

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

4.2.2023

Good morning baseball fans,

The adventure has begun. In this issue the future of pitch framing in a robo ump world, Vegas predicted win totals, tons of Opening Day notes, impact of shift rules on the Dodgers, **Rube Waddell**.

Subscriber feedback

We are a community of just over 100 subscribers. I'm sure some are occasional readers, some skim for what they find interesting and some read cover-to-cover. As the season kicks off, I'm glad you are all out there and appreciate your contributions. In the last two weeks:

- An invite to Seattle when the Yankees visit
- Two subscribers plan to meet me in L.A. for Yankees-Dodgers
- Another suggested seat choices for Dodger Stadium
- One loaned me the book "We Played the Game" by Danny Peary. 65 Players Remembered from Baseball's Greatest Era 1947-1964 (I'm sure I will find some interesting tidbits in there).
- One wrote that his mother was in the bleachers for **Bob Feller's** 17 strikeout game we referenced.
- A stream of comments on Yankee roster choices coming out of spring training.
- One added two new subscribers

Thank you for all your help and feedback. If you have ideas for how to improve, stories and anecdotes to add, please email me. I hope Opening Day gave you a big sense of renewal. And please send along anyone who would enjoy being added to the subscriber list.

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THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE

Your Opening Day bonus, four questions today. (answers at bottom).

No player has hit 45 homers in back-to-back seasons I over a decade. Here are the last five to do it:

2007-2009 NL 1B, 4 straight seasons 45+ including MVP

2005-2006 AL DH, lefty

2000-2004 NL Leftfielder, lefty, five straight seasons 45+

2001-2003 AL infielder, righty, MVP in 2003, three straight seasons 45+

2001-2003 lefty 1b/DH, in AL in 2001-22, NL in 2003

There are 3 two-time MVPs who are Not in the Hall of Fame

AL 1960-1961, lefty outfielder

AL 1996, 1998, righty outfielder, drove in 157 runs in 1998

NL 1982-1983, righty outfielder

I am 4x AL All-Star 3B.

I am a 4x Silver Slugger

I have been a regular AL MVP contender:

- 2017: 3rd (behind **Jose Altuve** and **Aaron Judge**)
- 2018: 3rd (behind **Mookie Betts** and **Mike Trout**)
- 2019: no MVP votes
- 2020: 2nd (behind **José Abreu**)
- 2021: 6th (**Shohei Ohtani** won unanimously)

- 2022: 4th (**Aaron Judge** set a new American League single-season home run record) five top-six finishes in the MVP voting in the last six years, including three top-three finishes.

2023 is my 11th season with the only MLB team I have played with.

