

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

3.26.2023

Good morning baseball fans,

It starts for real this week. In this morning's edition--WBC notes, more on rules changes, a backup catcher's favorite pitchers, rules changes' impact on betting, how many feet between bases? Grab a coffee and enjoy.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE

I won the 2002 American League Cy Young.

I was a 3x All-Star.

In 2002 I led the AL in wins with 23, in 2008 I led the NL in losses with 17.

I threw left-handed.

I pitched 8 seasons with my AL team, 7 seasons with my NL team.

I won 165 games, threw 2576 innings and struck out 1885.

I went 6-3 with a 2.83 ERA in 9 post-season series. I won more post season games for my AL team but I went 1-0 for my NL team in my only World Series in 2012.

Who am I?

Three pitchers, all in the Divisional Era (since 1969) have made Opening Day starts for five different teams. The teams they started for are below. Team he pitched the most games for in bold. Two are Hall of Famers, the third was 1997 World Series MVP. All are right-handed. Name then.

Twins, Rangers, Pirates, Indians, Angels

Giants, Indians, Rangers, Padres, Mariners

Marlins, Giants, Expos, Twins, **Nationals**

Since 1950 7 pitchers have won 26 or more games in a season. (one did it twice)

1952 28-7 with 3 shutouts, 30 complete games, National League right hander.

1956 27-7 also won NL MVP. Right-hander.

1965 26-8, 8 shutouts, 382 strikeouts, 27 complete games, Cy Young

AND

1966 27-9, 27 complete games, Cy Young, NL left-hander.

1968 31-6, Cy Young and AL MVP, right-hander. 280 complete games, 280 strikeouts, AL right-hander.

1968 26-9, 30 complete games, NL right-hander

1972 27-10, 1.97 era, 30 complete games, Cy Young, NL left-hander

1990 27-6, pitched in the World Series against the Reds, AL right-hander

(answers at bottom)

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

For the last Cardinals outfielder to win NL Rookie of the Year you have to go back almost 40 years--**Vince Coleman** (1985). Other St. Louis winners include **Albert Pujols** (2001 as a 3B), relief pitcher **Todd Worrell** in 1986, OF **Bake McBride** in 1974, then all the way back to the 50's for **Bill Virdon** (OF 1955) and **Wally Moon** (OF 1954).

Looking over MLB.com's ranking of minor league systems (Yankees 13th) which has the Orioles first including 8 prospects in the top 100. Rankings are based on long-term Major League value, including factors such as potential impact talent, depth, proximity to the big leagues and balance between position players and pitchers as well as ceilings and floors.

Orioles system delivered **Adley Rutschman** who was AL Rookie of the Year runner-up last year and new No. 1 overall prospect SS/3B **Gunnar Henderson** who was called up for a cup of coffee late last year. The Orioles improved 33 games from 2021 to 2022. If ownership had invested this off season they might have been contenders, even in the tough AL east.

The Dodgers had an all-switch-hitting infield of the 1960s. 1B **Wes Parker**, 2B **Jim Lefebvre**, SS **Maury Wills**, 3B **Jim Gilliam**.

Former Red Sox president Larry Lucchino is now chairman of the Worcester Red Sox, the Triple-A affiliate of the Boston Red Sox; chairman of The Jimmy Fund, the philanthropic arm of the Dana–Farber Cancer Institute; and president/CEO emeritus of Fenway Sports Group, the parent company of the Boston Red Sox and Liverpool F.C. Lucchino was a sophomore bench player when Princeton made it to the NCAA Basketball Final Four with Bill Bradley in 1965.

This surprised me-- Over the last four complete seasons, 14 teams have won at least 100 games.

WBZ radio legend Jonny Miller will be attending his 65th Red Sox home opener March 30.

Eliminating infield shifts most likely help lefty hitters that hit hard ground balls to the pull side. So, who hit the most hard (90+ mph exit velocity) ground balls and line drives (zero to ten degrees launch angle) to the pull side last year? Last year's top three hit 28 balls that met the criteria—**Corey Seager** of the Rangers, **Charlie Blackmon** of the Rockies and **Freddie Freeman** of the Dodgers.

Joe Pepitone and John Lennon were both born on Oct. 9, 1940. That's almost as good as **Nomar Garciaparra** and Monica Lewinsky both being born in California on July 23, 1973.

As a group, Reds youngsters **Hunter Greene, Nick Lodolo and Graham Ashcraft** averaged 97.4 mph on the fastball last year. All are 24 or younger.

This century, there have been four teams with three starters under 25 that each had at least 2.5 Wins Above Replacement (about a top-50 starter in the league most years):

- The Giants in 2008 with **Tim Lincecum, Matt Cain and Jonathan Sanchez**
- The Marlins in 2006 with **Dontrelle Willis, Josh Johnson and Scott Olsen**
- The Marlins in 2003 with **Josh Beckett, Dontrelle Willis and Brad Penny**
- The Athletics in 2001 with **Mark Mulder, Tim Hudson and Barry Zito**

Legalized sports betting is operational in 33 states and the District of Columbia, with three other states preparing to launch. The list includes Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island.

Seventeen of the 30 major league teams play where sports gambling is legal.

Hall of Fame voting is an honor. What were writers thinking of by not casting a vote for players like **Ken Griffey Jr.** (three votes shy of unanimous election), **Cal Ripken Jr.** (eight votes shy)? Dodgers beat writer Ken Gurnick kept **Greg Maddux** from being unanimous. Maddux won 355 games, four Cy Young Awards, 17 straight seasons with 15 or more wins, 18 Gold Gloves, eighth-best victory total of all-time, and his innings pitched total of 5,008.1 ranks 13th.

It will be fun to see **Julio Rodríguez's** second season in Seattle. Some rookie year highlights—

First-ever 25–25 debut season

Fastest sprint speed among center fielders.

Eighty-one bombs in Home Run Derby.

*At 21, youngest first-year AL All-Star outfielder since **Joe DiMaggio**.*

He and **Mike Trout** (2016) are the only center fielders ever to steal 25 bases while weighing at least 225 pounds. (Rodríguez is 6' 3" and 228 pounds, Trout is 6'2", 235).

Rodríguez had an average sprint speed of 29.8 feet per second last season, best among all center fielders with at least 100 timed runs. His bat speed topped 80 mph at age 17 when the average MLB hitter swings at 70 mph.

Rodríguez played only 217 minor league games, just 46 of them higher than Class A, before posting the highest wins above replacement by any center fielder in his major league debut season (6.2).

After the home run derby (after only 108 big league games) Seattle signed Rodríguez to a contract that guarantees him \$209.3 million over 12 years and, including options and incentives, could be worth \$469.3 million over 17 years.

Why is MLB focused on improving the product? Since 2007, the game's attendance apex, to last season, baseball has lost 14.9 million ticket buyers in the regular season and 5.3 million World Series viewers. From 2007 to '22, the average game grew 12 minutes longer with 5.5 fewer balls put into play. Shifts worked so well at sucking hits out of the game that their use nearly tripled in just three years, from 12% in 2017 to 35% in '20, including more than half the time against a left-handed batter. From 2007 to last season, the information-based style removed 5,302 hits, 623 stolen base attempts and 25

batting average points from the game. Strikeouts went up by 8,623. The '18 season marked the first time in baseball history strikeouts outnumbered hits. It has remained that way ever since.

Interesting scheduling twist for the Red Sox-- only four of the first 26 games are against teams that made the playoffs last season.

None of **Casey Stengel's** teams — and there were nine of them — ever finished higher than fifth before he joined the New York Yankees.

