

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

3.19.2023

Good morning baseball fans,

The WBC has been entertaining. Heck of a USA lineup but can the pitching get us through the final four? In this edition--the impact of the pitch clock on announcers, R.I.P. **Joe Pepitone**, Joe Sheehan on Regional Sports Networks, **Smokey Joe Williams**, a **Bob Feller** record that won't be broken, WBC notes. Enjoy.

I have mentioned the Joe Sheehan newsletter. An example is included below—interesting/dark piece on upheaval in Regional Sports Networks and the potential impact on MLB. He publishes daily stuff from inside the game loaded with analysis. If you are interested in a subscription let me know—he is offering a discounted year for \$20 in a friends & family deal. I also have 5 free one-month subscriptions to The Athletic if anyone is interested.

Follow-up to the invitation to join me to see the Yankees on the west coast. Two subscribers will meet me at Dodger Stadium and one subscriber who has season tix to the Mariners invited me to see the Yankees in Seattle May 31 before they head down to L.A. Should be fun.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE

Three players to hit 300-plus homers while playing at least two-thirds of their games at second base.

1915-1937, Hall of Fame, 2x MVP, 301 HRs

1992-2008, MVP, 377 HRs

2005-2022, 335 HRs, on winning 2009 World series team, lefty hitter

Nine Hall of Fame managers managed in the 1970's. First year as a manager, last year as a manager, team(s) managed in the 1970' and what years. Name them.

1954-1976	Dodgers 1970-1976
1978-2010	Braves 1978-1979
1939-1973	Astros 1972-1973
1973-1990	Rangers 1973, Angels 1974, Royals 1975-1979
1979-2022	White Sox 1979
1976-1996	Dodgers 1976-1979
1977-2010	Mets 1977-1979
1968-1996	Orioles 1970-1979
1967-1988	A's 1971-1973, Angels 1974-1976, Expos 1977-1979

I played at Arizona State with **Reggie Jackson**.

I'm a 4 time All Star third baseman. Finished Top 4 in MVP voting three times.

As a right-handed batter I hit .254 with 242 HRs and 1039 RBI.

I played in 3 World Series.

My team career record 789 RBIs was broken by **Mark McGwire**.

An MLB GM after I retired a player.

Who am I?

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

Bob Feller was throwing bullets as a 16 year old high school pitcher. At 17 in July 1936 the he made his debut for the Indians in an exhibition game against the Cards. He appeared in relief a few times before his first major league start August 23. He struck out 15 and pitched 9 innings. In September he struck out 17 Philadelphia A's.

17 whiffs at age 17, matched only by **Kerry Wood** striking out 20 for the 1998 Cubs at age 20. They are the only two pitchers to "strikeout their age".

Feller had **107 wins through his age 22 season** with 1233 strikeouts. Think about that. Good luck breaking that record. 107 wins at age 22.

Feller enlisted in WWII. He lost 4 seasons to the war. Wrapped his Hall of Fame career 266-162, 3.25 ERA, 2581 strikeouts, three no hitters, 12 one hitters.

Two players share the record for most home runs in a season from the leadoff spot--**Alfonso Soriano** (2006 Nationals) and **George Springer** (2019 Astros), with 39.

First Base – 21 players have played 1B 2,000+ games (more than any other position). 13 since WWII:

Eddie Murray	2413	MLB career leader
Fred McGriff	2239	
Mickey Vernon	2237	
Todd Helton	2178	
Mark Grace	2162	
Rafael Palmeiro	2139	
Jeff Bagwell	2111	
Andres Galarraga	2106	
Steve Garvey	2059	
John Olerud	2053	
Willie McCovey	2045	
Albert Pujols	2026	
Keith Hernandez	2014	

Joey Votto at 1909 leads active players.

In his first five full seasons **Hanley Ramirez** averaged .313/.385/.521 with 40 doubles, 25 homers and 39 steals per season? During those years, he won a batting title, finished second in the MVP balloting, made three All-Star teams and won Rookie of the Year. A great start in

Miami but fell off in his years with Red Sox and Dodgers. I would not have guessed he had 1834 career hits and 271 HRs.

On March 13, 1954, **Bobby Thomson** broke his ankle in a spring training game, clearing the way for **Henry Aaron** to make the team. The same Bobby Thomson who hit the famous “Shot Heard ‘Round the World” for the Giants off **Ralph Branca** in 1951.

Milwaukee acquired Thomson in a big trade just over a month earlier, sending four players and \$50,000 cash (the equivalent of over \$500,000 today) for the outfielder and backup catcher **Sam Calderone**. The Braves had won 92 games the year before and were already expected to contend for the NL pennant before they added Thomson, a three-time All-Star. But before he could slot into the lineup behind the great **Eddie Mathews**, Thomson broke his ankle while sliding into second base during a spring training game against the Yankees.

As a result of the injury, the Braves decided to give Aaron a shot in left field. He had just turned 20 years old but, despite having knocked the cover off the ball (.988 OPS) at Class A Jacksonville the year before, the team wasn’t convinced Aaron was ready for the big leagues. After hitting a home run in his first spring training start the day after Thomson’s injury, though, the Braves offered Aaron a major league contract. He made the team when camp broke and was the Opening Day left fielder.

The average catcher in the major leagues hit .228 with a .663 OPS last season, by far the worst of all the defensive positions.

José Abreu was the last rookie to lead either league in slugging percentage (.581 SLG for the White Sox in 2014).

Tip of the cap for **Olivia Pichardo**, making history on the field for the Brown University baseball team.

On Friday, Pichardo became the first woman to play in an NCAA Division I baseball game. The freshman utility player pinch-hit for the Bears in the bottom of the ninth inning against Bryant. 24 women have played at various collegiate levels. Pichardo is the first at D1.

Pichardo has always played baseball. Before Brown, that included playing for the USA Baseball women's national baseball team in 2022.

She also participated in MLB's Breakthrough Series -- a program that showcases girls to national teams and college recruitment programs -- and MLB GRIT, a pro-style workout designed specifically for young female athletes to showcase their ability as baseball players.

Cubs manager **David Ross** caught the final out of the World Series for Boston in 2013 when **Koji Uehara** struck out **Matt Carpenter** of the Cardinals. He also was behind the plate for the Cubs during Game 7 in 2016 when they won their historic championship.

How good was Johan Santana at his peak? Through age 31, Santana was 133-69 with a 142 ERA+, two Cy Young Awards and 50.9 bWAR. Who does that put him with? Here are 10 comps-- the **bold ones are in the Hall of Fame**:

- CC Sabathia, 53.1 bWAR, one Cy Young, 125 ERA+
- **Sandy Koufax, 53.1 bWAR, three Cy Youngs, 131 ERA+**
- Bret Saberhagen, 52.5 bWAR, two Cy Youngs, 126 ERA+
- **Jim Palmer, 52.2 WAR, three Cy Youngs, 132 ERA+**
- Félix Hernández, 51.9 WAR, one Cy Young, 125 ERA+
- Johan Santana, 50.9 bWAR, two Cy Youngs, 142 ERA+
- **Lefty Grove, 50.5 bWAR, one MVP, 153 ERA+**
- Dave Stieb, 49.5 bWAR, zero Cy Youngs, 49.5 ERA+
- Wes Ferrell, 49.1 bWAR, 117 ERA+
- Zack Greinke, 48.9 bWAR, one Cy Young, 122 ERA+

Santana did not have a long enough career to get many HOF votes but pretty strong early on.

In 1921, **Branch Rickey** was manager of the St. Louis Cardinals, and he decided to turn a 30-year-old journeyman named **Lou North** into a full-time reliever. North finished 27 games in 1921 and the next year led the league with 43 relief appearances.

The Senators picked up on this in 1923, when manager **Bucky Harris** made an old spitballer named **Allen Russell** into a relief specialist. Russell made 47 relief appearances that year. But the Senators weren't really any good, and few people noticed. Exit Russell, enter **Firpo Marberry**.

From 1924-1926 Marberry was an effective full-time relief pitcher. In 1924 he appeared in four World Series games.

In 1925 Marberry had a season was unlike anything in baseball history up to that point. He made 55 appearances, none of them as a starter, and he pitched only 93 1/3 innings. Marberry would set a big-league record by making six appearances in which he faced only one batter. Harris and Marberry had basically invented the modern closer, sixty-some years before **Tony La Russa**.

In 1926, Marberry set a big-league record with 22 saves, though, as mentioned, saves were not a thing yet. He pitched in 64 games that year.

That was his last year as a full-time reliever. And for decades full-time relievers were not a thing. **Jim Konstanty** for the 1949 Phillies 23 years later as the next real full-time reliever.

You can probably win a beer with this--of the three hitters in MLB history with more than 700 home runs, two – **Hank Aaron and Babe Ruth** -- primarily played right field. Ruth was the all-time home run king from 1920 until '74, when Aaron passed him with his 715th career homer. Aaron ended up with 755 long balls and held the career record until Bonds surpassed his total in 2007. That said, the leader in home runs while actually playing right field isn't Hammerin' Hank or the Great Bambino, but rather **Sammy Sosa** with 538. Aaron had 520 homers as a right fielder, 68 as a left fielder, 64 as a center fielder, 61 as a first baseman, 22 as a DH, six as a second baseman and three as a pinch-hitter. The active leader is **Giancarlo Stanton** at 372.