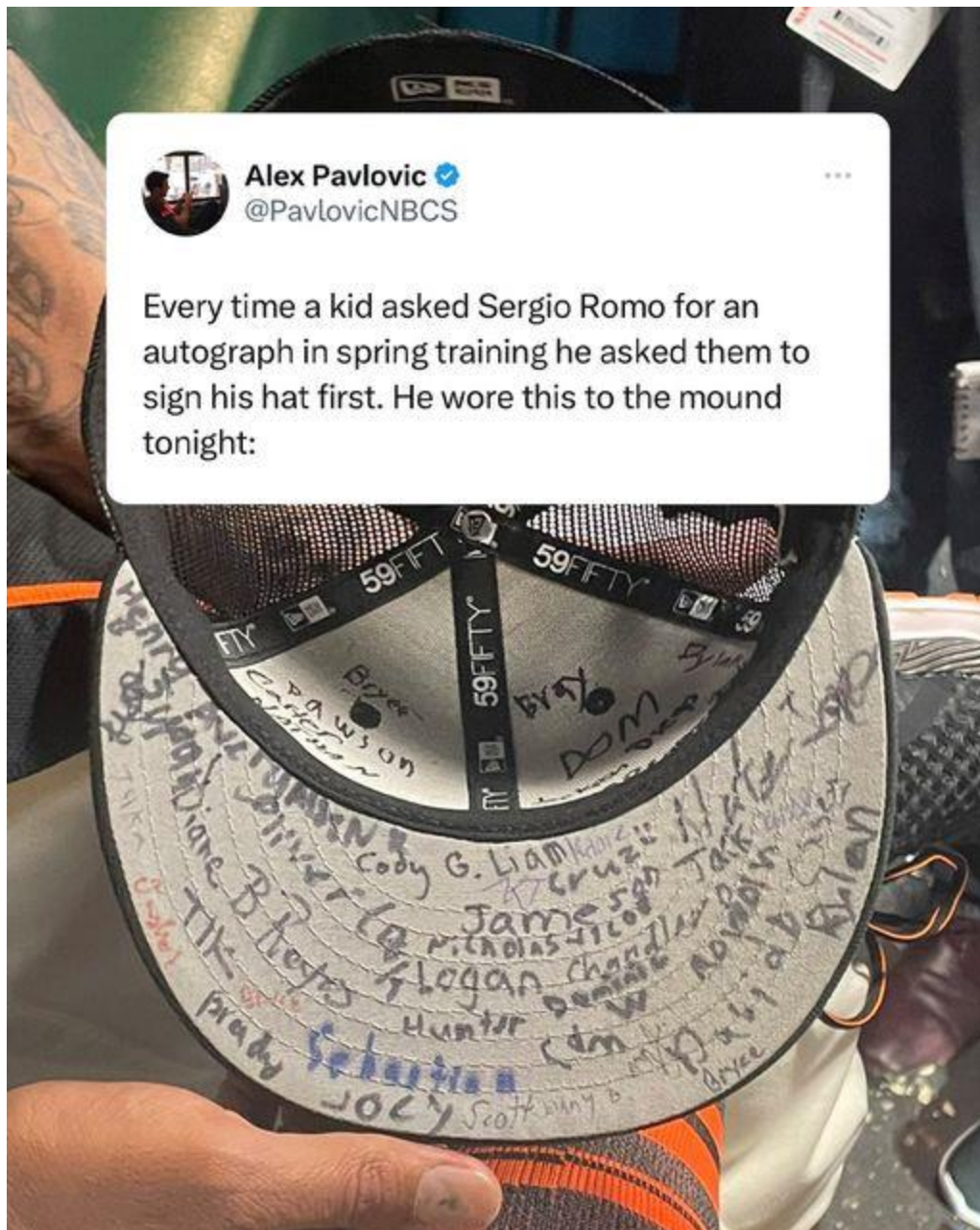
Who am I?

Name the seven current MLB franchises that have never had a 100-win season.

OPENING DAY NOTES

“Look around and embrace what today means: the start of that pursuit of a championship,” Yankees Manager **Aaron Boone** said Thursday morning. “Every team walks into the season with that hopeful feeling.”

The San Francisco Giants gave pitcher **Sergio Romo** one last game to pitch, an exhibition game (March, 27, 2023) after Sergio (3X World Series Champion) had announced his retirement from playing. Here is a classy thing that Romo did during spring training. For every kid that asked Sergio Romo for an autograph, Sergio gave them one, then asked for an autograph from the kid on the baseball cap worn by Romo. Those kids will remember that.



Opening Day featured eight Cy Young Award winners on the mound (**Sandy Alcantara, Shane Bieber, Corbin Burnes, Jacob deGrom, Zack Greinke, Corey Kluber, Max Scherzer and Blake Snell**) and 21 All-Star hurlers. In addition, five pitchers -- deGrom, **Kyle Gibson**, Kluber, **Pablo López** and **Kyle Muller** -- took the mound on Opening Day in a debut performance with their new clubs.

Justin Verlander has thrown the most Opening Day pitches of any active pitcher (1,151 pitches thrown in 12 Opening Day starts)

Logan Webb (SF, 2nd Opening Day start): Webb was the first Giants pitcher to make consecutive Opening Day starts since Madison Bumgarner in 2016-17.

