere .500 against winning teams yet a massive 58-36 against losing teams on their way to winning the AL Central by 11 games. Think about the Orioles, Blue Jays and Rays, who for decades have had nearly a quarter of their schedule coming against just the Yankees and Red Sox. Who you play matters, and who you play in 2023 under the balanced schedule is going to be different than who you might have played before.

JAYSON STARK ON MLB'S NEW RULES—HOW THE PITCH CLOCK, SHIFT BAN AND BIGGER BASES WILL AND WON'T CHANGE THE GAME.

Jayson Stark in The Athletic

There's a thing I've noticed about sports: When you change the rules, stuff happens.

So here we are, a week or so after baseball announced its three most tide-shifting rule changes in almost half a century — pitch clock, shift limits and bases the size of the tires on your Honda. And now here's the safest prediction I've ever made:

Stuff ... will ... happen.

But what stuff? And how will — and won't — it change the game? Here are 10 Things to Watch When the Rules Change.

1. The 2 1/2-hour game is back

Baseball has just fired its most accurate shot — aka., the 15-second pitch clock — in the War on Dead Time. And before it even lands, you should know this: That war is won.

"This thing is going to knock at least 20 minutes, I believe, off the time of a game in the big leagues." — **Morgan Ensberg**, former Astros third baseman, who now manages the Rays' Double-A team, the Montgomery Biscuits

Guess what? There is zero reason to think he's wrong. The average time of a minor-league game is down 26 minutes this year, compared with the olden days of the pre-pitch-clock era (by which we mean last year).

2021 — 3:04 (hours, minutes)

2022 — 2:38

Or you could just compare a typical day of baseball in Triple A (home to a 14-second pitch clock) versus the big leagues. This was from a random Wednesday.

	<u>Triple A</u>	<u>MLB</u>
9 inning games	13	14
Average time	2:44	3:00
Games over 3 hours	2	7
Games under 2:40	7	1

Yes, I'm aware the commercials mean the between-inning breaks aren't the same in both leagues. Yes, next year's big-league clock will be a second longer than this year's Triple-A clock. Still ...

- An 8-7 big-league game in Texas, featuring 20 hits, took 3 hours, 40 minutes.

- A 12-4 minor-league game in Nashville, featuring 24 hits, took 2 hours, 38 minutes.

I could give you 500 examples like this, but you get the idea. Watch any minor-league game on MiLB.com. You can't miss the difference. The clock, Ensberg said, is "absolutely incredible. It's given more time to the game versus just the fluff in between pitches. ... What it does, it takes all the fluff out."

Any fluff fans out there? Thought so! Now let's move on.

2. The balk record is in major jeopardy

On the other hand ... there are going to be issues!

There *will* be wrinkles to the pitch clock that will take some getting used to. It's not only 15 seconds between pitches with nobody on and 20 seconds with men on base. But also ...

The hitter has to be in the box, eyes locked on the pitcher, with eight seconds left on the timer (or the umpire can call a strike). ... The pitcher needs to start his delivery before the clock hits zero (or the umpire can call a ball). ... The hitter can step out only once per plate appearance (or it's a strike). ... The pitcher can step off/throw to a base only twice per plate appearance (or the third time is a balk, if he doesn't throw to a base and the runner is out).

So what can possibly go wrong? Ummm, paging Angel Hernandez.

Everyone I've talked with predicts a turbulent April as all parties — pitchers, hitters and umpires — adjust. Are you ready for this fun moment:

Bases loaded ... **Shohei Ohtani** at the plate ... two outs and a 3-2 count ... Ohtani isn't quite set and focused on the pitcher as the timer count hits "7" ... and some letter-of-the-law umpire screams: *"Timer violation ... strike three ... you're out!"*

Hoo boy.

"I think MLB has been very upfront that they don't want this rule used in that way. They don't want this rule deciding key moments of a baseball game." — a team executive on that scenario.