MLB has informed teams it will once again amp up its inspections searching for “sticky stuff” on pitchers. MLB is reacting to data that shows spin rates have ticked up steadily since the league’s much-ballyhooed June 2021 crackdown on Spider Tack and other high-potency sticky stuff. That data seems to indicate pitchers have found substitutes for Spider Tack that are less detectable and easier to mask or wipe away. Average spin rates, for four-seam fastballs, spiked just before the crackdown in June 2021, dipped dramatically after the crackdown and then crept back up in the months since.

It’s not a coincidence that these latest efforts to deal with sticky stuff come at a time when the league is introducing a flurry of other new rules. Don’t overlook the fact that one of the biggest goals of those rules is to get more balls in play, by banning the shift and by imposing a pitch clock that appeared to play a role in lowering strikeout rates in the minor leagues.

MLB’s data provides clear evidence that the June 2021 crackdown was highly effective in reducing spin rates. The result was an immediate drop in the strikeout rate and an increase in balls in play. But that impact was only temporary, prompting MLB to step up those efforts for the 2023 season.

TWO MORE FROM THE OBSCURE BUT INTERESTING STATS DEPARTMENT

Only nine players since the end of World War II have walked less than once per every 28 plate appearances. They are:

1. **Jesús Alou**, 1 every 33.2 PAs
2. **Deivi Cruz**, 1 every 33.1 PAs
3. **Dámaso García**, 1 every 31.7 PAs
4. **Shawon Dunston**, 1 every 30.9 PAs
5. **Yuniesky Betancourt**, 1 every 29.9 PAs
6. **Ozzie Guillén**, 1 every 29.8 PAs
7. **Hal Lanier**, 1 every 29 PAs
8. **Tim Anderson**, 1 every 28.1 PAs
9. **Salvador Pérez**, 1 every 28 PAs

Career leaders -- Grounded into Double Plays

- | | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| 1. Albert Pujols | 426 |
| 2. Miguel Cabrera | 353 |
| 3. Cal Ripken Jr. | 350 |

4. Ivan Rodriguez	338
5. Hank Aaron	328
6. Carl Yastrzemski	323
7. Dave Winfield	319
8. Eddie Murray	316
9. Jim Rice	315
10. Julio Franco	312

WBC

Ernie Whitt was a left-handed hitting catcher. Spent 12 of his 15 years with the Blue Jays 1977-89. Whitt is now manager of Team Canada. He is the only manger to lead a team in the all five WBCs. Whitt batted .248 in 1328 MLB games.

One inning changed **Duque Hebbert's** life in a hurry.

The 21-year-old right-hander -- who has never pitched in affiliated pro ball -- took the mound for Team Nicaragua in the ninth inning of Monday's World Baseball Classic game versus the Dominican Republic, a 6-1 win for the D.R.

Due up for the Dominican side: **Juan Soto, Julio Rodríguez and Manny Machado**. A tall order indeed for the 5-foot-10, 170-pound Hebbert.

But Hebbert was absolutely unfazed by the challenge. He began his frame with Soto, who homered earlier in the game, and struck out the Padres superstar on three pitches. Rodríguez experienced the same fate when he whiffed on an 80 mph slider. Machado doubled to left, but Hebbert bounced back by striking out **Rafael Devers** on a changeup.

Hebbert's work against some of the best players in the world immediately earned him the attention of the Detroit Tigers.

Tigers scout Luis Molina caught up with Hebbert after his outing and, following a short conversation, offered him a contract with the club. The signing was announced to all of Hebbert's Nicaraguan teammates on the team bus.

To recap Hebbert's outing: one inning, 19 pitches, 14 strikes, three K's against All-Star hitters and a contract with an MLB franchise. Not bad for a day's work.

Mike Trout, who has played 12 seasons, **Cedric Mullins** (five) and **Bobby Witt Jr.** (one) are the only position players on Team USA never to have known the feeling of shaking hands on the field after a MLB postseason win.

José De León and three relievers combined to pitch a perfect game as Puerto Rico routed Israel, 10-0, in a World Baseball Classic game called after eight innings Monday night because of the tournament's 10-run mercy rule.

Canadian pitcher **Mitch Bratt** on Monday against Team USA. Mitch has an interesting story. He grew up in Newmarket, Canada — basically 30-some miles North of Toronto — but baseball was his thing, not hockey, and he was so eager to play professionally that he moved to Statesboro, Ga., to be part of the Georgia Premier Academy.

He gained some velocity on his fastball, he was drafted by the Rangers in the fifth round of the 2021 draft, and last year in the Carolina League — at age 18 — he struck out 99 in 80 innings and gave up just four home runs. He's 19 now, he looks 12, and Canada decided to start him on Monday night against the U.S. in a pivotal World Baseball Classic game.

This was the lineup he faced;

1. **Mookie Betts**, rf
2. **Mike Trout**, dh
3. **Paul Goldschmidt**, 1b
4. **Nolan Arenado**, 3b
5. **Kyle Tucker**, lf
6. **Tim Anderson**, 2b
7. **J.T. Realmuto**, c
8. **Trea Turner**, ss
9. **Cedric Mullins**, cf

It didn't help that the U.S. was coming off a crushing loss to Mexico. It didn't help that a loss here might have ended the U.S. hopes of even getting out of the first round. Bratt is a young kid

who has never pitched above Class A ball, going up against an All-Star lineup with nine of the best hitters on planet earth.

He had no chance.

His first pitch to Mookie Betts was a foot outside. Mookie drilled his next pitch to rightfield for a single.

He then threw four balls to Mike Trout, none of them close. He threw five balls to Paul Goldschmidt, only one of them close enough for the home plate umpire to give him a mercy strike. The bases were loaded, and Nolan Arenado was up next, and you know exactly what the kid was thinking, right? Gotta throw a strike. Gotta throw a strike. Get ahead of Arenado. Throw a strike.

Arenado drilled said strike down the leftfield line for a two-run double.

It didn't get much better from there, though he did get one out — a 98.3-mph exit velocity line drive from Kyle Tucker that stayed up in the air long enough to be caught by the leftfielder. But then he walked Tim Anderson, and gave up a single to Realmuto, and that was the end of that.

The U.S. beat Columbia 3-2 to advance to the quarter-finals. They needed a comeback to win.

The U.S. beat Venezuela 9-7 to advance to the semi-finals. They needed a comeback to win.

And 7 Columbia pitchers with a total of 9 games MLB experience kept the game close.

It was a bummer to see Mets closer **Edwin Diaz** get hurt in the celebration after Puerto Rico's huge win over Dominican Republic to advance. But as Tom Verducci of Sports Illustrated points out, If you want to cancel the WBC because Díaz was injured, where were you calling for the abolishment of spring training when Dodgers shortstop **Gavin Lux** blew out his knee? Díaz's injury was a pure fluke. Period.

But if you buy the foolish logic, maybe we should just ban celebrations, too. After all, **Lance McCullers Jr.** hurt his pitching elbow when he was hit by a champagne bottle in the Astros' clubhouse after a 2022 postseason series clincher. **Cody Bellinger** wrecked his shoulder in the 2020 NLCS with a vicious arm bump with **Kiké Hernández**. **Ramón Ramírez** pulled a hammy running on the field to celebrate a no-hitter by **Johan Santana** in 2012. **Chris Coghlan** tore a meniscus while shoving a pie in the face of a Braves teammate after a 2009 walkoff win. And nine years before **Kendrys Morales** infamously broke his leg jumping on home plate following his 2010 walkoff grand slam, **Derek Jeter** hurt his foot jumping on home plate on his Mr. November home run. (It just took him 21 years to admit it.) The Mets have insurance that will cover Diaz' \$18 million salary for 2023.

Another fun fact--The starting pitcher for Colombia on Wednesday night was **Luis De Avila**, a lefthander who is only 21 and already has pitched for three organizations, was suspended 72 games for testing positive for a banned substance, has been released and has been claimed in the minor league Rule 5 draft. He is also only 5'9". If you don't think that makes him unique, know this: no left-handed starting pitcher at that height has won a major-league game in 20 years. **Michael Tejera** of the Marlins was the last to do so, in 2003.

Think **Shoei Ohtani** is taking this seriously? Ohtani pitched shutout ball into the fifth inning and sparked a four-run third with a bunt single to lead Japan over Italy, 9-3, at Tokyo to put the Samurai Warriors into their fifth straight World Baseball Classic semifinal. Pitching before an adoring crowd of 41,723 at the Tokyo Dome, Ohtani threw his fastest pitch since he joined the Angels in 2018, striking out **Vinnie Pasquantino** on a 102-mile-per-hour fastball in the second. Ohtani (2-0) allowed two runs and four hits in 4⅓ innings with five strikeouts and a walk and went 1 for 4 with a walk at the plate. He is hitting .438 (7 for 16) with a home run, three doubles, and eight RBIs along with a 2.08 ERA, 10 strikeouts, and one walk on the mound.

ONLY FOUR GM'S ARE IN THE HALL OF FAME

Baseball Prospectus

Of the 23 men elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame as "executives or pioneers," just four were honored for doing the job of a modern club president or general manager. Several Hall of Fame owners ran their own clubs, and several Hall of Fame managers also oversaw the business side of their organizations, but only **Ed Barrow, Branch Rickey, George Weiss and Larry MacPhail** were salaried employees responsible for their teams' off-field operations.

All four earned their plaques for services rendered from about 1920 to 1960. Before World War I the owner usually acted as his own GM, while no GM from the expansion era has yet garnered the necessary support from the Veterans Committee. The four inductees include two of 20th-century baseball's greatest innovators and the men responsible for the Yankees' four decades of dominance.