Gerrit Cole (NYY, 5th): For the fourth straight season, the Yankees started Cole on Opening Day. Cole, who now holds New York's all-time single-season strikeout record, joins CC Sabathia (2009-14), Mel Stottlemyre (1967-70), Lefty Gomez (1932-37) and Jack Chesbro (1903-06) as the only pitchers to make at least four consecutive Opening Day starts for the Yanks.

Kyle Gibson (BAL, 2nd): Gibson's lone prior Opening Day start came in 2021 with the Rangers, and it did not go well. In fact, it is one of only two instances in the Live Ball Era (since 1920) of an Opening Day starter allowing at least five earned runs while recording no more than one out, joining Toronto's **Mark Bomback** in 1982.

Aaron Nola (PHI, 6th): Nola made his sixth consecutive Opening Day start, the longest active streak among MLB pitchers. Only two Phillies pitchers have started more consecutive Opening Day games in franchise history: **Robin Roberts** made 12 straight starts from 1950-61, while **Steve Carlton** made 10 straight from 1977-86.

Alek Manoah (TOR, 1st): was the 10th different pitcher in the last 13 seasons to start on opening day for the Blue Jays.

Miles Mikolas (STL, 2nd): For the 24th straight season, the Cards' Opening Day starter was right-handed; **Donovan Osborne** in 1999 was the most recent southpaw to start for St. Louis in a season opener.

Sandy Alcantara (MIA, 4th): Alcantara opened the Marlins' season for the fourth consecutive year, surpassing **Josh Johnson** and **Josh Beckett** for the most Opening Day starts in club history.

Bet you didn't know **Brad Radke** set a Twins club record with seven straight Opening Day starts from 1999-2005.

Three opening day starters from 2010 remain active—**Zack Greinke, Adam Wainwright and Justin Verlander**.

Hunter Greene (CIN, 1st): At age 23 he was the youngest Reds opening day starter in 43 years. You'd have to go back to 22-year-old **Frank Pastore** who shut out the Braves in 1980.

Shohei Ohtani was the first Angels pitcher to start consecutive Opening Days since **Jered Weaver** started six straight from 2010-15.

Kyle Muller (OAK, 1st): Muller, who was acquired from the Braves as part of the Sean Murphy trade, made only his 13th Major League appearance and 12th start when he took the mound against the Angels. Muller was lone rookie to make an Opening Day start this season.

Julio Urías (LAD, 1st): Urías, the reigning NL ERA champion, became the Dodgers' fifth Opening Day starter in as many years, following **Walker Buehler** (2022), **Clayton Kershaw** ('21), **Dustin May** ('20) and **Hyun Jin Ryu** ('19). This was the first time the Dodgers had such a streak since a span that ended with Kershaw's first Opening Day Start in 2011, as he followed **Vicente Padilla** ('10), **Hiroki Kuroda** ('09), **Brad Penny** ('08) and **Derek Lowe** ('07).

Félix Hernández started a club-record 11 Opening Day games for the Mariners, including 10 straight from 2009-18, and posted a 1.53 ERA in season openers.

It was the Red Sox 123rd opening day on Thursday when the Sox hosted the Orioles. They have upgraded the lights at Fenway Park to LEDs and added crab cakes sandwiches to concessions—now if they had spent on better players...

Yankees 30 straight winning seasons. 24 post seasons. 5 World Series wins

1926-1964. 39 winning seasons. 26 post seasons. 19 WS wins

Cards 15 and Dodgers 12 are the only teams with more than 5

Padres shortstop **Fernando Tatis Jr.** made his big league debut on March 28, 2019, singling in each of his first two at-bats off **Madison Bumgarner** in a 2-0 victory over the Giants. At 20 years and 85 days old, Tatis is the second-youngest player in big league history to collect multiple hits while playing in his first game in the Majors on Opening Day. The youngest was Hall of Famer **Bobby Doerr**, who had three hits on Opening Day 1937 at 19 years and 13 days old.