Then he went to the Yankees, and in 12 years, won 10 pennants and seven World Series.

Then he went to the Mets, and finished dead last in each of his 3 1/2 seasons.

Think pitching has changed from starter dominance to bullpen dominance? In 2022, only eight pitchers surpassed 200 innings, which was long considered the benchmark for a useful season for a starter. In 2012, 31 pitchers met that standard. In 2002, the number was 42.

Bob Uecker on catching **Phil Neikro** in 1967-- Uecker had 25 passed balls and failed to block 31 wild pitches. "The way to catch a knuckleball," he would say, "is to wait for it to stop rolling and then pick it up."

Neikro led the majors in games started 1967-1980—44 starts in 1979.

The Brewers have not, in recent years, been run like the Pirates or Rays. While playing in the smallest city in MLB, the Brewers' payrolls have generally ranked in the top 20. They made the playoffs four straight years before falling short in last season's final days. Since the start of 2018, the Brewers have the sixth-best record in baseball, third-best in the NL. The Brewers have been competitive for six straight years, they have lost 90 games just once in 18 seasons and

they have not finished last since 2004 -- the last season under the Selig family. They have, like the Mariners, never tanked.

Jose Altuve's streak of 11 opening day starts for the Astros will come to an end with his hand injury.

The Red Sox spent big bucks on Japanese outfielder **Masataka Yoshida** who looked good in the WBC. But he will be under pressure.

Two interesting points from the Globe:

Baseball writers from Japan believe Yoshida will need time to adjust to playing outdoors and playing on grass after spending his career in Japan's domed ballparks.

A good comparison might be **Hideki Matsui** hit .258 with a .669 OPS and three home runs in his first two months with the Yankees in 2003. He hit .305 with an .855 OPS and 17 home runs the rest of the way and mashed in the postseason, helping the Yankees reach the World Series.

According to Forbes, the Yankees are worth \$7.1 billion, with the Dodgers (\$4.8 billion) and Red Sox (\$4.5 billion) rounding out the top three. The magazine also reported the Sox made a profit of \$71.6 million last season.

For \$249 — a mere \$3.07 a game — you can purchase a season ticket for the Rays. The Ballpark Pass provides access to Tropicana Field's standing-room areas but not a seat. I'm guessing they hope these folks buy a few beers.

Talk about the Haves and the Have-Nots--Yankee fans might remember **Rob Refsnyder**. Refsnyder got 342 at bats over three seasons as bench player in New York. Refsnyder is 32. Over 7 seasons he has bounced through Tampa, Toronto, Texas and Minnesota. The Red Sox outfielder had an .881 OPS over 57 games last season, which led to a one-year, \$1.2 million contract. It was his first guaranteed deal since making his major league debut in 2015.

Luis Severino is the latest Yankee pitcher to be hit with an injury, this time with another lat strain, and is expected to start the season on the IL. He would join fellow starters **Carlos Rodón** and **Frankie Montas** on the list, which also includes relievers **Lou Trivino, Tommy Kahnle and Scott Effross**. Money can't buy you health.

With Opening Day mere days away, Cardinals flamethrower **Jordan Hicks** appears to be more than ready.

On Saturday night against the Mets, Hicks threw a 104.6 mph sinker. That is the fastest tracked pitch (regular season, playoffs or Spring Training) since ... Hicks threw 105 mph twice in May 2018.

IN HONOR OF OPENING DAY, PITCHERS WITH THE MOST OPENING DAY STARTS

- 1 Tom Seaver (16 starts)**
- 2-tie) Steve Carlton (14 starts)**
- 2-tie) Randy Johnson (14 starts)**
- 2-tie) Walter Johnson (14 starts)**
- 2-tie) Jack Morris (14 starts)**
- 6-tie) Roger Clemens (13 starts)**
- 6-tie) Robin Roberts (13 starts)**
- 8-tie) Justin Verlander (12 starts)**
- 8-tie) Grover Cleveland Alexander (12 starts)**
- 8-tie) Bert Blyleven (12 starts)**
- 11-tie) Félix Hernández (11 starts)**
- 11-tie) CC Sabathia (11 starts)**
- 11-tie) Fergie Jenkins (11 starts)**

11-tie) Dennis Martinez (11 starts)

FROM BASEBALL-ALMANAC.COM

The 1991 Toronto Blue Jays were the first team in baseball history to draw a 4 million in attendance (4,002,527). Since then the following teams, in order by year joined, have joined the "4 million in attendance club": 1992 Toronto Blue Jays (4,028,318); 1993 Colorado Rockies (4,483,350) & 1993 Toronto Blue Jays (4,057,947); 2005 New York Yankees (4,090,696); 2006 New York Yankees (4,248,067); 2007 New York Yankees (4,271,867); 2008 New York Mets (4,042,045) & 2008 New York Yankees (4,298,655).

The largest attendance at a World Series game was 92,706 set during Game 5 of the 1959 World Series in the LA Coliseum. The largest attendance at an All-Star Game was 72,086 set during the 1981 All-Star Game at Cleveland Stadium. The largest attendance during an Opening Day game was 80,277 set by the Colorado Rockies on April 9, 1993.

BIG SWINGERS

In 1936, **Jimmie Foxx** struck out 119 times. That was not quite the American League record — a couple of Deadball Era guys had struck out more — but it was close, and, for our purposes, it was a breakthrough season, because it was the first time a player struck out 100 times and hit 40 home runs in the same season.

That was the start of something.

Babe Ruth was the first guy, I think, to combine homers and strikeouts as a hitting strategy — Ruth led the league in strikeouts five times — but the Babe never struck out 100 times in a season, and only once struck out 90 times. Whiffing 100 times was just not something that you did. Through 1930, only eight players struck out 100 times in a season.

Foxx broke the mold in '36 with 41 homers and 119 Ks.

The next year, **Hank Greenberg** hit 40 homers and struck out 101 times.

It took almost two more decades before the next guy did it:

All nine players who hit 40 home runs this decade so far have struck out at least 100 times. Here, by decade, is the percentage of players who struck out 100 times when they hit 40 home runs:

1930s: 11% (2 for 18)

1940s: 0% (0 for 9)

1950s: 15% (5 for 34)

1960s: 38% (13 for 34)

1970s: 65% (13 for 20)

1980s: 77% (10 for 13)

1990s: 60% (43 for 72)

2000s: 75% (65 for 87)

2010s: 85% (41 for 48)

2020s: 100% (9 for 9)

HALL OF FAME PTCHERS

In 1947, **Lefty Grove** became the first pitcher voted into the Baseball Hall of Fame with a career 3.00+ ERA.

Ed Walsh: 1.82 ERA

Christy Mathewson: 2.13 ERA

Rube Waddell: 2.16 ERA

Walter Johnson: 2.17 ERA

Babe Ruth: 2.28 ERA

Eddie Plank: 2.35 ERA

Pete Alexander: 2.56 ERA

Cy Young: 2.63 ERA

Iron Joe McGinnity: 2.66 ERA

Jack Chesbro: 2.68 ERA

Carl Hubbell: 2.98 ERA

Lefty Grove: 3.06 ERA

The thing about this that is wild is Grove led the league in ERA eight times, way more than anyone on the above list, more than Walter Johnson and Cy Young combined, more than Alexander and Walsh combined. Grove's statistical dominance was obscured by the fact that he played in a crazy offensive era (Grove pitched 1925-1941, 9 years for the Philadelphia A's and 8 years for Boston Red Sox). In five of his league-leading seasons, he was the only pitcher in the league with a sub-3.00 ERA, and in another season he led the league with a 3.08 ERA.