The Innovators

Branch Rickey

Branch Rickey developed the modern farm system *and* integrated the major leagues for the first time since the 1880s. Either accomplishment would have earned Rickey a spot in Cooperstown. When he took control of the St. Louis Cardinals in the late teens, Rickey realized that the Cardinals, who played in the majors' smallest two-club city, couldn't outbid New York or Chicago for top minor leaguers. Backed by new owner Sam Breadon, Rickey constructed a new system of player development. The Cardinals raised capital for the new scheme by selling their ballpark and becoming tenants of the Browns, then set out to make St. Louis forget about their landlords.

The Cardinals' philosophy was simple. By controlling dozens of minor-league teams (and in at least one case, an entire minor league), they could evaluate hundreds of players at a time, promoting the best and selling the rest to other clubs. The steady stream of young talent also allowed Rickey to keep the Cards' payroll low. He sold off aging veterans as soon as their replacements were ready, convinced that it was better to trade a player a year too early than a year too late.

Between 1922 and 1942, Rickey's Cardinals won six pennants, had just three losing seasons and sold \$2 million worth of players to other clubs -- all without buying a single player from another organization. Rickey was amply rewarded for his ingenuity, as his contract gave him a commission of 10 percent on all player sales.

Rickey left the Cardinals after the 1942 season and soon joined the Brooklyn Dodgers. Despite the wartime ballplayer shortage, Rickey invested heavily in prospects, positioning the Dodgers for postwar success. That success, and Rickey's place in the history books, was assured when he stared down the unanimous opposition of every other major league club to break the color line with **Jackie Robinson**. The Dodgers won the NL pennant in Robinson's first year (1947), then grew stronger as Rickey added **Roy Campanella and Don Newcombe** to join him.

After losing a power struggle with Walter O'Malley, Rickey left the Dodgers in 1950. He soon surfaced in Pittsburgh, but the magic touch was gone. Rickey proclaimed a five-year plan to

rebuild the Pirates; the team responded by finishing last in four of the five seasons. Rickey, who served on the Veterans Committee from 1953 until his death in 1965, was voted into the Hall of Fame in 1967.

Larry MacPhail

Larry MacPhail was the **Billy Martin** of general managers: a hard-driven, hard-drinking man who could turn around a losing team overnight, but never lasted more than a few years in any job. Inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1978, MacPhail was followed into Cooperstown by his son, Lee, a former AL president. His grandson Andy currently serves as president and GM of the Chicago Cubs.

After running the Cardinals' top minor-league team in Columbus, Ohio, MacPhail came to Cincinnati in 1934 to take over a club so weakened by the Depression that its owner had turned the team over to its creditors. Instead of lamenting that "small markets can't compete," MacPhail embarked on a spending spree to rival the WPA. He recruited industrialist Powel Crosley Jr. to buy the Reds, borrowed \$50,000 more from the National League, and spent over \$100,000 on players in 1934 alone.

During the offseason he persuaded the NL to let the Reds install the majors' first lighting system. Even with an arbitrary limit of seven night games per season, night ball proved an immediate success. MacPhail's investment brought a quick return both on and off the field: Cincinnati paid off the loan from the league in 1938, then won the 1939 and 1940 NL pennants.

By then MacPhail was competing with his own creation. He had left the Reds in September of 1936 to become a banker, but was soon lured back into baseball to run the Brooklyn Dodgers. As in Cincinnati, MacPhail spent heavily on players and installed lights. He also broke the gentleman's agreement among the three New York clubs to keep their games off the radio, importing Red Barber from Cincinnati to call Dodgers games, and even authorized an experimental television broadcast in 1939. MacPhail's Dodgers won the 1941 pennant, then lost to St. Louis in 1942 despite winning 104 games.

MacPhail left the Dodgers after 1942 to rejoin the Army. After World War II he, Dan Topping and Del Webb bought the New York Yankees from the estate of Jacob Ruppert. The Yankees hardly needed rebuilding and weren't used to the chaos that surrounded MacPhail, who elbowed aside future Hall of Famers Ed Barrow and George Weiss to run the club himself. After the Yankees won the 1947 World Series, MacPhail sold out to his partners and left baseball for good.

The Empire Builders

Ed Barrow

Barrow was elected by the first modern Veterans Committee in September 1953, a few months before his death at age 85. His 51-year career in Organized Baseball started as impressively as any non-player's: in 1896 Barrow scouted and signed **Honus Wagner** to his first professional

contract. Barrow later managed the Detroit Tigers for a year and a half, then served as president of two minor leagues before returning to the majors as manager of the 1918 Red Sox.

After leading the Sox to their fifth World Series title, Barrow spent a quarter-century ensuring they wouldn't win a sixth. He left Boston after the 1920 season to become business manager of the New York Yankees. Barrow didn't forget the players he had left behind in Boston. **Babe Ruth** and Carl Mays had already preceded him to New York; over the next three years, Barrow imported **Joe Bush, Joe Dugan, Waite Hoyt, Sam Jones, Herb Pennock, Wally Schang and Everett Scott** from the Red Sox as well. When the Yankees won their first World Series in 1923, half of their starting lineup and five of their six top pitchers were former Red Sox.

But instead of fading like dynasties of the past, Barrow's Yankees just grew stronger. He signed Lou Gehrig from Columbia, then opened owner Jacob Ruppert's checkbook to buy **Earle Combs, Tony Lazzeri, Frank Crosetti, Lefty Gomez** and ultimately **Joe DiMaggio** from their minor-league clubs. Noting the Cardinals' success at developing their own players, Barrow hired George Weiss to build a farm system, which soon ranked among the best in the majors.

Barrow ran the Yankees from 1921 through 1944, then served three years as chairman of the board while Larry MacPhail ran the club. During this period the Yankees won fifteen pennants and 11 World Series. When he retired, his record of success seemed impossible to duplicate ... but his successor would prove otherwise.

George Weiss

Like Barrow, George Weiss came up through the minors. He spent thirteen years in the front offices of New Haven and Baltimore before Barrow hired him for the Yankees. Charged with creating a farm system for the Yankees, Weiss and his network of scouts soon produced **Charlie Keller, Joe Gordon, Phil Rizzuto, Spud Chandler** and many others. *Baseball America* ranked his 1937 Newark Bears as the strongest minor-league club of all time.

Weiss was promoted to general manager of the big club after the 1947 season, when Dan Topping and Del Webb bought out Larry MacPhail. He held the position until 1960, when he was forced to retire at age 65. Weiss' clubs won 10 pennants and seven World Series during his 13 years as GM, then ran off four more consecutive pennants after his ouster. All told, from 1936 through 1964 teams built by Weiss claimed 22 of 29 AL titles and sixteen World Series. Perhaps as an act of penance, Weiss finished his career as GM of the expansion New York Mets. He was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1971.

JOE POSNANSKI

Some weeks I lean on The Athletic, others Sports Illustrated and other sources. This week items from Joe Posnanski's excellent book The Baseball 100 and his daily newsletter.

FROM THE BASEBALL 100

Johnny Mize – 1947 for the New York Giants. Batted .302 and led the majors with 51 HRs, 138 RBIs and 137 runs scored. He struck out 42 times all season.

Ernie Banks. In 1955 he became the first shortstop to hit 40 HRs. In 1957, 1958, 1959 and 1960 he hit 40 home runs. Before him there were no slugging shortstops. He led the league in intentional walks twice, in HRs twice, RBIs twice and won two MVPs for terrible Cubs teams.

What a different time we live in. 1969. **Steve Carlton** goes 17-11 for St. Louis with a 2.17 ERA, struck out 210 (including 19 in a game against the Mets) and threw 236 innings. He fought with ownership over a raise—the Cards offered \$60,000 and when Carlton pushed back he was traded to Philadelphia for **Rick Wise** who was making \$50K. Oops.

1997. **Jeff Bagwell** had 40 homers, 40 doubles, 30 stolen bases and 100 walks. Only guy to ever hit that combination.

Rod Carew. He faced 4 pitchers more than 100 times in his career including **Nolan Ryan** and **Catfish Hunter**. Batted over .300 against each of them. He faced 18 pitchers more than 60 times. Batted .331 against them.

Carew and **Stan Musial** are the only two players post WWII to hit .376 in 150 games or more. (**Tony Gwynn** hit .394 in strike shortened 1994, **George Brett** hit .390 in 117 games, **Larry Walker** hit .379 in 199 in 127 games. **Ted Williams** played 132 games in 1957 when he hit .388).

Before **Mickey Mantle** the power hitting switch-hitter didn't exist. At his retirement there had been ten seasons when a switch hitter hit 30 or more home runs. Ever. All ten belonged to Mickey Mantle.

THOUGHTS ON THE BABE

*Believing that the average baseball player today is better than **Babe Ruth** is like believing the average college student today is smarter than Aristotle—Bill James.*

As someone who has long been fascinated by how good Babe Ruth would be in today's game, I have to say that this point made me look at the question in a whole new way. We don't really question geniuses in other walks of life, right? We (and by "we" I'm referring to smart people,

not myself) now know a lot of things that Aristotle, Galileo, Beethoven, Marie Curie, even Albert Einstein didn't know. But we don't go around thinking that we are somehow smarter or more accomplished than them ... or that they would not stand out in today's world.

Babe Ruth was not only an extraordinary baseball player ... he was a visionary who saw a new way the game could be played. He swung for the fences when no one did that. He hit home runs when the greatest baseball players in the world did not. He opened the door.