Anthony Volpe made the Yankees opening day roster. Volpe is the youngest Yankee, at 21 years and 336 days old, to make his debut for the organization since his idol, **Derek Jeter**, did so at 21 years, 281 days old in 1996. Volpe had the first 20 HR/50 stolen base season in the minors since 1995 when **Andruw Jones** did it. Besides Volpe and Jeter, you'd have to go back to 1976 to find a 21 year-old Yankee opening day starter—**Willie Randolph**.

Gerrit Cole was the first Yankee pitcher ever to strikeout more than 9 batters on opening day. Cole whiffed 11 Giants. **Tim Leary** had the previous record with 9. Cole, **Whitey Ford** and **Roger Clemens** all topped at 8. It was the 22nd time since Cole joined the Yankees in 2020 that he struck out 10 or more.

Logan Webb who started for San Francisco struck out 11, tying the Giants opening day record held by **Madison Bumgarner** in 2017.

Tom Seaver made the most Opening Day starts of any pitcher in baseball history, with 16. Incredible! Seaver started every Opening Day for the Mets from 1968 through 1977. He then started three Opening Days for the Reds, another one for the Mets and he was the White Sox' Opening Day starter in 1985 and 1986, even though he was 40 years old by then.

Name the only time that every batter on a team came out of a game with the same batting average that he had going in. That would be the Chicago White Sox on April 16, 1940, when they all went into the game with a .000 average and they all came out with the same .000 average when **Bob Feller** threw a no-hitter on Opening Day.

Walter Johnson threw 7 opening day shutouts, 12 complete games and allowed just 1 HR in 124 opening day innings.

George Bell, who hit three homers off Kansas City's **Bret Saberhagen** on Opening Day, 1988. It's easy to forget just what a bopper Bell was; he'd won the 1987 MVP award after hitting 47 home runs.

Three players are tied with 8 career opening day HRs--: **Ken Griffey Jr., Frank Robinson and Adam Dunn.**

Carl Yastrzemski had 6 career opening day stolen bases (he had 168 career steals—caught 116 times).

Babe Ruth hit .422 with a 1.366 OPS on Opening Day. Pretty good stuff.

Ted Williams hit .449 and ALSO had a 1.366 OPS on Opening Day.

Jeff Kent hit .467 on Opening Day with five homers.

Shoeless Joe Jackson hit .410. **Tony Oliva** hit .425. **Lou Gehrig** hit .423. **Frank Thomas** hit .400 with eight doubles.

The last time every MLB team played on opening day was 1968.

Rafael Devers of the Red Sox became the first player called out because of a pitch clock violation. Cubs righthander **Marcus Stroman** committed Major League Baseball's first pitch-clock violation in the third inning of Thursday's Opening Day game against the Brewers.

Adam Wainwright has now truly done it all in a Cardinals uniform. The pitcher's 19th and final season in St. Louis started off with ... fireworks ... when he stepped out of the player line to sing the national anthem ahead of a matchup with the Blue Jays on Opening Day.

It's a small sample size, but as long as we're comparing it to another small sample size, that's fine, right? Here are some side-by-side comparisons after one day of games:

- Average Opening Day time of game
2022: 3:16
2023: 2:45
- The median game time was 2 hours, 40 minutes — meaning that if you took out a couple of outliers (like the St. Louis-Toronto game, which had a 12-minute delay), the games moved even faster. Nine of the 15 games were less than three hours.
- The fastest games were between Tampa Bay-Detroit and Cleveland-Seattle — 2 hours and 14 minutes each. Do you know how many nine-inning games in 2022 lasted 2 hours and 14 minutes or less? Take a wild guess. Two-hundred fifty? A hundred? Fifty?
- Yeah, the answer is NINE. There were NINE nine-inning games that moved that fast.