RANKING STARTING PITCHERS

Because I love lists...The Athletic surveyed a collection of 20 executives, analysts and scouts to determine the best of the best. For each player, the panelist provided a scouting grade, from a No. 1 pitcher to a No. 5. 5 points for a top ranking, down through 1 point for "just a guy". **Tier 1 (100) — The Inner Circle:** The unanimous No. 1s.

Tier 2 (99.5 to 90) — Aces: The pitchers you can trust all regular season and again in October.

Tier 3 (89.5 to 80) — The Pool of Applicants: The men who might one day call themselves aces.

The results did not have many surprises.

Tier 1 (100) — The Inner Circle

Justin Verlander, RHP, New York Mets

Tier 2 (99.5 — 90) — Aces

Corbin Burnes, RHP, Milwaukee Brewers

Gerrit Cole, RHP, New York Yankees

Sandy Alcantara, RHP, Miami Marlins

Max Scherzer, RHP, New York Mets

Shohei Ohtani, RHP, Los Angeles Angels

Jacob deGrom, RHP, Texas Rangers

Aaron Nola, RHP, Philadelphia Phillies

Tier 3 (89.5 to 80) — The Pool of Applicants

Zack Wheeler, RHP, Philadelphia Phillies

Spencer Strider, RHP, Atlanta Braves

Max Fried, LHP, Atlanta Braves

Shane Bieber, RHP, Cleveland Guardians

Brandon Woodruff, RHP, Milwaukee Brewers

Luis Castillo, RHP, Seattle Mariners

Carlos Rodón, LHP, New York Yankees

Julio Urías, LHP, Los Angeles Dodgers

Zac Gallen, RHP, Arizona Diamondbacks

Next tier down of number 2 and 3 starters included **Shane Bieber** of the Guardians, **Dylan Cease** of the White Sox, **Clayton Kershaw** of the Dodgers, **Alek Manoah** of the Blue Jays, **Yu Darvish** of the Padres, **Kevin Gausman** of the Blue Jays and **Framber Valdez** of the Astros.

RULES UPDATES

Pitch-timer violations are not reviewable by replay.

Tie game. Ninth inning. Slow-working reliever on the mound. Clock is ticking. Pitcher starts his delivery a fraction of a second after the pitch clock hits zero. The umpire calls a violation, but the reliever throws the pitch anyway. The guy at the plate smokes it into the second deck for what looks like a game-winning homer. But wait ...

Once the pitcher has been called for a clock violation, nothing that happens afterward counts. So that game-winning home run? It never happened.

But the logic here makes sense. Suppose a pitcher realizes he had a violation and just lobs one up there at 38 mph because he'd already started his motion — and a hitter pounds that half-hearted pitch for a home run?

Umpires can stop the clock for shoe-tying, or PitchCom glitches, or if the catcher is running the bases at the end of an inning. But on stuff like hitters not getting into the box on time and pitchers starting their delivery before the clock strikes zero? Barring some other extenuating circumstances, leniency is not an option

With the pitch clock now part of the game, (do) the 20 seconds teams were given to determine if they wanted to ask for a review become obsolete?

The short answer is, teams now have to decide whether to challenge within the parameters of the pitch clock. So no more stalling for a minute while the people in the replay room get 12 looks. Those decisions will need to be pretty much instantaneous — or within 15 seconds anyway.

First and third. The pitcher comes set. There have been two disengagements. Runner on first takes off and infielders yell, "Step off, step off!" The pitcher disengages and runs straight at the runner, as he should. Runner on third breaks for home. The pitcher hears, "Four! Four!"

So he wheels and throws home. A rundown ensues and the runner from first races for third, as he should. An error in the rundown allows the runner from third to score. No out has been recorded on a third disengagement. By (new) rule, a “balk” is called. Does the runner now at third (who began this play on first base) return to second base? Is it a “balk” or not?

The answer is, if that runner advances, there is no balk, and the result of the play overrides the balk call.

Does the two-pickoff-attempts limit reset with each new batter?

It does. And unlike the version of the clock used in the minor leagues last year, it also resets every time a runner advances to another base. MLB agreed to adjust that rule. And talking to players who played in the minor leagues last year, I understand why.

Without the pickoff limit resetting, there was pretty much no way to control the running game once a pitcher used up two disengagements. So if a guy could run, every single had a chance to be a triple. And in the big leagues, you should have to earn every 90 feet.

Major League Baseball has clarified its new rules to allow umpires to delay the start of the pitch clock after big swings in which a hitter loses footing or when a pitcher covers first base, third, or home, in addition to other clarifications announced Wednesday.

The commissioner’s office said in its memo that if a catcher ends an inning on base, at bat, or on deck, an umpire may determine the catcher needs additional time and allow the pitcher another warmup throw and the catcher to throw to second base.

The MLB also said whether a defensive team violated the new shift restrictions will be subject to a video review only involving the first player to touch a ball after a pitch.

The league also said that after a batter uses his one allowed timeout during a plate appearance, the clock shall start when the hitter indicates he is ready in addition to the previous specification when he returned to the batter’s box.

The clarifications ahead of March 30 openers were contained in a four-page memo sent by MLB senior vice president Michael Hill to managers, general managers and assistant general managers, a copy of which was obtained by The Associated Press.

Baseball’s 11-man competition committee, established in the labor agreement last March, adopted the pitch clock and shift limits last September over the opposition of the four players on the panel. MLB set the pitch clock at 15 seconds with no runners and 20 seconds with runners.

The average time of spring training games through Monday was down 25 minutes to 2 hours, 36 minutes. Violations per game were 1.03 during the past week, down from 2.03 during spring training's first week, according to the memo.

Teams were told bat boys and girls in the visiting dugout will meet with the visiting club before each series to discuss the player preferences. MLB said it will monitor the bat boys and girls to determine whether they contribute to noncompliance with the pace of game procedures.

"Bat boys and girls are to meet with the visiting team before each series to discuss equipment preferences and MLB will monitor 'the performance' of bat boys and girls throughout the season. The league might ask for a bat boy or girl to be replaced if they're contributing to game delays."

What? Why? Are we going to have quarterly reviews for the kids? Performance improvement plans? *"Hey kiddo, you brought the bat back to the dugout in six seconds instead of four. You're fired."* Will the "job" listing for bat boy/girl say it's a "fast-paced environment?" I can't get over this.

There is a caveat that if a kid "requires additional time" to get off the field, the umpire will waive any game-pace penalties, which is fine. Can't we just do that every time? With the new rules, we're already gaining plenty of precious seconds. If a child gets fired, time to riot.

DUSTY BAKER NOTES

According to Baseball Reference, he played with (and for) 325 different players in his 19 big-league seasons — seven of them Hall of Famers. (**Hank Aaron, Joe Torre, Phil Niekro, Don Sutton, Frank Robinson, Tommy Lasorda, Eddie Mathews**).

In 1977 Baker really changed the game. After hitting his 30th and final home run of the year, Baker crossed home plate where he was greeted by the outstretched hand of **Glenn Burke**, who was in the on-deck circle.

Baker was in the on-deck circle when Hank Aaron passed Babe Ruth with his 715th home run on April 8, 1974, becoming baseball's new Home Run King.