There's something about Ruth that I think a lot of people get wrong — and I say this because I have gotten it wrong. In 1920, generally considered to be the first year out of Deadball, he hit 54 home runs, essentially twice the previous home run record and three times as many as any other player in baseball.

So much of this has been attributed to a newer baseball that carried better and the elimination of the spitball and various other advancements in the game. That's what you will see on the Wikipedia page. But I've dug into this a bit, and I think that's wrong.

For one thing, the spitball was not outlawed for the 1920 season. As I understand it, a rule was put in place to ban all NEW spitball pitchers, but all the pitchers who threw spitballs were grandfathered in. Anyway, that rule was for the National League. The AL did not take aim at the spitball until the following season.

No, it wasn't the lack of spitballs that led to Ruth's absurd 1920 season. And it wasn't better baseballs, either. The construction of baseballs was the same between 1919 and 1920. It is true that commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis responded to the tragic beaming of **Ray Chapman** by having teams replace old baseballs liberally, but that didn't happen until the END of the 1920 season.

So what led to Ruth's absurd season?

He simply invented a new way to hit a baseball ... and he moved to a much, much better home run park in New York. Let's start with the park; Ruth played in Fenway Park in 1919, and it was not a good slugger's park for lefties. Ruth hit nine home runs in 63 games there.

On the road? He mashed TWENTY home runs in 63 starts. Remember, this was 1919, a year still considered very much a part of Deadball. It wasn't new baseballs or new rules or any of that stuff that led to Ruth's home run barrage. He actively decided that hitting home runs was the way to go. He developed his swing to hit home runs. He accepted a few more strikeouts to hit home runs.

Then he was sold to the Yankees, moved from Fenway to the much more slugger-friendly Polo Grounds, and he hit 29 home runs at home and 25 on the road, blowing up not only every record but every preconceived notion about what a baseball slugger looked like.

And he inspired a whole new generation of sluggers — **Lou Gehrig, Rogers Hornsby, Mel Ott, Jimmie Foxx**, etc. What does the game look like without Babe Ruth? I don't know, but I suspect it looks different. What does the high-jump look like without Dick Fosbury? What does today's NBA look like without Steph Curry?

There's a habit — one I sometimes fall into — of trying to put Babe Ruth in today's game as he was in 1920. Of course, that wouldn't work — **Adam Ottavino** is probably not wrong in saying he would strike out Babe Ruth every time if he were swinging a 42-ounce bat and had never seen a slider. But that's a little bit like saying that Aristotle would be a dummy today because he wouldn't know how to use an iPhone.

What I have come to think is that it's more likely that Babe Ruth growing up in today's world would reinvent the game in some way that we simply cannot conceive, the way **Shohei Ohtani** reinvents the game, the way **Mike Trout** reinvents the game, the way **Aaron Judge** reinvents the game. He was an athletic genius, a baseball genius, and it seems to me that genius is a rare thing that adapts to any time.

OPTIMISM AND AARON JUDGE

In 1968, **Frank Howard** turned 31 years old. Hondo's career had been pretty turbulent. He won Rookie of the Year for the Dodgers in 1960, when he hit 23 home runs, but manager **Walter Alston** did not believe in him at all. Howard was an oddity; he stood 6-foot-7, and as his career went on, he probably weighed close to 275 pounds. He was an All-America basketball player at

Ohio State in 1957. The NBA's Philadelphia Warriors drafted him. The Dodgers got him instead, with a \$100,000-plus signing bonus.

Even so, Alston thought Howard was too big and too slow and missed too many pitches to play every day, so he platooned Howard the next couple of seasons. Before the 1964 season, Howard threatened to retire for what he called personal reasons. It turned out those personal reasons probably had quite a lot to do with the fact that he wasn't getting to play every day. "I'll never be content until I have a chance to play a full season — I want to see what I can do."

But Alston didn't play Howard any more in 1964 than he had before, and Howard hit just .226, and it was all kind of miserable, so the Dodgers traded him to Washington, where Howard was finally given the chance to play every day. In 1967, at age 30, Howard mashed a career-high 36 home runs, though he hit just .256.

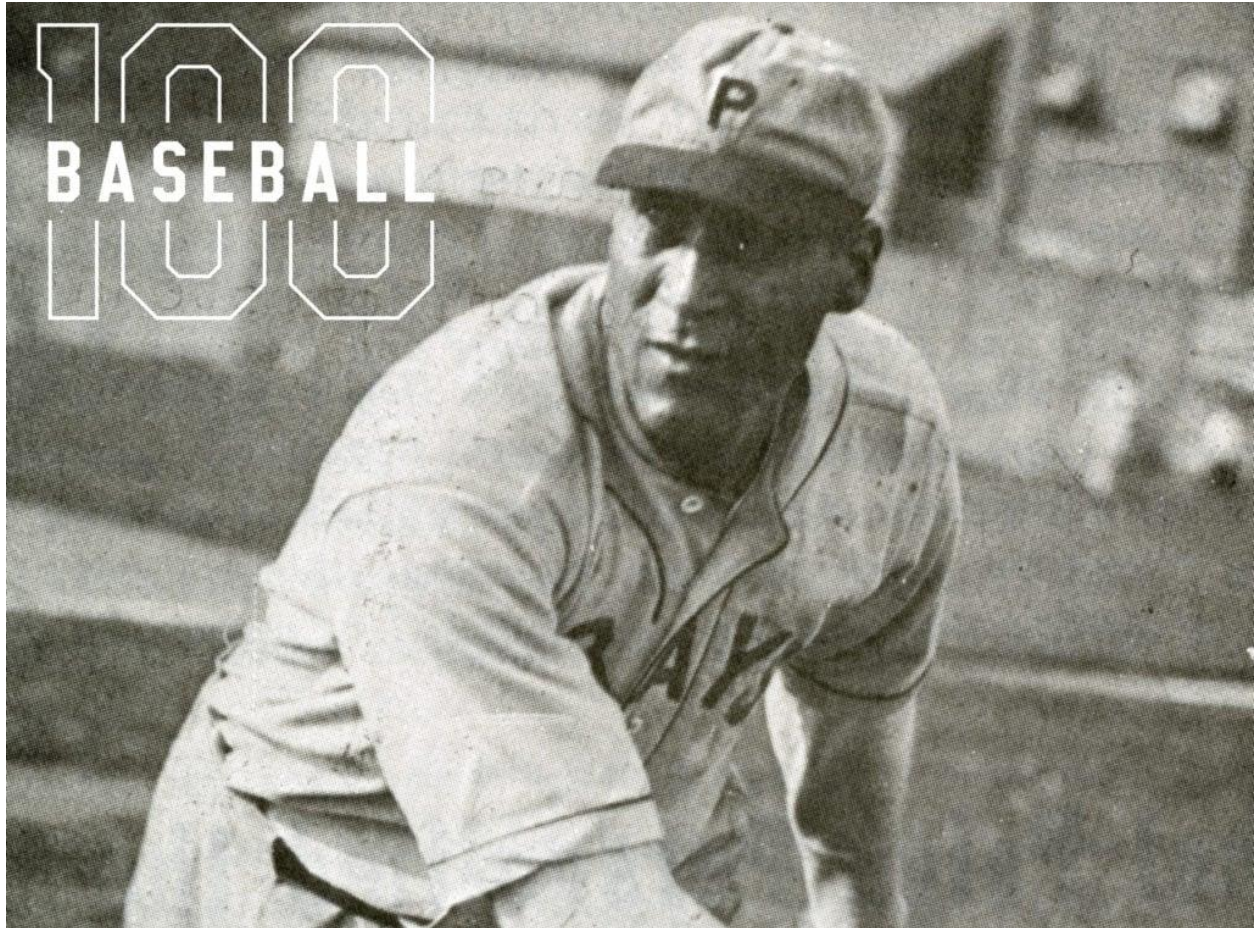
Why do I bring any of this up? Because, as mentioned, in 1968 Howard turned 31 — and for the next three years, he was a holy terror. Even as pitching dominated the game, he hit .284/.386/.558 with a 173 OPS+ over those three years, and he averaged 45 home runs per season. And again, remember, this was when hitters barely stood a chance.

Well, **Aaron Judge** turns 31 this year. There has been some questions about how well he will age because he's 6-foot-7, weighs close to 300 pounds probably, and has a lot of swing-and-miss in his game. There have been many who believe that his crazy 2022 season will not only be a career year, it will be an absurd outlier.

But you know what? Maybe not. I think the Frank Howard comparison is pretty apt. Once Howard hit his 30s and stayed healthy, he was his best self. I'm not saying Judge can improve on .311/.425/.686 with 133 runs, 131 RBIs, 62 homers and so on.

But I'm not saying he CANNOT improve on it, either.

SMOKEY JOE WILLIAMS



In April of 1952, the Pittsburgh Courier put together a panel of 31 experts — “thirty-one of the top baseball men in the country,” is how they were described — and had them pick what the paper called “The All-Time ... All-America Baseball Team.” The famous team has sometimes been called “The All-Negro Leagues Team,” but it was not exactly that. It was, instead, a collection of the greatest black players from 1910 to 1952.

Now, because it was 1952, there is not much space between “greatest black players” and “greatest Negro Leagues players” since it was only five years after **Jackie Robinson** broke the color line in baseball. But, this is the point: Robinson is on the team even though he only played one year in the Negro Leagues. He is the only player on the starting team who made it largely for his awesomeness in the big leagues.