The Yankees-Giants game took two hours, 33 minutes. It took 3:56 for New York to slog through Opening Day last year, a 6–5 win in 11 innings over Boston. It was the first time in 180 games

that the Yankees won a game so quickly at Yankee Stadium (no bottom of the ninth) with five or more runs scored.

The timer was tested in more than 8,000 minor league games over the past two years. It shaved 25 minutes off minor league games. It was tested in major league spring training games. It shaved 26 minutes off those games. A similar reduction in regular-season games will cut time of game under 2:45 for the first time since 1985.

I was lucky to be watching **Shohei Ohtani**'s start late on opening day. Here is a catch worth your time:

https://www.mlb.com/news/hunter-renfroe-makes-no-look-catch?partnerId=zh-20230331-867685-mlb-1-A&qid=1026&utm_id=zh-20230331-867685-mlb-1-A&bt_ee=6YAxHw1Qo0xswy57PKRYrT1kKO%2BHdwzcHZsXKYPL6T2jxDK%2FwXHCQd5ccDgRw009&bt_ts=1680267767784

Hunter Greene of the Red was clocked at 105.2 MPH Fastball, fastest pitch recorded in the last 7 years.

Orioles catcher **Adley Rutschman** went 5-FOR-5 in Baltimore's opening day win over the Red Sox. He's the first catcher in MLB history to have five hits on Opening Day. The last player with 5 hits on Opening Day was **Aaron Miles** (5-for-6 in a 12-10 Rockies win over the Padres in 2005).

Rockies 1B **CJ Cron** went 4-5, with a double, 2 home runs and 5 RBI vs. the Padres

Most opening day strikeouts--**Randy Johnson (107)**. Johnson racked up all these K's over the course of 14 Opening Day starts in his career. That's 26 more than any other pitcher. **Tom Seaver** is second with 81.

Johnson had four 10-strikeout games on Opening Day, the most all-time. **Bob Gibson, Pedro Martínez, Félix Hernández and Max Scherzer** are tied for second with three each.

Active leader: **Justin Verlander** (76)

Most opening day hits--**Pete Rose** with 31. Rose recorded at least one hit in 17 different Opening Day games and had multiple hits in 11 of those, putting him three ahead of **Joe Judge, Jeff Kent and Carl Yastrzemski** on the overall list.

Active leader: **Miguel Cabrera** (got his 20th on Thursday)

Rose's Opening Day games spanned from 1963-85, a 23-season streak which began against the Pirates and concluded against the Expos -- a team that didn't even exist when he played his first opener. **Albert Pujols, Carl Yastrzemski and Hank Aaron** are tied for second with 22 each. But neither of them, nor Rose, played in the most wins. That distinction belongs to **Babe Ruth and Brooks Robinson**, with 15 each.

Active leader: **Miguel Cabrera** (20) played in his 21st on Thursday.

Most opening day Home Runs: **Adam Dunn, Ken Griffey Jr., Frank Robinson (eight)**

This trio shares the record, but they each got there in different ways. Robinson hit exactly one home run in eight different Opening Day games. Griffey had a two-homer game in 1997, then hit one in six other games. And Dunn had two different Opening Day games with two homers, in 2005 and '07, and one each in four other games.

Dunn is one of seven players on record (since 1901) with two multi-homer games on Opening Day, along with **Joe Torre, Xavier Nady, Raul Mondesi, Eddie Mathews, Juan González and Albert Pujols**.

Active leaders: **Bryce Harper, Evan Longoria, Giancarlo Stanton** (five)

Looking back on some Opening Day highlights

2017 **Madison Bumgarner** strikes out 11 for the Giants, **Zack Grienke** for the D'backs becomes the only pitcher ever to homer twice on opening day as D'backs rally to win 7-6.