Besides Hall of Famers Baker played with some great teammates:

Chili Davis, Jose Canseco, Mark McGwire, Tito Francona, Phil Niekro, Felipe Alou, Davey Johnson, Steve Garvey, Davey Lopes, Steve Yeager, Ron Cey, Bill Buckner, Manny Mota,

Tommy John, Rick Sutcliffe, Rick Monday, Boog Powell (I had no recollection Powell played his final season for the Dodgers), **Mike Scioscia, Fernando Valenzuela, Dave Kingman.**

Before his championship run in Houston, Baker managed some pretty good players too:

Ken Griffey Jr., Scott Rolen, Joey Votto, Sammy Sosa, Kerry Wood, Nomar Garciaparra, Greg Maddux, Bryce Harper, Ryan Zimmerman, Anthony Rendon, Trea Turner, Max Scherzer, Barry Bonds, Will Clark, Matt Williams, Darryl Strawberry, Deion Sanders, Kenny Lofton, J.T. Snow, Jeff Kent.

WBC NOTES

The Boston Globe's Peter Abraham summarized it:

Did the best moment of this season already happen?

*It's hard to imagine baseball will have a more compelling at-bat over the next seven months than the showdown between **Shohei Ohtani** and **Mike Trout** with two outs in the ninth inning of the championship game of the World Baseball Classic on Tuesday night in Miami.*

With Japan leading Team USA by a run, Ohtani struck out Trout on six pitches, the final one a slider that started over the middle of the plate and darted to the outside corner. Ohtani flung his glove in joy when Trout swung and missed.

I hope you saw the final and some of the games – it was fun stuff.

The World Baseball Classic's storybook ending averaged 4.5 million viewers, Fox Sports announced yesterday, a staggering 69 percent increase from 2017's WBC championship game. That number is also higher than all but three Divisional League playoff games from last year.

Here is a link to the Japanese call of **Shohei Ohtani** striking out **Mike Trout**.

https://www.mlb.com/video/japanese-call-of-ohtani-vs-trout?partnerId=zh-20230322-858329-mlb-1-A&qid=1026&utm_id=zh-20230322-858329-mlb-1-A&bt_ee=Jf7KbXttJKts5iswhJm%2FIGr6oHdhFyyIEhfhboPUPVurH1VkDBcEoOprOaoQ0g7t&bt_ts=1679492150551

It had to come down to that, didn't it? Bottom of the ninth, two outs, full count, Team USA trailing Japan 3–2. The two best players in the game, two of the best players ever—and teammates, no less—going head-to-head with a championship on the line.

And then Shohei Ohtani struck out Mike Trout with one of the nastiest sliders you'll ever see to give Japan its third World Baseball Classic championship.

Shohei Ohtani, who went 1-3 in the game as the Designated Hitter, entered as a pitcher in the ninth inning and closed out Japan's win by striking out his Angels teammate Mike Trout.

Ohtani was named the tournament's MVP after hitting .435, with a .606 on base percentage and a .739 slugging percentage in seven games for Japan. He also had a 1.86 ERA in three appearances—two starts and his appearance as the closer in the final.

Ohtani--He hit .435 with 8 RBI. He threw the fastest pitch and hit the farthest home run. He went 2-0 with a 1.86 ERA and the winning save

It was only the 24th time in 6,174 plate appearances that Trout swung and missed at three pitches in a single at-bat.

The Angels might've been the only loser last night. Ohtani clearly relished the important moment, something he's never experienced in an Angels uniform.

Reminder that Ohtani's future as an Angel is very much in doubt. He's only signed through this season and has all the power in contract negotiations.

When Ohtani struck out Trout to end the WBC championship game, he threw the best breaking ball of his major league career.

Japan led USA 3-2 with two outs in the ninth inning when, on a full count, Ohtani threw Trout his sweeper—his favorite pitch, essentially a slider with a bigger break. Ohtani threw his sweeper last season 37% of the time, more than any other pitch, at an average speed of 86.5 mph and with an average spin rate of 2,492 rpm. The sweeper that Trout whiffed on was clocked at 87.2 mph with a spin rate of 2,708 rpm.

Of the 1,659 sweepers Ohtani has thrown in the major leagues, he threw only five that fast and with that much spin. The one to Trout had more vertical break (32 inches) and more horizontal break (17 inches) than his previous five best sweepers.

The combined 49 inches of vertical and horizontal break easily eclipsed the best total movement on his other five elite sweepers, 44 inches on a called third strike to Jose Altuve last Sept. 20.

The sweeper for the Trout strikeout immediately followed the most electric fastball Ohtani has ever thrown as a major leaguer: a four-seamer clocked at 101.6 mph with a spin rate of 2,581 rpm. Ohtani has thrown 5,589 four-seamers in the majors, but none of them with so much speed and spin.

Ohtani has thrown only one pitch faster since joining the majors, a fastball for a strikeout of Italy's **Vinnie Pasquantino** in the WBC quarterfinal game that was clocked at 102 mph; although the spin rate on that heater was 2,337 rpm, below his average last season of 2,449.

With his 10 fastballs against Team USA, Ohtani posted a higher average fastball velocity (99.6) and average spin rate (2,529) than in any of his 63 major league games.

The best pitchers in Japan competed to get on Samurai Japan's roster. The USA could not get even one of the 14 U.S.-born pitchers who received a vote for the Cy Young awards last season to throw a pitch for it.

The first four pitchers USA manager **Mark DeRosa** used in the championship game combined in their careers for a 114–120 record, no All-Star games, no postseason wins and no fastballs with above-average velocity.

The tournament introduced us to players like Israel pitcher **Shlomo Lipetz**, a 44-year-old who in his day job as president of venues at City Winery is in charge of booking concerts across the United States, and 21-year-old Nicaragua pitcher **Duque Hebert**, who signed his first MLB contract after striking out **Juan Soto**, **Julio Rodríguez** and **Manny Machado** in the same inning. It also exposed American fans to the biggest stars in Japan. You may have read about **Roki Sasaki**'s unreal 19-strikeout perfect game last season and the eight perfect innings he threw in his next start, but actually watching him against a Mexico lineup full of MLB hitters was special.

If there was one sequence we saw over and over in the 2023 World Baseball Classic, it was **Trea Turner** circling the bases.

Turner homered yet again for Team USA in the WBC championship game on Tuesday night against Japan. He connected in the second inning for his fifth home run of the tournament, which tied the record for a single Classic. Turner matched **Seung Yuop Lee**'s five home runs for Korea in the inaugural 2006 WBC.

At one point Turner had 4 HRs in 7 at bats. The home run also gave Turner 11 RBIs in this WBC, third all-time behind the 13 that **Masataka Yoshida** of Japan had this year and the 12 that the Netherlands' **Wladimir Balentien** totaled in 2017.

The only player from the 2017 All-Classic Team also named to the 2023 team--Puerto Rico's **Javier Báez**

Masataka Yoshida's 13 RBIs are a new Classic record. (most RBIs in a single World Series--**Bobby Richardson**, Yankees, 12 RBIs in the 1960 World Series).

The spring training timing robbed us of seeing most big name pitchers. One suggestion--move the All-Star Game to a Pro Bowl-type winter slot, make the midseason break two weeks in July and print money. Japan watches this more than they watch the World Series. The Mets' **Francisco Lindor** is ready for 2026 already. Plenty of others will follow, injury concerns be damned.

MLB bettors are on the clock

ViSN (the Vegas Information and Sports Network)

The 2023 MLB season presents a rare sports betting opportunity – when bettor and bookmaker are on equal footing.

“The pitch clock and the shift ban will be two huge rule changes to watch,” he said. “Spring training stats should be taken with a grain of salt, but there has been an increase in both stolen base attempts and successful tries. We've also seen more singles, especially from left-handed batters, who no longer have to contend with three infielders on the right side. A big spike in batting average on balls in play [BABIP] in spring training has likely carryover to the regular season.