"I think it's important for umpires to understand the spirit of the law versus the letter of the law. And the umpires in the (Double-A) Southern League have done a really good job of understanding that meaning. They're looking at the clock while looking at the pitcher, and they're making an assessment whether or not to stop the game for a second and assess a ball. And if it's at zero or minus-one, they're letting it go. And they should, because ... stopping (the game to make a call) is going to go against the entire spirit of the rule." — Ensberg

Agreed. But be ready. Even if everybody gets that spirit-of-the-rule memo, this will get messy. Early in the season, before everyone settles in, there are going to be shocking calls never witnessed in baseball history. There are going to be ejections. There are going to be words uttered that you won't hear on Nickelodeon. There are going to be lots of sensational sports-talk-radio moments. And also ... there are going to be balks.

DOUBLE-A BALK RATE

2022 — One balk every 10.7 games

2021 — One balk every 20.5 games

Then again, in other news ...

3. **Terrance Gore** has never been more employable

Will the stolen base actually be cool again? Before you answer that, check out what's happened this year in the minor leagues.

Pickoff/stepoff limits and larger bases (18 inches-by-18 inches square, up from 15-by-15) — which shrink the distance between bases by 4 1/2 inches — have been in effect all season. And they've turned these games into the Penn Relays.

STOLEN BASE ATTEMPTS PER GAME

Minor leagues — 2.83

Major leagues — 1.36

Now here's what that means: If big-league players suddenly started running at the same rate as minor-league players have this year, it would lead to a stolen-base attempt rate we haven't seen in the major leagues *in more than 100 years*. So is that going to happen?

Quick answer: Of course not. As one exec I surveyed put it, "the cost of an out in the big leagues is still going to be valued."

But also remember these rules aren't just there to subtly encourage base stealing. They're there because this sport's brightest minds see base stealing as one of the centerpieces of the next wave of baseball's entertainment strategy. So even if these rules don't roll back the clock to, say, 1917, here's what MLB execs do expect:

34 steals will never lead the league again! I'm guessing you could win this bar bet with your buddies: Who leads the big leagues in stolen bases? It's Marlins track star **Jon Berti** (who else?) — with 34. Meanwhile, in the minor leagues, *79 players* have stolen 34 or more, because thanks to these rules, stolen-base success rates have skyrocketed (to 77 percent).

MLB teams tend to run these days when they calculate at least a 75 percent probability of making it. If that's the new probability for, basically, *everybody*, look out.

But it might take 70! Rickey Henderson's 130 steals look as unreachable as ever, but would anyone find it shocking to see somebody swipe 70 (for the first time in 14 years) next season? Again, don't forget, these rules are designed to make that eminently possible. As one exec put it, "I don't think you'll see any records, but if someone steals 70 instead of 35, that's a dramatic change."

Some team might steal 250! In 1976, **Bert Campaneris** and those fast-stepping Oakland A's stole an incredible 341 bases. We won't see that again. But as recently as 1992, **Pat Listach's** Milwaukee Brewers stole 256. Is that out of the question? Why would it be?

The Rangers, for example, have *eight* minor leaguers with at least 32 steals this year. So why *wouldn't* a team or two — or eight — decide the best way to find an edge and wreak havoc next season is to start running at rates no current big leaguers have ever had to find a defense for?

Terrance Gore forever! One more question: Shouldn't teams start saving the last spot on their roster for the fastest dude they can find — since these rules will make it almost impossible to throw him out?

"If we're going to be mandated to have 13 position players, that 13th guy could be a Terrance Gore," one club exec said. "Then every time one of your slow guys gets on base after the seventh inning, you send in Terrance Gore to run. I think that makes a lot of sense."