1996 **Randy Johnson** strikes out 14 White Sox, Frank Thomas gets him for a 2 run HR, Arod drives in winning run in the 12th for Seattle.

1975. One of the 5 times **Tom Seaver** dueled **Steve Carlton** on opening day. Seaver (who holds the record with 16 opening day starts) held the Phillies to one run in nine innings and struck out nine. But Carlton, who made 14 Opening Day starts himself, was just as good until the bottom of the ninth. The Mets finally got to him for the winning run, with **Joe Torre** the man who knocked it in. In his 5 opening days against Carlton, Seaver had an era of 1.19.

1974 **Hank Aaron** tied **Babe Ruth** with his 714th HR in Cincinnati.

1947 **Jackie Robinson** makes his debut for Brooklyn Dodgers in front of 26,623 at Ebbets Field against the Braves.

1940 21 year-old **Bob Feller** no hits the White Sox in Chicago, the only opening day no-hitter. The first of three career Feller no-hitters.

1926 **Walter Johnson** wasn't just one of the greatest pitchers of all-time, he was also one of the best ever on Opening Day. The Big Train started 14 season openers for Washington in his Hall of Fame career, and in those games, he tossed a Major League-record seven shutouts. His performance on Opening Day 1926, though, was simply mind-boggling.

At age 38, Johnson held the Athletics scoreless for 15 innings, allowing only six hits to a lineup that included Hall of Famers **Al Simmons** and **Mickey Cochrane**. But he was matched by Philadelphia starter Eddie Rommel, who kept the game scoreless into the 15th himself. Finally, in the bottom of the 15th, Hall of Famer **Bucky Harris** singled for Washington, **Goose Goslin** -- another Hall of Famer -- doubled him to third, and **Joe Harris** singled him home for the winning run.

1925 The Cleveland Indians beat the St. Louis Browns 21-14 in the highest scoring opening day game ever. It was a back and forth affair. Cleveland scored 12 runs in the top of the eighth, with the go-ahead blow a three-run homer off the bat of Hall of Famer **Tris Speaker**. But maybe the strangest part of the game? The Browns committed a whopping 10 errors -- tying the Major League record for a single game -- including five in the 12-run eighth. Eleven of those runs were unearned.

1923 the Yankees won the first of their Major League-record 27 World Series championships. But the season was special from the beginning: Opening Day for the Yanks was also the grand opening of the original Yankee Stadium. The ballpark, of course, became known as "The House

That Ruth Built." **Babe Ruth** christened Yankee Stadium with a three-run homer that made the difference in the Bronx Bombers' 4-1 win over the Red Sox.

The hustle and bustle of Opening Day in Boston brought with it a flurry of commerce. Programs were going for \$5, sausages for \$12. You could buy a leopard print Sox hat for \$45, or a gaudy plastic chain with the team's iconic "B" for the same amount. Replica jerseys were going for \$200. Red Sox socks could be yours for \$25. Many years after they were first introduced to Sox fans, one sidewalk stall in the heart of Kenmore Square was still pushing "Yankees Suck" shirts for \$25. Inside one bar, martinis were \$17. According to StubHub the highest priced opening day tickets were Yankees and Dodgers (surprise). At the other end of the spectrum you could get int Oakland for \$12 a seat. Scalpers in Boston were getting less than face value.

JOE SHEEHAN ON OPENING DAY (several years old but captures the mood)

Mike Trout, Max Scherzer, Mookie Betts, Chris Sale, Bryce Harper, Manny Machado, Noah Syndergaard, Ronald Acuña Jr., Francisco Lindor, Jacob deGrom, Aaron Nola, Kris Bryant, Aaron Judge, Christian Yelich, Clayton Kershaw, Justin Verlander, Jose Ramirez, Nolan Arenado, Joey Votto, Freddie Freeman, Andrelton Simmons, Giancarlo Stanton, Michael Conforto, Blake Snell, Buster Posey, Trevor Bauer, Jameson Taillon, Edwin Encarnacion, Miguel Cabrera, Edwin Diaz, Matt Chapman, Whit Merrifield, Vladimir Guerrero Jr., Paul Goldschmidt, Eloy Jimenez, Jose Berrios, Jonathan Villar, Corey Seager, Gleyber Torres, Joey Gallo, Brian Anderson, Zack Greinke...