The team is fascinating on many levels, including, as you will see, the voting for today’s featured star, **Smokey Joe Williams**. But before we get to him, let’s look at the all-time lineup. If you are a substantial fan of the Negro Leagues you will probably recognize all the names ... except one.

1B: Buck Leonard

2B: Jackie Robinson

SS: Pop Lloyd

3B: Oliver Marcelle

LF: Monte Irvin

CF: Oscar Charleston

RF: Cristóbal Torriente

C: Josh Gibson

Seven of these players are in the Hall of Fame ... and one is not. It is the name that you probably do not recognize — Oliver Marcelle.

It's no fluke that Marcelle is on this team. When the great Pop Lloyd put together his greatest all-time team, Marcelle was on it. When Smokey Joe Williams put together his greatest all-time team, his third baseman was also Oliver Marcelle. Of all the forgotten great players in Negro Leagues history, it seems pretty clear that Marcelle is the most forgotten.

He was a Creole from Louisiana, and they called him "The Ghost" — **Buck O'Neil** used to say that was because he tended to disappear after games. On the field, he was a defensive wizard at third base, a line-drive hitter and a volcano of rage. His talent was impossible to miss; after one exhibition game against Major Leaguers, they began calling him "the Black **Frankie Frisch**."

His fury was also impossible to miss. He supposedly took a bat to the head of the great Oscar Charleston (O'Neil always doubted the story, believing that if Marcelle had, Charleston would have killed him), had part of his nose bitten off in another fight and was arrested for being on the scene when a man was murdered (he was released after it was determined he didn't fire the gun). He was traded by the Lincoln Giants twice in the same year, 1925, because the team kept going back and forth on whether or not his extraordinary talent made him worth the trouble.

"He has been a stormy petrel throughout his entire career in New York," the New York Age reported after one of the trades. "Possessed of an unusually quick temper, he got the enmity of many fans because of his willingness to argue and even fight with umpires."

So why is Marcelle not in the Hall of Fame while all the other players on the list are, along with two third basemen he convincingly beat in the poll (**Judy Johnson and Ray Dandridge**)? It could be his temper. It could be his questionable off-the-field exploits. But I think it's something else, something to do with storytelling.

See, the statistics from the Negro Leagues are, by definition, incomplete. It isn't just because the record-keeping was less diligent. The Leagues themselves were not set up for keeping statistics. The seasons were a jumble of league games, town games, exhibition games, doubleheaders after doubleheaders (sometimes on the same day). Some of the games were

played in the nation's best stadiums in the biggest cities and some of the games were played on rock-hard fields surrounded by rickety benches in small towns.

And so what are we left with?

The stories. The legends. The memories. Marcelle, maybe because he played in the early days of the Negro Leagues, maybe because he was difficult to know, maybe because his steady style of play didn't inspire folk tales, disappeared even more than others. Was he the best third baseman in the Negro Leagues?

The people in 1952 who saw him and everyone else play sure thought so.

And that leads us to Smokey Joe Williams.

In addition to picking a lineup, the Pittsburgh Courier experts also chose a pitching staff. And you know where that naturally leads: The great Satchel Paige, the most famous and the most celebrated pitcher in the history of the Negro Leagues, got 19 votes, more than any position player with the exceptions of Josh Gibson and Oscar Charleston.

But Smokey Joe Williams got 20 votes.

Now, yes, it's true, you can make too much of this. We're talking about a one-vote difference — and it's not like Paige and Williams were competing. The voters got to choose four pitchers for the staff. And they made it clear with their votes that those two were miles ahead of every other pitcher (**Bullet Rogan** finished third in the voting with nine votes).

But, yes, it is actually pretty incredible. As mentioned, Paige was the all-time Negro Leagues legend. His exploits were so incredible that sportswriters in the white press would routinely write about him while he was in the Negro Leagues — that simply didn't happen for almost anybody else. He was bigger than life, the pitcher that black and white players alike idolized and adored.

And Paige was at the height of his fame in 1952. He was 45 years old (at least), but he was pitching brilliantly for the St. Louis Browns (he made the All-Star team and got an MVP vote) and he was telling his stories, and people simply could not get enough of him. He was one of the biggest sports stars in America.

Smokey Joe Williams, meanwhile, had died the year before virtually unknown. He pitched some of his best ball before the Negro Leagues even existed.

And he got more votes than Satchel Paige.

Wow. How good must he have been?

They called him “Smokey Joe” (sometimes spelled “Smoky”) and they also called him “Cyclone Joe” and the man did not seem to have a preference between the two nicknames. Both got the point across and the point was this: He threw hard. How hard? Again, we have to rely on the legend.

One Negro Leaguer said that he threw so hard that he needed two catchers per game because the first catcher’s hand would be too swollen to go on after the fifth inning.

Williams grew up in a town called Seguin, Texas, not far from San Antonio. There isn’t too much known about his childhood but he said that he became a pitcher “probably as soon as I discovered I had an arm.” He loved the way a baseball felt in his hand, loved it so much that he would carry one around in his pocket wherever he went. At night, he would put the baseball under his pillow and rest his head on it.

He was a late bloomer ... or anyway, it seems that way. We don’t know because, like with Paige, we don’t know when Williams was born. At different times, people thought he was born in 1879, 1885 and 1886. The settled year seems to be 1885, which means he was 25 years old when he signed to play with the Chicago Black Giants in 1910. This a full decade before the Negro Leagues officially came into existence.

In his first game, he supposedly threw the ball so hard that Hall of Famer pitcher and pioneer Rube Foster said to him, “Slow down a little there.”

To which Williams replied: “If I really throw hard, they won’t see the ball at all.”

He pitched for the next 25 years. Williams was 6-foot-4, weighed about 210, and he bounced all around the United States as well as Cuba and Mexico. He was a sensation everywhere he went, not unlike Paige — though he didn’t have the storytelling gifts of Ol’ Satchel. (Who did?)

“When I wasn’t pitching, I had to play the outfield,” Williams said. “In those days, there was no two-platoon system. You had to pitch to everyone, lefties as well as righties. And you had to finish every game you started unless there was an emergency. We had no pinch-hitters. Couldn’t afford them.”

We do know Williams threw thunderbolts, and not just from his nickname or the legends. He threw so hard that he was matched up regularly in exhibitions with two of the hardest throwers and greatest Major League pitchers of the day, **Walter Johnson** and **Pete Alexander**. Observers said that Williams threw at least as hard as the two big-leaguers (some said he threw harder). One legend, possibly true, is that Hall of Famer **Ross Youngs** saw Williams’ fastball and he coined the nickname “Smokey Joe.”

“If you have ever witnessed the speed of a pebble in a storm,” Negro Leagues owner Frank Leland said, “you have not even then seen the equal of (Williams’) speed.”

He didn't just throw hard — he had impeccable control (again, like Paige). That combination made him nearly unhittable. Bozeman Bulger, one of the pioneers of sports writing and a man who ghostwrote Giants' manager **John McGraw's** newspaper columns, said that Williams was as good a pitcher as **Christy Mathewson** — and that was telling because Bulger and Mathewson were close friends.

Ty Cobb said that Williams would have been a “sure 30-game winner in the Major Leagues.”

To repeat: That's Ty Cobb.

“You have a little respect when you face guys like that,” Hall of Famer Frankie Frisch said of Williams.

Waite Hoyt, many years later when he was broadcasting, saw **Bob Gibson** pitch and said that he had seen a pitcher like Gibson before, and his name was Smokey Joe Williams.

The statistical record, slight as it unfortunately is, backs everything up. Williams was 45 years old when he struck out 27 Kansas City Monarchs in 12 innings in one of the first professional games under lights (though, to be fair, nobody could see too well under those portable lights; Monarchs pitcher **Chet Brewer** struck out 19 the same day).

Eighteen years earlier, while pitching for the New York Lincoln Giants, he threw a no-hitter to outduel a great Negro Leagues pitcher named **Cannonball Dick Redding** (who missed making the Pittsburgh Courier's all-time team by just one vote).

Most of all, Williams dominated white teams in exhibition games. In his life, he beat Walter Johnson, Pete Alexander, **Chief Bender**, **Rube Marquard**, Waite Hoyt, just to name the Hall of Famers. James Riley's research pointed to Williams going 20-3 against white exhibition teams, including one game against the New York Giants when he struck out 19 (that was actually one of his three losses).

There's joy and sadness in studying the Negro Leagues — joy in discovering such wonderful players as Smokey Joe, and sadness that he was denied the chance to play in the Major Leagues and denied his place in baseball history. We can do something about the second part at least. The Pittsburgh Courier team is a snapshot, a chance to understand just how great some of the players were.

Many years later, by the way, Buck O'Neil asked his friend Satchel Paige how it felt to finish second to Smokey Joe in the poll.

“They got that right,” Paige said.

1991 ATLANTA BRAVES

(Continuing our series of memorable teams from historicbaseball.com)

After finishing 65-97 and in last place in the division, the Braves had only one way to go -- up. And that's just what this team managed to do.

The Atlanta squad in 1991 had the pieces of a pitching staff that would dominated the 1990s. The previous year, Atlanta had made a trade that sent former Braves star **Dale Murphy** to the Philadelphia Phillies. In return, the Braves received little that would help them in their championship run. But, the move did open the way for Atlanta to go out and acquire much-needed free agents and to elevate some players from the minor league system.