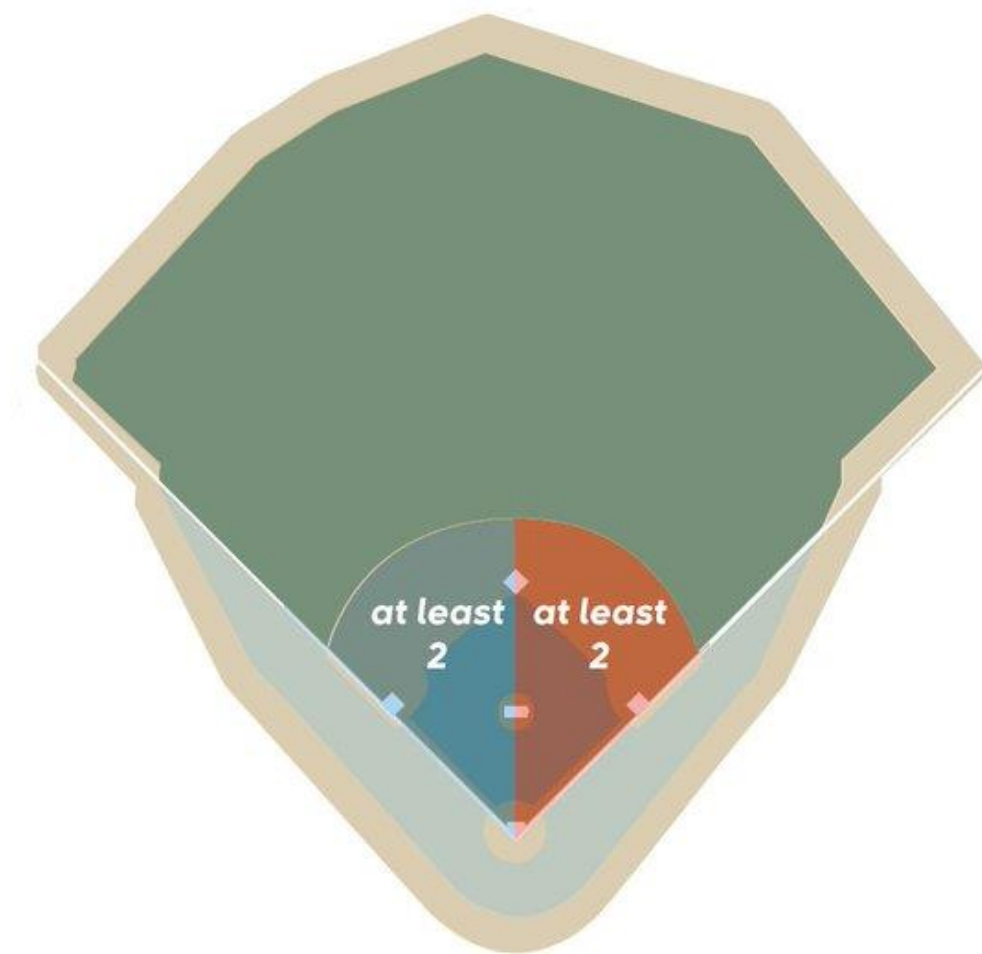
It's also a reminder that these rules will affect how front offices construct rosters. More on that shortly. But first ...