“The rich will get richer to some degree with these changes, as pitcher strikeouts are more important and teams that put the ball in play a lot will be rewarded. Teams like the Guardians, Astros, Mets, Cardinals and Blue Jays are in line to benefit greatly, while teams like the Angels, Pirates, Tigers, Marlins may not see as much of a boost.”

“It will be a learning curve for both bettors and bookmakers, but I’ll be tracking as much of the data as I can with my baseball work throughout the season – and hopefully, we can pick up on some things before the betting markets and the sportsbooks do,” he said.

Major League Baseball is going to look a lot different in 2023. A handful of rule changes are likely to have a significant impact on betting the game. At least with these – unlike the baseball, which changes from season to season – we know what they are and they are well-defined. Players got a crash course in how they would be implemented and enforced in Spring Training and the data was rather eye-opening.

The three main rule changes are the pitch clock, bigger bases and a ban on infield shifts. I’ll break these down one by one to look at the data from Spring Training and the potential impact for bettors.

Pitch Clock

- Pitchers are required to start their pitching motions within 15 seconds with nobody on base and 20 seconds with men on base
- The batter must be ready and looking at the pitcher with 8 seconds on the clock
- Pitchers are allowed two “disengagements” and batters are allowed one timeout (the number of disengagements resets if a runner advances to another base; a third disengagement is considered a balk)
- The penalty is an automatic strike or an automatic ball depending on the offending party

Rob Manfred’s biggest goal as MLB Commissioner has been to speed up the game, and these rule changes have absolutely done that. I couldn’t find a more recent tweet update, but as of March 8, Spring Training games were about 24 minutes shorter (2:37) than last season’s exhibition affairs (3:01). Regular season games averaged 3:11 last season.

From a betting standpoint, there is a lot to unpack here. Obviously, a ball or a strike in any given plate appearance is a huge deal, so those could be tremendously impactful. After a 1-0 count, MLB hitters slashed .255/.371/.428 last season. After a 0-1 count, they slashed .213/.258/.334, so even a violation to begin a plate appearance could be significant. Some of those will cancel out, as both pitchers and hitters will be guilty of infractions, especially early in the season.

The bigger one to me is actually the “disengagements” rule. Pitchers can only step off or throw over twice in a given plate appearance, which makes it really hard to hold runners. Furthermore, a baserunner can peek at the clock and time up a pitcher perfectly because the penalty is a ball and a stoppage in play anyway.

In Spring Training, we did see a major increase in stolen base attempts and about a 6% increase in successful stolen bases year over year. Last year, there were 811 caught stealings out of 3,297 attempts, so base stealers were successful 75% of the time; in Spring Training, we've seen an 81% success rate.

There are some caveats to this – some of the better catchers have been playing in the World Baseball Classic (WBC) or haven't played a lot of innings, and a lot of minor leaguers with great speed who lack other tools are trying to make an impact and make a team – but, it does appear that the stolen base success rate will go up league-wide with pitchers unable to control the running game.

In theory, all teams should be more aggressive, but the teams with the most stolen bases last season were the Rangers, Marlins, Guardians, Cubs, Phillies, Diamondbacks, Royals and Yankees, who all had 102 or more. The Twins, Rockies, Tigers, Padres, Red Sox, Reds and White Sox all had 58 or fewer steals.

Catchers had 191 throwing errors last season (not all on stolen base attempts). I'd assume this number goes up with more hurried throws, so there could be some extra bases taken in that regard. Catchers will also try to throw behind runners more in hopes of keeping them close.

I'm also speculating here – and it's hard to use the Spring Training data to confirm or debunk my theory – but I think pitch velocity will be down overall this season. Pitchers have less recovery time between pitches and may be less likely to throw with max effort. I also think the pitch clock will be a much bigger issue for relievers, who are generally slower than starters. They also throw harder on the whole.

Bigger Bases

- Bases went from 15 square inches to 18 square inches

There could be a very modest correlation between the successful stolen base rate and the bigger bases, but this was primarily a decision based on the safety of the players. The distance between first, second and third base is about 4.5 inches shorter. It is three inches shorter from home plate to first base or third base to home plate.

Home plate remains the same size.

Shift Ban

- Two infielders must be on each side of second base
- All four infielders must be on the dirt when the pitcher is on the pitching rubber

- Infielders cannot switch sides (i.e, make the third baseman play second base and the second baseman play third against a left-handed batter)

- If the infielders are not aligned at the time of the pitch, the batting team can choose an automatic ball or the result of the play

So, this is the big one and the one that has been analyzed the most by baseball scribes. It is not nearly as cut and dry as looking at last season's batted balls to see how many hits a batter had taken away. This is going to completely change the mindset of a batter, particularly a left-handed batter who pulls the ball a lot.

On Mar. 19, @CodifyBaseball had a tweet that batting average was down one point, on-base percentage was up eight points and slugging percentage was down 18 points from the previous Spring Training. Singles were up 3% on a per-game basis, while home runs were down 14% on a per-game basis. Keep in mind, though, that a lot of elite hitters have been playing in the World Baseball Classic. (Stolen bases, by the way, were up 60% on a per-game basis)

Tom Tango, one of the most respected analysts in baseball, had a Mar. 17 tweet that the Spring Training batting average on balls in play (BABIP) was .320; from 2006-2022, the ST BABIP averaged .312, with a high of .318 and a low of .305. Spring Training comes with a grain of salt with pitchers working on things, lesser fielders, etc., but that seems to line up with the increase in singles from the other tweet. Also, home runs don't count towards BABIP because they are not balls in play (nobody can field them), so we are seeing a big increase in balls in play and an increase in BABIP.

The tweet that really got a lot of run was from ESPN's Jeff Passan on Mar. 9 when he noted that BABIP on ground balls was up 23 points year over year in Spring Training. It was .235 in 2022 and .258 at the time of Passan's tweet in 2023. Another CodifyBaseball tweet on Mar. 20 noted that the BABIP for left-handed batters this spring was .329—a direct impact of the shift ban. That was up 15 points from last year. Righties saw a two-point increase in BABIP from .311 to .313.

Last regular season, the league batting average was .243 with a BABIP of .290. Left-handed batters hit .245 with a BABIP of .294. However, using Baseball Savant (Statcast) search results, lefties had a batting average of just .226 on grounders. That number will undoubtedly go up this season.

From a betting standpoint, I'm curious to see how this all plays out. Without a shift, lefties won't shy away from pulling the ball, but they may be less likely to hit the ball in the air over the shift. The increase in singles with a decrease in home runs makes some sense based on the mindset and psychological approach for a hitter in a post-shift world. We may have more baserunners, but could ultimately end up without a big increase in offense.

MLB had a batting average problem. In the era of rising strikeout rates (though K% actually decreased for the second straight year), the last three years (.243, .244, .245 dating back to 2020) represent the lowest batting averages since the 1960s. Hitters only struck out about 16% of the time back then. Now they strike out 22-23% of the time.

In a lot of ways, we have to take something of a wait-and-see approach. Some of the best hitters have been playing in the WBC. The offensive environments in Florida and Arizona are typically conducive to offense, though it has been a little cooler than normal in AZ.

One thing we do know for sure is that teams that don't strike out should greatly benefit from all of the new rules, so teams like the Guardians, Astros, Mets, Cardinals and Blue Jays should be helped, while teams like the Angels, Pirates, Tigers, and Marlins could be negatively impacted. In some respects, I think the rule changes absolutely make the rich richer, so to speak. They disproportionately benefit the good teams with the best hitters and the best fielders, so we could see an even more defined chasm between the haves and have-nots.