Tom Glavine (20-11, 2.55 ERA) and **John Smoltz** (14-13, 3.80 ERA) began to establish themselves in 1991 as pitching stars. Joining them in the rotation were **Steve Avery** (18-8, 3.38 ERA), **Charlie Liebrandt** (15-13, 3.49 ERA) and **Kent Mercker** (5-3, 2.58 ERA).

The team lacked a dominating closer but picked up 48 saves with its closer by committee of **Alejandro Pena** (11 saves), **Juan Berenguer** (17), **Mike Stanton** (7) and Mercker (6).

In the field, Atlanta put together a lineup that would change entirely by the end of the decade. Still this lineup would power the Braves for several seasons. **Sid Bream** (11 HR, 45 RBI), **Terry Pendleton** (22 HR, 86 RBI) and **Otis Nixon** (72 SB) gave the team a much-needed lift from its free-agent signings. **Ron Gant** (32 HR, 105 RBI) and **Dave Justice** (21 HR, 87 RBI) provided two hitters that the Braves had developed in their system. **Deion Sanders** played in 53 games. **Bobby Cox** was early in his second stint as Braves manager.

The Braves began their run to the World Series with a win over the Pittsburgh Pirates for the National League Championship. Back then the Braves played in the NL west. They finished 1 game ahead of the Dodgers.

The Braves' opponents in the World Series were the Minnesota Twins, another team that had finished the previous season in last place in its division. In the seventh game of that series, the Twins' **Jack Morris** shut out the Braves for a 1-0 victory and the championship.

Atlanta fans would be disappointed in the outcome, but they were watching the beginnings of one of the most dominant teams of the 1990s. The Braves won the Division Championship in 1991, beginning a string of consecutive division titles that would be broken in 2006.

R.I.P. JOE PEPITONE



Roger Maris, Mickey Mantle and Joe Pepitone at 1963 World Series in St. Louis

Joe Pepitone, a powerful and popular player who spent eight seasons with the Yankees during the 1960s, passed away on Monday. He was 82 years old.

A Brooklyn native, Pepitone debuted with the Yankees at the age of 21 in 1962. After the team traded **Moose Skowron** following that season, Pepitone became the Yankees' everyday first baseman as well as one of their best run producers. From 1963-66, he clubbed 104 home runs, made three All-Star teams and won two Gold Gloves.

Pepitone replaced a hobbled Mickey Mantle as the Yankees' center fielder in 1967 and 1968. Once Mantle retired following that latter season, Pepitone moved back to first base for the '69 campaign and earned another Gold Glove.

After winning 10 World Series in the previous 16 years, the Yankees lost in a sweep to the Los Angeles Dodgers in 1963 — Mr. Pepitone mishandled a throw for a three-base error that cost the Yankees the final game — and in seven games to the St. Louis Cardinals in 1964.

The team wouldn't return to the Series until 1976, and Mr. Pepitone, whose own performance leveled off, never did. His Yankee teams finished no higher than fifth through 1969

Pepitone was traded to the Astros prior to the 1970 season and spent time with the Cubs and Braves before playing in his final Major League game in 1973.

The left-handed slugger returned to the Yankees following his playing days. He was hired by the club as a Minor League coach in 1980 and was instrumental in teaching a young **Don Mattingly** the intricacies of first base.

Pepitone briefly served as a Major League coach for the Yankees in 1982 and also worked in the team's front office during the 1980s.

Mr. Pepitone was a fan favorite in New York. They called him Pepi, a local boy who came to the Yankees in 1962 with a sweet, compact, left-handed swing, a slick glove, and the personality of an irrepressible joyrider from the neighborhood.

His renegade nature would eventually cost him. He earned a reputation for wildness and unreliability, and in the 1980s, long after his career had ended, he went to prison on a drug charge. But at the start it was big fun.

A cutup in the locker room, a jabberer with the fans, Mr. Pepitone wore his hair pouffy and long; he was famously the first Yankee to bring a hair dryer into the clubhouse and supplemented his coiffure with toupees. And he led the life of a late-night social prowler, spreading money around, chasing women, and hitting notorious glam-and-trouble spots like the Copacabana. Before the arrival in New York of Joe Namath, he was, well, a poor man's Joe Namath.

Like Namath, the brash New York Jets quarterback christened Broadway Joe, Mr. Pepitone could play. A slender kid with surprising power, he also had the arm, speed, and judgment to play more than 400 games in center field during his 12-year career.

For most of his career, Mr. Pepitone undermined his own gifts with his rambunctious and self-destructive behavior. He had money problems and marital problems. His nightlife began after night games; he drank with and without his teammates and was no stranger to drugs. He claimed at one point to have turned Mantle and **Whitey Ford** on to marijuana, and in an

interview in Rolling Stone magazine in 2015, he recalled that when he was with the Cubs, fans in the bleachers would throw packets of joints and cocaine at him in the outfield, and he would hide them in the ivy that covered the stadium wall.

“Used to be I was always the first person at the ballpark, and the first one to leave; next thing you know, people are wondering why I’m hanging out at the ballpark so long,” Mr. Pepitone told Rolling Stone. When the manager, **Leo Durocher**, asked him what he was doing hanging around, he would say he was going to get a rubdown from the trainer.

“Then I’d be out in center field with my shorts on, looking through the ivy to find my dope,” he said. “I loved Chicago!”

After retiring, he played some professional softball, was in the bar business for a time, and in the early 1980s worked briefly for the Yankees as a hitting coach. In 1985, he was riding in a car with two other people when police stopped them for running a red light and found drugs — cocaine, heroin, and quaaludes — and a loaded handgun in the car.

Mr. Pepitone was convicted on misdemeanor counts of possession of drugs and drug paraphernalia and served about half of a six-month sentence.

“I find it particularly sad,” the judge, acting Justice Allan Marrus of state Supreme Court, told him at his sentencing, “when someone who graced New York in Yankee pinstripes will now have to serve his time with the New York Department of Correction in their prison stripes.”

Mr. Pepitone later worked in public relations for the Yankees and mostly stayed out of trouble, though he did plead guilty to drunken driving after losing control of his car in the Midtown Tunnel in 1995. He was married and divorced three times.

For many in the game — players, coaches, sports writers and even umpires — Mr. Pepitone was a lovable if self-centered, entertaining if exasperating, hugely talented if hugely troubled guy.

“I wish I could buy you for what you’re really worth,” Mantle once said to him, according to the website Baseball-Almanac.com, “then sell you for what you think you’re worth.”

Fittingly, in a 1993 Seinfeld episode Cosmo Kramer claimed to have beamed Pepitone at a fantasy camp, triggering a benches clearing brawl.

REGIONAL SPORTS NETWORKS

The Joe Sheehan Newsletter

In a move that had been expected for a while, Diamond Sports Group, the owner of broadcast rights for 14 major league teams, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection on Tuesday. The

move is part of a plan that will allow Diamond to eliminate much of its debt while continuing to operate its 19 regional sports networks, which also hold the rights to NBA and NHL teams' games, as well as those of a number of smaller-sport franchises.

Parallel to this, Warner Bros. Discovery, which owns the AT&T Sportsnet regional sports networks, is looking to exit the business as well. Their networks carry the games of the Rockies, Astros, Mariners, and Pirates. Altogether, more than half of MLB teams now find themselves with a core plank of their business model -- rights fees paid to them by RSNs -- in partial or total collapse.

Before we wade too deep into this, it's important to note that while "cord cutting" is a part of this story, it is not in any way the cause of the current crisis. Televising baseball games locally is still a profitable endeavor, if perhaps less so than it was four years ago. The problem for Diamond Sports Group is the debt its owner, Sinclair Broadcasting, saddled it with at DSG's creation in 2019. DSG's fate is more closely akin to stories from the last decade of retail outlets and media companies being purchased with amounts of debt it could never possibly repay, then slowly being destroyed in service of that debt.

Nevertheless, the DSG bankruptcy and the WBD withdrawal push MLB to a future it had been trying to stave off. For now, MLB has made clear that one way or another, fans in the cities affected by this situation will be able to see their teams' games. Two weeks from Opening Day, the details are unclear, but we can expect some combination of RSNs, local television, and streaming to carry the games. MLB, in fact, seems to be taking this as an opportunity to change the access in-market fans have to their teams. If the RSN contracts become void in the bankruptcy, then so do the exclusivity clauses -- the kids call them "blackouts" -- within them.

In the short term, it's a full-employment program for lawyers. For more, I'd encourage you to read a great Ben Clemens piece from six weeks ago, and another by Rob Mains from around the same time. Over at The Athletic, Daniel Kaplan has a summary of yesterday's news, and *Forbes's* Maury Brown is all over it as well. This is a fluid and complicated situation, not least because, as with the pandemic three years ago, it happens at a time when MLB teams have more to lose than their winter-sports peers do.

What interests me, though, are the long-term effects in a league where local-TV revenue disparities have been a topic for 35 years. I think this could lead to a war that costs MLB a season and perhaps even leads to a Premier League Baseball split, as we saw in England in 1992.

Let's take a step back and look at the model. Baseball teams sell their local broadcast rights to regional sports networks for varying sums that are broadly proportionate to the size of their television market. The RSNs go to the cable and satellite distributors and say, "If your customers want to watch the Mudville Nine, you have to carry our network." The RSN and the distributor agree on a price based on the total number of customers the network reaches through that distributor. For example, in 2021, ESPN received \$7.64 a month for every cable

customer it reached. ESPN has always been an outlier, and this *Variety* piece shows that the other most popular national channels come in at \$1-2/month.