4. Coming to a park near you: the two-man outfield?

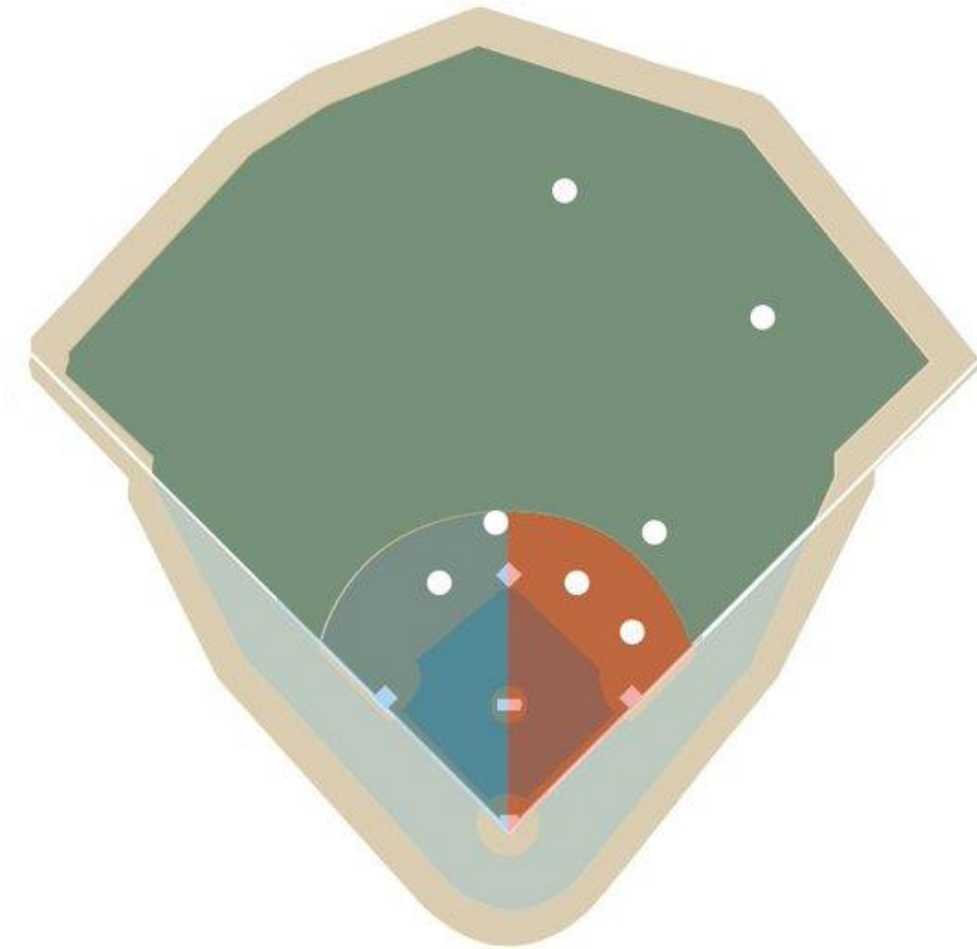
One theme that has come through loud and clear in the last week: Front offices are already think-tanking ways to turn these new rules upside-down and devise innovative strategies to use them to max advantage.

The idea I've heard most so far? The four-man outfield may be going away — but say hello to the "two-man" outfield.

All right, so technically, it's not really a two-man outfield. It's just an outfield with two defenders in conventional outfield locations — and a third outfielder lurking in, say, short right field, where those shifting infielders used to hang out against pull-heavy left-handed hitters. Here's how MLB.com's Mike Petriello diagrammed that one.



If you want to torment Joey Gallo you can still torment Joey Gallo. But if he goes to LF you'll pay a bigger price. See below.



But this idea isn't just popping up on Twitter. It's sweeping through front offices and coaching staffs. Not everybody is convinced it will be widespread — or even work effectively enough to become popular. But if 18 teams start using it regularly, it definitely will be interesting to see how — or if — MLB reacts.

“MLB wants more triples, right? So in theory, if you're hitting against a two-man outfield, you're going to find some triples in there just by accident. So they may be OK with two-man outfields.” — one club exec

“You know what'll happen if we see a lot of those two-man outfields, right? Then they'll just change that (rule) the following year.” — another club exec

Are there really enough **Joey Gallos** out there who hit so few balls the other way, even in the air, that teams would go to that extreme? Seems doubtful. But you know what isn't doubtful? That we're about to find out.

As MLB consultant Theo Epstein said at the press conference announcing these rules, "The smartest organizations are already thinking about how to react" — to every one of these changes. No telling where that will lead. But in the meantime ...

5. Left-handed hitters shouldn't party too soon

That sound you heard, off in the distance, after that press conference, was the left-handed hitters of Planet Earth celebrating. And why would they be celebrating? Pulled groundballs might actually be hits again!

Avg. on pulled groundballs, LH hitters

YEAR	Batting Avg.	Shifts
2022	.146	56%
2019	.156	42%
2017	.189	22%

**percentage of plate appearances versus shifts*

(Source: Statcast)

What does that chart show us? In the 15 seasons Statcast has been tracking batted balls, it has never been harder for a left-handed hitter to sneak a groundball through the pull side than it is right now. At the same time, the shift rate on those hitters has mushroomed. So is there any question about whether shifts work? C'mon. They totally work.

The data even shows they work no matter how hard these guys mash the ball. Check out these numbers, also from Statcast, on the impact of the shift on batting average on the hardest-hit groundballs (for all hitters).