I'll be looking for some concrete regular season data, but that will take some time. For now, I'll handicap based on these three suspicions:

1. More stolen bases will be attempted and more attempts will be successful
2. Singles and the number of baserunners will increase
3. Fly ball pitchers won't be as affected as ground ball pitchers and I will try to bet on more of those

It will be a learning curve for both bettors and bookmakers, but I'll be tracking as much of the data as I can with my baseball work throughout the season – and hopefully, we can pick up on some things before the betting markets and the sportsbooks do.

BEST PROMOTIONS

Orioles, Aug. 5: Eddie Murray 1983 World Series Bobblehead

Baltimore is celebrating 40 years since its most recent title, if you can believe that. The O's even got the leaning-back batting stance right.

Yankees, Aug. 4: Bucky Dent Bobblehead

Guardians, July 5: Larry Doby 1948 Cap

The giveaway commemorates the 75th anniversary of Doby becoming the first Black player in the American League.

Cubs, Sept. 9: Harry Caray Statue Bobblehead

D-backs, Aug. 12: 25th Anniversary Replica Jersey

Dodgers, April 18: Vin Scully Jersey

It has his signature microphone, where there is usually a number.

WHEN IS 90 FEET NOT 90 FEET BUT STILL 90 FEET?

Anthony Castrovince, mlb.com

As Major League Baseball embarks upon a season in which the size of the bases has been increased, we regret to inform you that the distance in between bases will not be 90 feet this year.

Yes, that's a lot to process. We get it. You were born into a world in which the grass is green, the sky is blue and the distance between bases is 90 feet. That's sacred baseball math, and we understand if you're upset that these brand-new bags have messed with it.

But wait. Before you get too hot and bothered about the bigger bases, we've got another piece of news for you:

The distance between bases was never 90 feet.

How can this be, you ask?

Look, everything you're about to read is not common knowledge, even within the sport. The truth is, most of us had no idea the bases were 15 inches on each side before MLB expanded them to 18 inches. Even fewer of us understood the intricate nuances of how the distances down the lines and around the infield are measured.

But after researching the topic, we're here to tell you: It's a trip. And not a simple 90-foot one.

Now, before we bring out the measuring tape, let's first discuss how this 90-foot thing came about in the first place. Much like the story of how we got to 60 feet and 6 inches from the

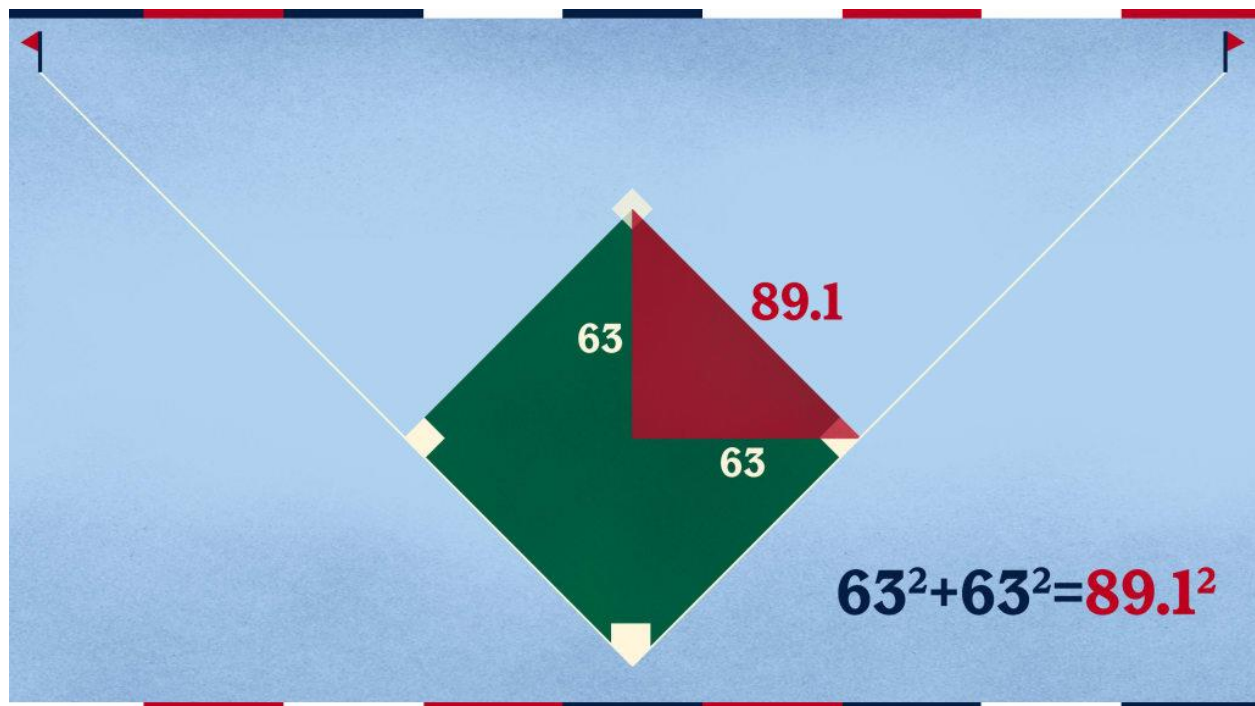
pitcher's mound to the back tip of home plate (emphasis on back tip, because a lot of people don't know that, either), it's complicated stuff. As 1800s baseball tends to be.

The Knickerbocker rules -- the earliest surviving rules of baseball -- were codified in 1845. They called for "42 paces" between home and second base and between first and third bases.

OK, so... What, exactly, is a "pace?"

Depends who you ask.

Some scholars have presumed a pace of three feet and come to the conclusion that the ensuing distance between bases would be about 89 feet -- quite close to the 90 feet we know and love. (The math here is a bit tricky for those of us who are not currently taking high school geometry, and the short version is as follows: If we assume 42 paces, at 3 feet per pace, in a straight line from home to second and first to third, that equals 126 feet. Which means it's 63 feet from the center of the diamond in each direction to all four bases. Now you've created four right triangles, each of which has two sides that are 63 feet. Using the Pythagorean Theorem, we can figure out that the hypotenuse is 89.1 feet.)



This is a clean and (nearly) uncomplicated explanation that paints Alexander Cartwright -- the man often credited with developing the Knickerbocker rules -- in a particularly positive light. Heck, it's right there on Cartwright's Hall of Fame plaque: "Set bases 90 feet apart."

But wait! Don't rush to the assumption that what's captured in Cooperstown is correct in perpetuity.

Pace yourself.

As official MLB historian John Thorn points out, the definition of “pace” in Noah Webster’s “An American Dictionary of the English Language” at the time was as follows:

1. *A step.*
2. *The space between the two feet in walking, estimated at two feet and a half. But the geometrical pace is five feet, or the whole space passed over by the same foot from one step to another.*

If a single pace was known at the time to be 2.5 feet, then that means the distance between each base would then be only 74.25 feet. (Following the same math in the graphic above, in this scenario it is 105 feet from home to second and first to third, which means 52.5 feet from the center of the diamond in each direction to all four bases. And if you use the Pythagorean Theorem again, we see that 52.5 squared plus 52.5 squared equals ... 74.25 squared.)

Thorn’s research indicates that 75-foot basepaths were the norm well into the mid-1850s. Then something happened. A fundamental evolution that essentially ushered in the game as we know it.

Baseball became hardball.

“When the ball was wound tighter, gaining more hardness and resilience,” writes Thorn, “it could be hit farther and, crucially, thrown farther.”

This allowed the dimensions of the field to expand.

Daniel Lucius “Doc” Adams, another influential member of the Knickerbockers, claimed that it was he who set the 90-foot standard in the 1850s.