Box scores.

The Green Monster, the **Jackie Robinson** Rotunda, the Judge's Chambers, the King's Court, the Rally Monkey, the Rockpile, McCovey Cove, Bernie Brewer, Mr. Met, the Phanatic, Dinger, Fredbird, Wally, play Sinatra, Fly the W, fly the Jolly Roger, the sausage race, the presidents' race, the pierogi race, The Freeze, the **Roberto Clemente** Bridge, the pool, the fountains, the ivy, the train tracks, Fenway Franks, Cha-Cha Bowls, Dodger Dogs, Boog's, walleye on a stick, bacon on a stick, Ben's half-smoke...

Peanuts and Cracker Jack.

Tom Verducci, Will Leitch, Joe Posnanski, Jeff Passan, Rany Jazayerli, Emma Baccellieri, Ben Reiter, Mike Petriello, Jay Jaffe, Rob Mains, Joel Sherman, Pete Abraham, Ken Davidoff, Ken Rosenthal, Meg Rowley, David Schoenfield, Peter Gammons, Eno Sarris, Jayson Stark, Sheryl Ring, Nick Piecoro, Jamal Collier, Mark Simon, Jamey Newberg, Rob Neyer, Maury Brown, Marly Rivera, Sam Miller, David Laurila, Ben Lindbergh, Katie Sharp, Matthew Leach, Derrick Goold, Jessica Quiroli, Sarah Langs, Craig Calcaterra, Travis Sawchik, Dayn Perry, Meghan Montemurro, Ben Badler, Jim Callis, John Sickels, Scott Miller, Matt Snyder, Bill James...

Baseball-Reference.com.

Len Kasper, Boog Sciambi, Jason Benetti, Jon Miller, **Bob Uecker**, Kruk and Kuip, Marty Brennaman, **David Cone**, Dan Shulman, Todd Kalas, **Jerry Remy**, Joe Davis, Don Orsillo, Brian Anderson, Mike Ferrin, Dave O'Brien, Chip Caray, **Dave Flemming**, **Mike Shannon**, Denny Matthews, John Sterling, Eric Nadel, Chris Welsh, Matt Vasgersian, Joe Buck...

Gary, Ron, and Keith.

The trade deadline, the rumor mill, the standings, the live scoreboard, 91-mph sliders, 64-mph curves, Quick Pitch, batting practice, getaway day games, makeup doubleheaders, #weirdbaseball, getting to the park early, staying to the final out, sneaking into better seats, MLB At Bat, the Subway Series, the Freeway Series, the Crosstown Cup, the Vedder Cup, cup checks, shirseys, snapbacks, going home with a foul ball, going home with a story of how you gave your foul ball to a kid, sunburn, keeping a scorecard, dot races, Centerfield, YMCA, Sweet Caroline, Thank God I'm a Country Boy, California Love, Thunderstruck, Go Cubs Go, Seven Nat...nope...

Take Me Out to the Ball Game.

Opening Day.

Let's. Go.

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

The Marlins have been under .500 12 straight years.

In 27 of the 28 seasons since MLB introduced the wild card, at least one team that had a losing record the year before has made the playoffs. (The only exception is 2005.) Last year, the Guardians, Mets and Padres all reached the postseason after posting sub-.500 records.

Players making their big-league debuts will be especially marked this season.

Major League Baseball announced before Thursday's openers that players making their first appearances will wear debut patches on their jerseys. The patch will appear on different places of a sleeve, depending on the team and any anniversary of sponsor patches.