	<u>100+ mph</u>	<u>110+ mph</u>
Versus shift	.362	.442
No shift	.445	.554

So shifts are depressing averages, even on rockets, by about 100 points. I think that explains why Phillies hitting coach **Kevin Long** confidently told *The Athletic* this the other day:

*“There are going to be guys where their average skyrockets. I think **Kyle Schwarber** is going to be one of the biggest. **Anthony Rizzo** is going to be another one. **Brian McCann**, when he played, would have been a huge one, because those guys don’t run.”*

So there is going to be a subset of left-handed hitters whose average will climb because the shift disappears — possibly as much as 40 points in some cases, Long predicted. I don’t know why there’s anything wrong with that. Where’s the rule that says the sport is more entertaining when **Max Muncy** hits .199? I can’t find that.

So which left-handed hitters might fit into this subset? Sports Info Solutions just looked into that question. **Corey Seager** ranked No. 1. And Schwarber was way up there on the list.

But before that crowd starts popping too many Moët & Chandon corks, I need to break some news to these guys: The shift ban isn’t going to help as much as they’re dreaming it will.

I wrote about this earlier this year. As long as the shortstop can still play an inch to the other side of second base, and the precision of modern data places second basemen where teams know these hitters pull the ball most often, most groundballs will still be outs.

“The shortstop is still directly up the middle, and they’re still taking hits away from left-handers. And on the other side, the second basemen are taking hits away from right-handed hitters. ... So the biggest impact is that you don’t see the second baseman in right field.” — Ensberg

Bingo. I asked Sports Info Solutions to dig into the effects of the minor-league shift ban by examining what happened in Double A, where the data is most extensive. As predicted by Ensberg, keeping two infielders on each side of the bag has had minimal impact. But keeping infielders out of the outfield? Different story.

PCT. OF OUTS ON PULLED GROUND BALLS/BUNTS BY LHH

2019 (last season before shift rules) — 69.3 percent

2022 (first full season of shift rules) — 64.4 percent

PCT. OF OUTS ON PULLED LINE DRIVES

2019 — 12.3 percent

2022 — 6.8 percent

(Source: Sports Info Solutions)

In other words, when this rule was implemented, in Double A, it turned out to help just one more groundball out of 20 get through the right side. For a guy like Seager, who puts the ball on the ground an average of only 1.3 times per game, that doesn’t even work out to two extra ground-ball hits a month.

But let's turn to the impact on pulled line drives. In the big leagues, they're still being gobbled up regularly by that extra infielder in the outfield. But when that sneaky hit-burgling trick was outlawed in Double A, the rate of hits on those line drives nearly doubled!

In terms of total extra hits, we're still talking about very few for any individual hitter when spread out over a whole season. Still, it's something.

"I think we will all agree hitters should be rewarded for line drives. So if you're hitting a really hard line drive to the pull side, you should probably be rewarded for that. And if this new rule helps that, I think that's a good thing." — one team exec

So if the line-drive single is back, hey, cool. But what about the beloved single up the middle? Well, I never enjoy being the bearer of unhappy news, but ...

6. Still M.I.A.: The good old single up the middle

In the piece I wrote about the shift earlier this year, there was a Freddie Freeman quote that's still stuck in my brain:

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

Freddie, I hate to hit you with this. But this particular shift limit isn't going to change your life much. Here's the Double-A data, courtesy of Sports Info Solutions.

PCT. OF OUTS ON GROUNDBALLS/BUNTS UP THE MIDDLE BY LHH

2019 — 66.1 percent

2022 — 64.2 percent

So basically, about one of every 50 groundballs makes it into center field now that didn't before the shift was "banned." Commissioner Rob Manfred often talks about his passion to "restore" the single up the middle. Oops. This sure isn't going to do it.

"You do still see some balls get up the middle occasionally, just due to positioning. But that's usually more on the right-handed pull hitter, versus the left-handed pull hitter." — Ensberg

So as we were saying — sorry Freddie! And in a related development ...

7. Launch angle is still a thing

At the press conference announcing these shift-rule changes, MLB's **Raul Ibañez**, former left-handed masher of yesteryear, mentioned something we all need to stay dialed in on. The big hope here, he said, is that eliminating the defensive traffic jam on one side of the infield will change more than just batting averages.