“I was chairman of the Committee on Rules and Regulations from the start and so long as I retained membership,” Adams wrote in 1896. “I presented the first draft of rules, prepared after much careful study of the matter, and it was in the main adopted. The distance between bases I fixed at 30 yards [or 90 feet], the only previous determination of distance being ‘the bases shall be from home to second base 42 paces, from first to third base 42 paces equidistant,’ which was rather vague.”

If we can assume that Adams is telling the truth (again, who knows?), then there’s our answer as to the “how,” albeit not really the “why.” That’ll have to be enough.

We’re still not out of the woods when it comes to complication, though. Because in those formative years of professional baseball, there were various relocations of home plate and changes to the positioning of first and third base, thereby altering the dimensions between bases.

From 1845-74, home plate, then known as “home base” (and that’s a whole other story), was partially in both fair and foul territory. In 1875 and 1876, it was moved entirely to foul territory. Then, in 1877, it was moved entirely to fair territory, where it remains (though it did not get its present-day pentagonal shape until 1900).

First and third base, meanwhile, were initially half in fair territory and half in foul. It was not until 1887 that they were shifted 7 1/2 inches to be placed completely in fair ground.

The effect of all this movement is that the distance between the bases was adjusted multiple times.

What has been a constant -- at the very least, since Doc Adams came along -- is that there has always been a measurement of 90 feet from... somewhere to... somewhere.

From the mid-1850s until the mid-1880s, the 90-foot measurement went from the center of one base to the center of another (this included “home base,” which was initially shaped like a circle and then, like the other bases, a square).

When the aforementioned shift of first and third bases in 1887 occurred, this changed the way 90 feet was measured. Now, it was from the center of home base to the back corner of first and third base. And from the back corner of both first and third to the center of second base. Previously, it was 7 1/2 inches from the edge of a base to its center, meaning that the actual distance in-between bases was reduced by 7 1/2 inches with this change.

Finally, in 1900, when home plate became a pentagon neatly nestled into the shape of the diamond, the method of measurement from home to first and third shifted once again -- from the back tip of home plate to the rear corner of the bases.

That’s how it has remained ever since.

Even now, with the bigger bases.

Though the new bases themselves have been expanded three inches on each side, they do not affect this 90-foot measurement, because the positioning of the bases has not changed and the size of home plate has not changed. All of the extra size of the bases pushes inward.

Let’s lay this out as clearly as we can:

HOME TO FIRST AND HOME TO THIRD

Old 15-inch bases: 87 feet, 3 inches

New 18-inch bases: 87 feet

Difference: 3 inches

In both cases: It is 90 feet from the bottom tip of home plate to the back corners of first and third base.

FIRST TO SECOND AND SECOND TO THIRD

Old 15-inch bases: 88 feet, 1.5 inches

New 18-inch bases: 87 feet, 9 inches

Difference: 4.5 inches

In both cases: It is 90 feet from the back corner of first and third base to the center of second base.

So, there you have it. Hopefully, now you understand that the distance *between* the bases was never actually 90 feet. We were all living a lie.

(By the way, the 90-foot concern is not the only myth related to the new bases, which fulfilled their purpose in the Minor League trial by reducing injuries around the bases by 13%. Some have suggested that all bang-bang plays at first will now go to the runner because he is three inches closer to the bag. What that argument doesn't account for is that the first baseman is now three inches closer to the throw. So it's basically a wash.)

Anyway, if you don't mind using a loose definition of "between" (just like some scholars have apparently employed a loose definition of "pace"), then, by all means, continue to say that it is 90 feet between bases. Because it's no less true than it was prior to the arrival of the bigger bases. And it still sounds good.

A BEHIND THE MASK TOUR OF A GENERATION OF PITCHERS

Tyler Kepner, NYT

Stephen Vogt, Seattle's new bullpen coach, caught 6,000 innings in pro ball and came away with keen insights on the colorful pitchers he worked with along the way.

When last we saw Crash Davis, the protagonist of Ron Shelton's film "Bull Durham," he had swatted one final homer and was on to his next life, considering a managerial opening in Visalia, Calif.

Visalia happens to be the hometown of **Stephen Vogt**, who homered last Oct. 5 in the final at-bat of his unlikely 10-year career in the majors. Vogt could easily have been the next Crash Davis, a vagabond catcher who got only a whiff of the big time. When Vogt finally reached The Show, after stops with five minor league teams — including, yes, the Durham Bulls — he started off 0 for 25. His team, the Tampa Bay Rays, soon sold his contract to Oakland.

But Vogt persisted, winding from the A's to the Milwaukee Brewers, the San Francisco Giants, the Arizona Diamondbacks, the Atlanta Braves and back to the A's last season, mostly as a mentor for a young roster. On that last, golden day in the majors, he squatted for his 6,000th professional inning behind the plate.

Now Vogt, 38, is on to another job, as the bullpen coach for the Seattle Mariners, not far from his home in Olympia, Wash. He could have been a special assistant, coming and going as he pleased, but that is not the way to connect with players. Baseball is an everyday job, and it matters to honor the grind.

The memories of the pitchers he caught are fresh — from a World Series icon to the ultimate one-game wonder, from an ambidextrous rookie to the one and only **Bartolo Colon**. In an interview over dinner last month, Vogt shared a personal farewell to arms: a behind-the-mask tour of the habits, humor and humanity of some of his era's most captivating characters.

Fernando Rodney

Tampa Bay Rays, 2012

That was the year he set the E.R.A. record, which I think **Zack Britton** broke a few years later — but he was throwing like 99 miles an hour with an 82 mile-an-hour change. That might not be exactly right, but it was a lot more than a 10-mile-an-hour difference. We called it the Bugs Bunny changeup, and it was — it was a “stop” ball. He was so joyful, such a kind teammate. He and **Joel Peralta** took me out to a steakhouse in Toronto on my first road trip. I was a wide-eyed rookie, and they treated me so well and welcomed me. Fernando was very quiet, but when the time was right, he would say or do something funny, or maybe just make a weird noise. He knew when everybody needed to laugh.

Kyle Farnsworth

Tampa Bay Rays, 2012

Of course he intimidated me, he's Kyle Farnsworth. He's an intimidating person, and that's the persona he wanted, the persona he owned. I remember that spring training, watching him in the weight room, it was different — the amount of weight he could lift, the intensity that he would get after in the weight room. And then you talk to him, and he's one of the most soft-spoken, gentle, kind people. But when he would get into the moment, he pitched with tenacity, he pitched with fire.

David Price

Tampa Bay Rays, 2012

I caught him during his Cy Young season — **Jose Molina** took a foul tip in the seventh inning and I went in to catch one inning. But obviously I caught David quite a bit through spring trainings and bullpens, and the thing that always struck me was his attention to detail. His bullpens were always well thought out: He would execute multiple, multiple fastballs where he wanted them before he would move on to anything else. And he said to me, “If I can command my glove-side fastball, everything else is going to do what I want it to do.”

Hideki Okajima

Sacramento River Cats, 2013

He would let go of the ball and his head would be down right at release point. The Sacramento video board was a little low, so when he would throw his curveball, it would go up into the video board and I’d lose it for a split second in the numbers and lights — and then I’d see it come back out of the scoreboard and then catch it. So he’s not looking at me, and I can’t see the ball. That’s a good matchup.