The RSNs, with their live sports rights, come in not far behind ESPN. The various Bally's channels were getting more than \$5/month from distributors, as estimated by CNBC. Having the Mudville Nine was a huge part of the RSNs' value. Baseball teams provide an enormous amount of content across six, now seven months with the number of exhibition games televised. Those games get replayed, they get paired with shoulder programming, the networks produce interview shows and kids' shows. For many of these RSNs, the baseball team was their pathway to those sweet monthly rates, with total revenue based not on the popularity of the Mudville Nine, but on the number of people the distributor reached. That's how they justified paying the Nine tens of millions of dollars a year.

That's the relationship that has broken down. The local broadcast rights fees of many MLB teams were propped up by the RSN/distributor model that paid RSNs according to the distribution of the channel. MLB teams were perhaps the biggest beneficiaries of this system. The system was springing a leak as customers left cable and satellite services, but with so many teams having long-term deals with their RSNs, it was a problem MLB seemingly had time to address.

The DSG bankruptcy and WBD abandonment eliminate that buffer period. Whether the teams get all their rights fees in 2023 or 2024 or even 2025, what's certain is that the chain has been broken, the line from customers to distributors to RSNs to teams is no more. The Mariners, to pick a team, are estimated to take in \$89 million a year from AT&T Sportsnet, which may no longer exist. To patch that hole, they would need to sell 890,000 Mariners-only streaming subscriptions at \$100/year. In 2019, the last year for which I have data, an average of 55,000 people a night watched the Mariners. If you double that, because the Mariners are a lot more attractive now, you get to 110,000/night. Convince all of them to buy a streaming package, and you only have to charge \$809/year to break even.

It's worse at the low end. The Reds get \$48 million a year from a DSG. Well, they did. How many people do you think are going to pay even \$100/year to watch the 2023 Reds? The 2023 Pirates? The 2023 Tigers? There is just no way, in the short term, to replace the guaranteed money in these deals. There may be no way in even the medium term. Even if you can, you'll have teams unsure from year to year what their local revenue will be.

I mentioned that there are 18 teams affected by this. Here are the 12 that are not:

Los Angeles Dodgers
Chicago White Sox
New York Yankees
Boston Red Sox
Chicago Cubs
Washington Nationals

Philadelphia Phillies
San Francisco Giants
New York Mets
Baltimore Orioles
Toronto Blue Jays
Oakland A's

That's a mix of teams that own their networks, Comcast/NBC teams, and MASN teams, plus the one Canadian team. It's also a list of teams you'd need to make any sort of all-in-one streaming product work.

The last 30-odd years of baseball economics have been a fight over the distribution of local-television revenue. The 1994 strike, at its core, was caused by the owners agreeing to a revenue-sharing deal among themselves and then trying to make the players pay for it. As the gap in local-TV revenue has grown, MLB has created a system to share that money among its teams, not equally, but in a fashion that mitigates the gap in potential revenue among markets. Evan Drellich reported, in 2021, that the extremes in 2019 were \$70 million net in for the Marlins, and \$90 million net out for the Dodgers. That's based on a formula in the Collective Bargaining Agreement in which teams pay 48% of their local revenues into a shared pool that is then redistributed equally among all 30 teams.

The teams affected by the DSG bankruptcy are, by and large, revenue-sharing recipients. I am not sure how much more you can reasonably ask the Dodgers or Yankees or Cubs to transfer to the Marlins and Brewers and Royals, but if that CBA formula is applied to future seasons, with some teams getting full value from their TV deals and others getting nothing or close to it, we're going to find out where the limit is.

That's why I think a war is coming. The collapse of the RSN model exacerbates the revenue gaps that currently exist, and gaps in local revenue have been a sore point for a long time. The teams affected by this are going to expect the others to help -- or perhaps more to the point, adhere to the revenue-sharing formula in the CBA -- and I'm just not sure how much more you can get from those teams. I also don't think that the Dodgers or Yankees or Red Sox will be eager to give up the local exclusivity that undergirds their RSNs to help build an MLB.tv product with no blackouts.

There are a few ways this could go. It could be 1994, where teams agree on a deal in which large-revenue teams will rescue small-revenue ones, so long as they can all get the players to pay for it through restrictions on the market. I am not sure how that would end up, but I am certain we'd lose a season finding out.

The other possibility is, as I mentioned above, Premier League Baseball, with 18-24 of the healthiest teams splitting off into their own circuit. It's already very difficult to structure a league with teams in cities with eight million people and cities with 800,000 people. If teams' ability to generate revenue diverges further, it may be impossible to hold a 30-team

league together. MLB is not the NFL, a national product broadcast from 32 TV studios 17 times a year. Local revenue matters in baseball, and the gaps in local revenue, post-RSN model, may become too great to overcome.

There's something you'll hear..."The Yankees can't play themselves, they need opponents." This is true, but they don't necessarily need 29 opponents. Over the next four years, we may find out just how many they do need.

FOR MLB BROADCASTERS, PITCH CLOCKS MEAN ADJUSTING TO A WHOLE NEW BALLGAME

Chad Jennings, The Athletic

The first at-bat took about 90 seconds. Padres center fielder **Trent Grisham** worked the count full before White Sox ace **Lance Lynn** struck him out with a fastball. The next at-bat took less than 30 seconds, a two-pitch groundout to shortstop. A minute later, Lynn threw his 11th pitch of the inning — an efficient number, but not unusual — and **Jake Cronenworth** flied out harmlessly to center field. It was the White Sox spring training opener, and the top half of the third inning had taken 3 minutes and 35 seconds.

In the booth for NBC Sports Chicago, veteran play-by-play man Jason Benetti and his longtime broadcast partner **Steve Stone** were not exactly confused, but they certainly were trying to get their bearings.

"The inning is over, I believe," Stone said, disbelief in his voice.

"Are we talking faster?" Benetti asked, still on the air.

"I think so, yeah," Stone answered as the broadcast went to a commercial break.

Benetti and Stone had worked together for seven years, and Stone had been an on-air analyst more than twice that long, but baseball's new pitch clock waits for no one.

"It's like waking up in a different hotel room, not knowing where you put your shoes, where the bathroom is, and the light doesn't work," Benetti said recently. "You're walking to where you think it is, and you walk directly into a wall."

Welcome to baseball broadcasting in 2023, where the best in the business are suddenly fumbling in the dark, trying not to stub their toes or bump into one another.

Their natural cadence and innate sense of timing?

"It feels extremely off for me," Orioles play-by-play man Geoff Arnold said.

That done-it-a-thousand-times comfort of calling a game for a live audience?

“It was like being at an amusement park and going on a ride,” Red Sox broadcaster Mike Monaco said. “It just moved fast, every part of it.”

Decades of baseball knowledge that can be recalled at a moment’s notice?

“It’s a lot of extra stuff to think about that wasn’t there before,” said the voice of the Angels, Wayne Randazzo. “And it’s all coming at once.”

This offseason, Major League Baseball added a series of rule changes meant to add action and improve pace of play. Defensive shifts were restricted, bases were enlarged, and a pitch clock was introduced to decrease the amount of time featuring pitchers and batters doing nothing but kicking at the dirt, adjusting their batting gloves, and thinking about the next pitch. The impact has been swift and unmistakable. What used to be three-hour games are now taking two-and-a-half hours, sometimes even less. The change has been jarring for players and often confusing for fans.

Caught in the middle are hundreds of broadcasters, producers, sideline reporters and camera operators tasked with subtly, but fundamentally, changing the way an at-home audience watches and listens to the national pastime.

“I’ve been beating this drum for a while,” Benetti said of improving pace of play. “That said, I did not really conceptualize what was going to happen to us, because there are 30 telecasts that are all having these discussions in one way or another.”

Baseball broadcasters have always been the sport’s most intimate storytellers. Through car radios and living room televisions, they speak to fans in real time, narrating events as they unfold, and providing context and history when the games slow down.

In recent years, they’ve had a lot of dead air to fill. According to MLB figures, the average time between batted ball events in the 1950s was 2 1/2 minutes. But by the 2020s, that number had soared to nearly 4 minutes.

“It takes too much time for nothing to happen,” Cubs and ESPN broadcaster Jon “Boog” Sciambi said. “That’s what we’ve been watching. And for broadcasters, that’s basically an invitation to say stupid s—.”

Sometimes the stupid s— is the fun part. The game’s best analysts enlighten with instant feedback, and the most adept play-by-play voices keep the conversation fluid and entertaining. The most popular broadcast booths are not simply describing what they’re seeing, they’re enhancing the experience.

"If I'm just doing a game recap every day, that's boring," Cardinals play-by-play man Chip Caray said.

Boring for the broadcasters. Boring for the audience. Boring for the game itself. And the entire sport is trying to find a better balance of tradition without tedium. The pitch clock allows only 15 or 20 seconds between pitches (depending on whether there's a runner on base), and each countdown replaces inaction with action. It rushes an especially slow pitcher and disturbs an overly meticulous batter. Once a ball is in play, the game is more or less the same. It's the space between that's changed, on the field and in the booth.

"Play-by-play is still going to do what the play-by-play guy does," Yankees broadcaster Michael Kay said. "But in order to analyze a play, I think that's going to be a bear because that's a lot to get in."