Suppose groundballs are hits again, he said. ... Which means singles become more attainable again. ... Which means hitters might just realize they no longer need to design a swing with a sole goal to lift the ball over all of those infielders.

If all of that happens, Ibañez hypothesized, maybe that's enough incentive for hitters to recalibrate those swings. Then, maybe launch angle won't be quite as hot a ticket anymore, he said, hopefully. Which could bring back the old line-drive stroke that used to be the swing of every hitter's dreams.

Hey, what a beautiful thought. I hope it turns out that way. It's just hard to look at *this* shift rule — which mostly benefits pull-happy, left-handed, turn-and-burn hitters — and expect any of that to happen.

"Do you know how much these guys are creatures of habit? I mean, Schwarber's not changing anything. He's going to get more hits because the field's opened up. ... But I don't think that has anything to do with it. Are our hitters going to change? No, they're going to stay the same. ... Like I've always said, home run hitters are home run hitters." — Long

So what would have to happen to make that change? Maybe the big-league results won't match the minor-league data we just laid out. Or maybe there will be more rules coming that alter the hitting climate more than these rules do. But is Gallo going to look at *this* set of rules and decide it's time to try to win a batting title? Not happening.

But you know who is going to have to make some changes? I'll tell you who ...

8. Relievers are in for a shock

The one-inning, let-it-fly relief pitcher is one of the great gigs in the history of baseball. But all of a sudden, trouble is ahead. And you spell that trouble: C-L-O-C-K.

What's coming next year? A 15-second pitch clock with nobody on base. And how will that affect the boys in the bullpen? Thanks for asking. The Statcast data spells out exactly how.

According to Statcast, among pitchers who have thrown at least 100 pitches in the big leagues this season, there are 95 whose "tempo" (average time between pitches) would be considered to be slower than that 15-second clock would allow. And of those 95, 89 are relievers.

So their first challenge is they're going to have to pick up that glacial pace. But that's not these relievers' only challenge.

The biggest question: If they no longer can take all the time they need in between pitches, to recover from that 101 mph smokeball they just fired, will they be able to throw the next pitch at 101 — and the one after that and the one after that?

MLB's original hope was no. But the data doesn't support that. Here was Ensberg's reply when I asked if his relievers had seen their velocity drop:

"No. Absolutely not. There was no decline in any sort of performance. And arguably, the performance improved because of that tempo, because of that rhythm."

That seems surprising. But it has turned out to be true, across the minor leagues. We know that thanks to Baseball America, which recently obtained velocity readings across minor-league baseball. Those readings showed zero drop in velo — literally.

AVERAGE FOUR-SEAM FASTBALL VELOCITY, MINOR LEAGUES

2021 — 92.3 mph

2022 — 92.3 mph

So for all those bullpen heat-wavers, it turns out this clock doesn't pose a velocity challenge, Ensberg said. It poses a conditioning challenge:

"This will change the way (relievers) train, because they're going to be throwing pitches quicker. So they're going to want to have a little bit more endurance than usual. Nothing crazy, but they're going to be throwing more pitches and doing more action, in a quicker amount of time. Their bodies will adjust. But early on, they're going to want to have some more stamina."

In fact, big-league execs I surveyed said they're more concerned about whether their *starting pitchers* can sustain velocity deep into games than they are about their short relievers. So can anyone really be sure how this clock will affect big-league pitchers — especially veterans who have never experienced a clock in the minors? No, we can't answer those questions until we see what happens next year.

But here's one thing you *can* be sure of ...

9. Wave goodbye to **Mike Moustakas** at second base

It's easy to look at these rules and start digging into how they'll affect games on the field. But if you only hone in on that part, you'll be missing one of the biggest impacts of all:

This has a chance to dramatically change how teams are built.

In what ways, you ask? Here are two:

It's a great time to be an athletic middle infielder. Let's begin with another Epstein observation from the press conference: What fans want, he said, is having games decided "by diving plays" — not "by whose front office devised the best algorithm" to position all their shifting infielders.