Bartolo Colon

Oakland Athletics, 2013

Bartolo would walk around the clubhouse flipping up a baseball with a big smile on his face. He never said much; he didn’t have to. The first time I caught him was when I got my first hit, with the A’s, and I remember asking another catcher, **Derek Norris**, “Hey, what do you got for me?” And he said, “Sit back and enjoy it.” That was his advice. I’d set up right on the corner, and I didn’t know if it was going to be a four-seamer or a two-seamer, but it didn’t matter because, either way, it was going to end up right at my glove, right where I set up. I never had anyone easier to catch, or more fun.

Sonny Gray

Oakland Athletics, 2013 to 2017

Sonny was by far the hardest on my hand and on my thumb. I had to wear a thumb guard my entire career because of catching Sonny through Triple-A and the big leagues, because his ball would move so late — and I didn’t have the best hands to handle it, either. We had a lot of fun together, but he would throw this 94-mile-an-hour cutter-slider thing when I would call a four-seam. I’d ask him and he’d say, “Oh, I thought they were ready for a four-seam so I just cut it,” and I said, “You need to tell me when you’re going to do that.”

Philip Humber

Sacramento River Cats, 2014

He talked about his perfect game a little bit, never in detail. But I asked him, “What did it feel like?” And he said: “It’s what you dream of, right? You work every day to be perfect. You work every day to get every hitter out. And I did it once.” I actually bring him up quite often to pitchers because he was a phenomenally talented pitcher who, for whatever reason, unfortunately didn’t turn into a long major league career. But it’s such a great testament to this sport that on any given day, any pitcher can go out there and get anybody out.

Pat Venditte

Oakland Athletics, 2015

What a great story, and what a cool experience to be able to catch an ambidextrous pitcher. He made his debut at Fenway Park and flew in late, got there kind of midgame, and he was active. Josh Phegley ended up catching him that night, but I remember telling him, “Hey, it’s a long walk from the third-base dugout to that right-field bullpen.” He goes, “Yeah, I’m going to head out there in a jog.” And I said: “No, you’re not. I want you to walk as slow as possible and take every single moment in, because you’re only going to get to do this once, walking out to the bullpen midgame during your debut.”

Barry Zito

Oakland Athletics, 2015

It was an honor for me to catch his last game. The curveball was still big, bigger than you can even imagine. I mean, there were times where he would throw it and you’d think it was never coming down. He was throwing 85, 86, that last year, way different from when he was in his prime with the better velocity, but the curveball and the way he could still set hitters up and skillfully and masterfully get through a game, was absolutely beautiful.

Josh Hader

Milwaukee Brewers, 2017

It’s arms, legs and hair. He turns his back all the way to you, and it’s tough to find his release point because he doesn’t show you anything. Then all of a sudden he’s whipping around and his hair’s flopping, coming at you, then it’s his lead elbow. I mean, there’s so many things to distract you. Catching Josh as a rookie, you could see that the fastball was real. And then in ’18 you started to see him dial in the command, and with the slider and the changeup he’s got three devastating pitches with command. It’s not fair.

Johnny Cueto

San Francisco Giants, 2019

He's fun, charismatic, a character with the dancing and the shimmy. But as a catcher, you don't know when he's coming to the plate. So you have to be ready for him to do the quick one, and then you have to stay relaxed long enough to wait for him to do his shimmy. I tried not to watch that and just cued on his left hip, like, "As soon as that left hip comes toward me, then I know." But that was tough, because then you're moving from his hip to his arm slot. Ordinarily I'd just look for the arm slot and I'd know where that window's going to be, but with him I needed to know when he was coming so that I wouldn't get stuck in my position.

Madison Bumgarner

Giants, 2019; Arizona Diamondbacks, 2020 to 2021

He is, right now, the greatest World Series pitcher of all time. He's got the best numbers, he's automatic, and you can never take that away from him. It was really fun to catch the guy that you watch on TV and get to know him as a person. He's really athletic and can move; I mean, to be able to repeat that funky delivery over and over and over, with pinpoint accuracy, he's still one of the best pitchers of my generation. And he's a cowboy. That's how he pitches — he pitches like a cowboy. It's: "I'm coming after you, and I'm going to beat you, and I'm not going to accept anything else."

Charlie Morton

Atlanta Braves, 2021

Charlie's got the biggest sweeping curveball I've ever seen. He actually struck me out in Houston on a curveball, and it hit me in the back foot. I swung and missed and it just kept curving and hit me in the back foot. And then getting to catch him, I'm like, "OK how big, really, is this thing?" — and just being blown away at how well he was able to shape it and throw it at any time.

Max Fried

Atlanta Braves, 2021

He's got electric stuff, four plus pitches. But just the way he can bounce off the mound, help himself by fielding his position, he's so athletic. His goal was to do both, to win the Gold Glove and the Silver Slugger, and he did. I actually think he had more hits as a Brave that year than I did.

Fried did outthit Vogt, 15 to 13, partially because Vogt was injured in September and missed the rest of the season. Atlanta ended up winning the World Series.

A year later, Vogt was back in Oakland to finish out his career, in the uniform he had worn best back when he represented the A's in the 2015 All-Star Game and saw an old friend 60 feet 6 inches away.

Chris Archer

Tampa Bay Rays, 2012, A.L. All-Star team, 2015

We were in Double-A together and then Triple-A, and then we made our debut the same year. And we lived in the same hotel during September of 2012; he rode home with my wife, my daughter and me every night back to the hotel, so we really got to know each other and got close. And then I got designated for assignment that next spring — and the next time we met back up on the same field was our first inning of our first All-Star Games.

Ned Yost told me I had the fourth, fifth and sixth innings, and I didn't even realize who I was going to catch. So I run out there to catch the fourth and I look out and, sure enough, here comes Chris Archer. For me, it was such a special moment, obviously personally, but also to share it with somebody you came up with through the minor leagues. When you play together like that, you may not talk all the time, you may not see each other for a while — but you're family.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE ANSWERS

I won the 2002 American League Cy Young.

I was a 3x All-Star.

In 2002 I led the AL in wins with 23, in 2008 I led the NL in losses with 17.

I threw left-handed.

I pitched 8 seasons with my AL team, 7 seasons with my NL team.

I won 165 games, threw 2576 innings and struck out 1885.

I went 6-3 with a 2.83 ERA in 9 post-season series. I won more post season games for my AL team but I went 1-0 for my NL team in my only World Series in 2012.

Who am I?

Barry Zito, Oakland A's, San Francisco Giants.

Three pitchers, all in the Divisional Era (since 1969) have made Opening Day starts for five different teams. The teams they started for are below. Team he pitched the most games for in

bold. Two are Hall of Famers, the third was 1997 World Series MVP. All are right-handed. Name then.

Twins, Rangers, Pirates, Indians, Angels
Bert Blyleven

Giants, Indians, Rangers, Padres, Mariners
Gaylord Perry

Marlins, Giants, Expos, Twins, **Nationals**
Liván Hernández

Since 1950 7 pitchers have won 26 or more games in a season. (one did it twice)

1952 28-7 with 3 shutouts, 30 complete games, National League right hander.

Robin Roberts

1956 27-7 also won NL MVP. Right-hander.

Don Newcomb

1965 26-8, 8 shutouts, 382 strikeouts, 27 complete games, Cy Young

AND

1966 27-9, 27 complete games, Cy Young, NL left-hander.

Sandy Koufax

1968 31-6, Cy Young and AL MVP, right-hander. 280 complete games, 280 strikeouts, AL right-hander.

Denny McLain

1968 26-9, 30 complete games, NL right-hander

Juan Marichal

1972 27-10, 1.97 era, 30 complete games, Cy Young, NL left-hander

Steve Carlton

1990 27-6, pitched in the World Series against the Reds, AL right-hander

Bob Welch

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