Some of the changes are logistical. Where do regional broadcasts fit their ad reads and sponsored content? Is there still time for a promotional teaser coming back from commercial break? If a sideline reporter has a 90-second bit, is it worth the risk of missing an entire at-bat?

"You have to find opportunities and not just cram things in," Rockies broadcast producer Alison Vigil said.

Before she worked her first game under the new rules, a colleague told Vigil that broadcasting this spring training was "like doing baseball shot out of a cannon." Viewers and listeners might not notice all of the changes, but for the professionals behind the scenes, they're akin to squeezing the same old puzzle into a smaller frame. Some of the pieces simply won't fit. And, really, this puzzle has even more pieces.

Television networks are now contending with when to show the pitch clock and for how long. Some are working on ways to show the number of pitcher pickoffs and step-offs — disengagements, in MLB parlance, which are suddenly relevant — in their scorebugs.

"I love the process of trying to figure out how to effectively deliver sequences of information in a small space," ESPN's vice president of production Phil Orlins said. "... That may make us strange people, but we have a lot of fun debating this on Zoom calls."

To make all of the pieces fit, networks will have to make difficult decisions about what to keep and what to cut. And not all of the excess is necessarily expendable, especially as the home audience tries to keep up with the new rules and the influx of new information coming their way. The future of baseball broadcasts might have home run replays double-boxed, with a live shot of the player rounding the bases in one window and the replay being shown almost instantly in a second window. Sideline reports might become shorter, in-game anecdotes a little tighter, and instant analysis a little bit quicker.

"The listener makes an adjustment, too," A's radio play-by-play man Johnny Dostkow said.

Actually, Duskow might be the foremost expert on the topic. He joined Oakland's radio booth this offseason after decades of calling games in Triple A. He experienced the pitch clock last season when it was introduced in the minors, and like so many others, Duskow said he was skeptical.

"One thing I was worried about at first: will I be able to let the broadcast breathe and still get the stories in and still be effective with the play-by-play?" Duskow said. "And I think the answer is, yes. You can still let it breathe a little bit. Not even a little bit. You can still let it breathe, you just have to be more efficient with your stories."

It's not only efficiency that's being challenged, it's also effectiveness. Everyone is getting used to a new ballgame.

In the second inning of a game on March 1, the Angels executed a pickoff with runners at the corners. The play was easy enough to describe, but Randazzo did not immediately note the strategic ramifications. Under the new rules, each pickoff attempt increases the potential for a balk — pitchers are allowed limited disengagements — and in that situation, a balk would have scored the runner from third. The pickoff attempt was gutsy, and Randazzo was kicking himself later for not mentioning it on the air.

"That's something you would like to have in real-time to at least have a discussion about," Randazzo said.

That's especially true under these circumstances, in which audiences are less familiar with the rules and might need immediate explanations. Dodgers play-by-play man Joe Davis compared it to his 6-year-old playing T-ball and not understanding something as simple as a force out. Pickoffs and balks — not to mention balls and strikes — used to be as fundamental as a routine out at second base, but suddenly they're coming with a new set of wrinkles.

"It's not a great feeling to have to think about that kind of stuff," said Davis, who also calls games nationally for FOX Sports. "Players talk about not wanting to think about their mechanics. We don't want to think about things like that. It's a little scary going into the season."

Scary, but perhaps necessary. It seems few, if any, in the industry are arguing that a more efficient broadcast is going to be a bad thing. The reality is that for more than a decade, as baseball games got longer with less action between balls in play, on-air talent developed an internal clock to deal with the downtime. Stories didn't grow longer and in-game banter more prevalent out of pure narcissism. Broadcasters were faced with a problem — more time to fill — and the solution was to talk more. On the surface, that's easily rectified.

"All we've done is taken away a lot of the time-consuming garbage that ate up so much time," Caray said.

“You really felt like you were overfilling,” said Kay.

“As someone who is long-winded and a gasbag — and you can use that — there’s nothing bad about less of me,” Sciambi said.

That’s a funny line, and it makes a self-deprecating point, but the truth is, there is value in those on-air conversations. Broadcasters had dead air to fill, and they filled it — sometimes with rambling stories, but quite often with good, worthwhile information. They wrote notes in the margins of their scorebooks and kept tidbits filed away on their computers so that, as if out of thin air, they conjured perfect nuggets at just the right times.

Now, they’re finding, a look at a computer screen or a glance into a notebook might cause them to miss a pitch clock violation.

“And if you’re (at home) listening to the game and you just heard a batter step in and all of a sudden the count is 0-1, you’re wondering what you missed,” Randazzo said.

To keep up with the changing pace, some broadcasters are taking a cue from baseball’s bench players and utility infielders: they’re making the most of their versatility.

“A lot of us also call basketball,” Arnold said. “You’re kind of drawing on that experience a lot more.”

Basketball play-by-play is faster and more urgent than baseball. There’s less on-air banter and rarely enough time to share a lengthy anecdote or look up an in-the-moment statistic. That might be useful practice, but it’s worth wondering how much of that style should cross over from the court to the diamond.

When calling basketball, it’s common for a play-by-play broadcaster to count down an expiring shot clock to build tension and anticipation. *Five on the shot clock! He dribbles into the lane. Shot clock’s down to two!* Basketball lends itself to such edge-of-your-seat anticipation.

But baseball? Should a broadcaster really give a breathless countdown as the pitch clock nears zero? *Five on the pitch clock! The pitcher comes set. Pitch clock down to two!*

“It (doesn’t) sound like it should even be part of the vernacular,” Randazzo said.

“It feels a little bit like you’re defusing a bomb in an action movie,” Benetti said. “Baseball never has had that attached to it. I don’t want baseball to become a MacGruber episode.”

Television networks are now debating how prominently — and how often — the pitch clock should appear on the screen. Should it be constantly counting down in the corner of the broadcast? Should it appear only at key moments? Only when it’s nearing zero? Showing the clock when there are 10 seconds left seems to be a popular solution, at least for now.

“It needs to be highlighted at the right time,” said Orlins, who oversees ESPN’s baseball production. “It needs to be clear and simple but bold enough to get it. But I think there are going to be a lot of innings and maybe even games where it’s just not that big a factor.”

Last season’s minor-league experiment showed that as players got used to the pitch clock, violations became far less frequent. The same is sure to happen at the major-league level this season, and as players adjust, fans will grow comfortable, and the clock will require less on-air attention. But that’s going to take time.

“I think it’s incumbent on us to teach the viewer what this is,” said Andy Jacobson, lead producer of ESPN Sunday Night Baseball. “We can’t just assume our viewers know it at this point, especially to start the year. ... We need to say, here’s what this clock is, here’s where it is. Hopefully over some time, it becomes like so much of the things that we now take for granted on scoreboards.”

The great Dodgers broadcaster Vin Scully used to invite listeners to “pull up a chair,” as if they should be enjoying each ballgame on their front porch with a glass of lemonade. That ethos lives on today. When asked, every broadcaster interviewed for this story said he had no intention of adding dramatic countdowns to their play-by-play, unless perhaps repeat violations had become an issue in a specific game. Building countdown tension with every pitch, Arnold said, “is completely inconsistent with that feeling and that vibe and that baseball realization.”

Baseball broadcasts didn’t always have fancy graphics and instant replay and every statistic a mouse click away. They had only the game, its players and its storytellers. Davis, who’s Scully’s replacement in Los Angeles, called the new pace, “beautifully snappy.”

“Eighty percent of Vin’s career, he worked with games that were this time or shorter,” Randazzo said. “So, I think there’s still a way to do it and still make it fun and entertaining and kind of a normal broadcast.”

The old ballgame has evolved before. It’s changed and adapted and changed again, but it’s always had a story to tell, with familiar voices to tell that story in innovative ways. They’ll do it again this summer. Tune in to the radio. Flip on the TV. Pull up a chair. The game’s about to start.

THIS WEEK’S TRIVIA CHALLENGE-ANSWERS

Three players to hit 300-plus homers while playing at least two-thirds of their games at second base.

1915-1937, Hall of Fame, 2x MVP, 301 HRs

ROGERS HORNSBY

1992-2008, MVP, 377 HRs

JEFF KENT. Kent leads the way with 377, having recorded 20 or more 12 times. He earned National League MVP honors after hitting .334 with 33 homers, 125 RBIs and a 1.021 OPS in 2000.

2005-2022, 335 HRs, on winning 2009 World series team, lefty hitter

ROBINSON CANO

Nine Hall of Fame managers managed in the 1970's. First year as a manager, last year as a manager, team(s) managed in the 1970' and what years. Name them.

Walter Alston	1954-1976	Dodgers 1970-1976
Bobby Cox	1978-2010	Braves 1978-1979
Leo Durocher	1939-1973	Astros 1972-1973
Whitey Herzog	1973-1990	Rangers 1973, Angels 1974, Royals 1975-1979
Tony La Russa	1979-2022	White Sox 1979
Tony Lasorda	1976-1996	Dodgers 1976-1979
Joe Torre	1977-2010	Mets 1977-1979
Earl Weaver	1968-1996	Orioles 1970-1979
Dick Williams	1967-1988	A's 1971-1973, Angels 1974-1976, Expos 1977-1979

I played at Arizona State with Reggie Jackson.

I'm a 4 time All Star third baseman. Finished Top 4 in MVP voting three times.

As a right-handed batter I hit .254 with 242 HRs and 1039 RBI.

I played in 3 World Series

My team career record 789 RBIs was broken by **Mark McGwire**.

Was a MLB GM after I retired a player.

SAL BANDO

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