So on that note, let's talk about Mike Moustakas. Nothing personal. He just came up over and over as the poster boy for second basemen you'll never see again in baseball.

"When you're putting a roster together now, this is going to impact how you view defense. I'll use Mike Moustakas as an example. He's played a lot of second base, but he's not a second baseman, He doesn't have the foot speed to play second base. But in a shift, he could do it." — one club exec

Well, not anymore. Teams are now going to rethink which positions they can sacrifice defense for offense. And in a world without shifts, second base won't be one of those positions. I'd love to be an agent for an athletic free-agent middle infielder this winter. That's going to go well.

"When you put together your team now, you may have three positions that are all about defense only — second base, shortstop and center field." — the same exec

It's time to collect left-handed pull hitters. You know what has changed since these new rules were announced? How front offices watch games every night. They now amuse themselves by tracking all the outs that would be hits with no shift. And all of a sudden, they have a newfound appreciation for left-handed mashers.

An executive of one team told me about a left-handed hitting player in his system who might not still be on the 40-man roster — but was kept around because the new shift rule would change his value. Another exec brought up **Matt Carpenter**, a perfect example of a left-handed pull hitter whose career was almost ended by the shift and now will be looked at in a whole new light.

"I think there are guys who are going to add 15 to 20 points to their average because of this. Matt Carpenter is one. Anthony Rizzo is another. Those are guys whose average has just been brutalized by the shift. But now I can see guys like that having much greater value, because they do hit the ball the other way in the air. They just hit most of their groundballs to the right side. And the shift has turned them all into outs." — one longtime exec

So who knows — in future years, players like that could add even more value. And why would that be? Because ...

10. The shift rules might keep shifting

Remember the early days of replay in baseball? MLB's replay point guard, the Braves' John Schuerholz, talked often then about how baseball should and shouldn't implement major rule changes. You should keep that in mind at times like this.

What *not* to do: Fire up your new rule, assume you nailed it, then forget about it and move on to something else.

What *to* do: Implement your rule. Watch carefully. Then tweak it over the next few years until you get it right.

I still hear people in baseball quote that philosophy all the time. So that tells me something: Why would we think the same thing can't happen again? Why would we think these will be the last rules MLB will ever install to neutralize the shift? Here are two I suspect we could see someday:

Into the deep: So now there's a rule designed to add hits and action by telling infielders where they can and can't stand. Why wouldn't the next shoe drop? Why not a future rule that tells *outfielders* where they can and can't stand?

Do you recall that two-man outfield experiment we talked about earlier? Suppose that works. Suppose it turns into a regular thing. Why wouldn't baseball react with a rule that shuts that trick down? Could happen.

Also remember that MLB's fan polling shows that the customers love doubles and triples, which have dropped to levels not seen in 50 years. Why wouldn't baseball consider a rule requiring outfielders to play shallow again, so all those gappers would stop landing in outfielders' mitts? MLB has tried that out, in extended spring training. So anything is possible.

Pie, anyone? Manfred wants to bring back the single up the middle, huh? That can be arranged. Remember, baseball started experimenting with a rule to do exactly that in the minor leagues this year.

It's the Pie Slice Rule — a big, wedge-shaped diagonal line drawn in the infield dirt, which forces the second baseman and shortstop to leave the middle of the field open. They've tried it, and it works. And back in the minor-league test lab, that one has a lot of fans.

"They need to add that rule, because that's the most important one." — Ensberg

Of course, it was complicated enough to get *these* rules written and implemented. The next wave figures to be just as complicated. Maybe more.

But Manfred made it clear at that press conference. The competition committee that drew up these rules isn't closing up shop. It's open for business indefinitely, he said — for “an ongoing review process of the way we're playing.”

So change is coming — after which, well, more change is coming. And you know what that means.

Stuff ... will ... happen.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE ANSWERS

Three questions in ascending difficulty—good luck. Answers below.

I am a three-time All-Star, won the '07 NL MVP Award, four Gold Gloves and a Silver Slugger.

I was part of five straight NL East titles, two NL pennants ('08, '09) and the World Series ('08).

I am among the 19 players with at least 2,000 career games at shortstop, rank third in home runs, behind **Cal Ripken Jr.** (431) and **Derek Jeter** (260). Fourth and fifth on the list? **Barry Larkin** (198) and **Alan Trammell** (185), both Hall of Famers.

I am one of 11 players, and the only shortstop, in MLB history to hit at least 200 home runs and steal more than 400 bases. My 81.74% stolen base rate is the best of the group.

I hit 231 home runs and 470 stolen bases. Only four players had more homers and steals in their careers: **Barry Bonds**, **Rickey Henderson**, **Joe Morgan** and **Paul Molitor**.

I am one of six primary shortstops with at least 800 career extra base hits. The other five are in the Hall of Fame.

I am one of 13 players with at least 500 doubles, 100 triples and 200 home runs. Eleven of them are in the HOF.

I am one of only four players to hit at least 30 doubles and 20 home runs and steal at least 30 bases in four different seasons.

I am one of only two players to record at least 30 doubles, 20 triples and 30 homers in the same season. Hall of Fame first baseman **Jim Bottomley** also did it, 79 years earlier. **Willie Mays** is the only other player to hit 20 triples and 30 home runs in a season.

I am one of the four members of the 20/20/20/20 club: meaning 20-plus doubles, triples, homers and steals in a season, the only player to do that while also tallying 200 hits.

Who am I? **JIMMY ROLLINS**

Bullet Joe Bush started World Series games on the mound for three teams—1913 & 14 Philadelphia A's, 1918 Boston Red Sox and 1922 & 23 Yankees.

Two other pitchers started World Series games for three different teams. Both right handers.

1984 Tigers, 1991 Twins, 1992 Blue Jays **JACK MORRIS**

2002 Angels, 2013 Red Sox, 2016 Cubs **JOHN LACKEY**

22 pitchers have won the MVP award since 1911, three of them twice. Three franchises have had four pitchers win the MVP. Lets see how many of the sixteen you can come up with.

2014 Dodgers lefty starter **CLAYTON KERSHAW**

1963 Dodgers lefty starter, Hall of Fame **SANDY KOUFAX**

1956 Dodgers righty starter, lost games in 1948-55-56 World Series **DON NEWCOMBE**

1924 Dodgers righty starter, Hall of Fame **DAZZY VANCE**

2011 Tigers righty starter, 3 Cy Youngs **JUSTIN VERLANDER**

1984 Tigers lefty reliever, 32 saves for World Series champs **WILLIE HERNANDEZ**

1968 Tigers, the last pitcher to win 30 games in a season **DENNY MCLAIN**

1944-45 Tigers, along with Walter Johnson and Carl Hubbell 2x MVP. **HAL NEWHOUSER**

1992 A's, Hall of Famer with 197 wins, 390 saves **DENNIS ECKERSLEY**

1971 A's lefty starter, pitched for 3 Oakland World Series winners. **VIDA BLUE**

1952 A's lefty starter, went 21-4 in his only 20-win season **BOBBY SHANTZ**

1931 A's lefty starter, 300 game winner, Hall of Fame **LEFTY GROVE**

Please remember to check out:

SUNDAYBASEBALLTIDBITS.COM

Over 5,000 pages of our back issues, trivia questions & answers, subscriber recommendations for best baseball books and websites.

HOUSEKEEPING

Sunday Baseball Tidbits is distributed every Sunday morning. The goal is to provide “2 Cups of Coffee worth of baseball news, analysis, history and trivia” from a range of sources. All content belongs to its respective copyright holders. This newsletter is provided for the non-commercial enjoyment of our subscribers. Please email nhsuperseven@yahoo.com for a free subscription. We will never share your email address. Questions, comments, ideas, corrections and pointers to content you think subscribers would enjoy are encouraged and appreciated.

Our sources include:

The Athletic	Baseball-almanac.com
Baseballroundtable.com	Bleacher Report
Boston Globe	Mlb.com
The New York Times	Joe Posnanski newsletter
SABR.org	Sports Illustrated
Joe Sheehan newsletter	Baseballreference.com
ESPN.com	New York Post
SBNation	mbltraderumors.com

Please check them out and support them.