After a player appears in his first game, the patch will be authenticated and placed on a Topps baseball card as part of an agreement reached by MLB and the business wing of the players'

association with Fanatics Collectibles, a division of Fanatics that acquired the trading card company Topps last year.

One card with the patch will be available for each player.

Taylor and Tyler Roger's of the Giants first pair of twin brothers teammates since **Jose and Ozzie Canseco** for 1990 A's.

Yankees' rookie record for stolen bases in a season--**Alfonso Soriano** (43 SB in 2001)



Great photo on the Yankees broadcast. Overhead photo showing it was 2962 feet from old Yankee Stadium to the Polo Grounds.

Speaking of the Yankees, they emailed me with some promotions:

\$550 to step onto the field during batting practice
\$175 meet Yankee alumni before a game

When **Shohei Ohtani** threw his first pitch of the season on Thursday night, the radio broadcasters were watching from monitors inside an otherwise deserted Angel Stadium.

It's the fourth year of this setup. For the first two years, that's what everyone did. COVID-19 forced the change. But as baseball and society have moved toward a more post-COVID reality, Angels radio — at the direction of Angels management — remains stuck in the past.

"We found out that it's not changing — we love our radio people, they do a great job," Angels owner Arte Moreno said during a rare press session on March 18. "We just found that the economics — 40,000-50,000 miles is not going to change that experience."

The Angels are one of two major-league teams that will not travel their flagship English-speaking radio booths on the road. The Blue Jays are the other team.

In contrast, 275 Red Sox staffers from across the world: scouts from Japan, Australia and South America, remote employees from across the country, analysts, minor-league coaches and front-office decision-makers met in spring training.

Teams are competing so hard with each other on the infrastructure side because acquisition, talent identification and development, both at the minor-league level and the major leagues, is so important. It is really the difference between good and great.

There had been some growth before Chaim Bloom, but since his arrival, the analytics/research and development staff has been bolstered noticeably. Part of it has been to keep pace with the industry itself. As recently as 2018 there were nine people in the Red Sox R&D department. That increased to 14 at the start of 2019 when Dave Dombrowski was still president of baseball operations. By the following year, Bloom's first year on the job, there were 16 people in R&D. The group grew to 21 people entering 2021 and by the start of 2022, there were 28 people working in R&D including additional hires in sports science and biomechanics.

At the start of 2023, the R&D staff had grown to 33 people, nearly four times the size it was when the Red Sox won the World Series in 2018.

When the Red Sox moved their spring training facility to JetBlue Park in Fort Myers in 2012, they had aspirations of making it a year-round player development hub, not just for minor leaguers or for extended spring training, but as a place where all players in the organization could go in the winter to work out.

While it's taken years for the Red Sox to implement their aspirations for JetBlue Park, the facility has hosted a growing medical and training staff as well as a larger presence from the research and development group.

It has been more than 10 years since **Félix Hernández** threw MLB's last perfect game on Aug. 15, 2012. There were three perfect games in 2012 (also **Phil Humber** and **Matt Cain**), the most ever in a single season. MLB is now in the middle of its longest perfect game drought since going a touch more than 13 years between **Catfish Hunter** (May 8, 1968) and **Len Barker** (May 15, 1981).

Patrick Corbin of the Nationals has a chance to do something no pitcher has done since the Carter Administration: lead his league in losses for three straight years (**Phil Niekro**, NL, 1978-1980 four seasons, tied with **Pedro Ramos** 1958-61 for the Senators and Twins). The last two seasons Corbin has gone 9-16 and 6-19. Pitching for a team that lost 108 games last year can do that to you.

Random stat of the day—career triples by 1B

1. **Keith Hernandez**, 60
2. **Tony Pérez**, 57
3. **Will Clark** and **Cecil Cooper**, 47

The only player to win a National League batting title for the Dodgers since they moved to Los Angeles--**Tommy Davis** (1962 & '63).

From Dan Shaughnessy of the Boston Globe

At this moment, **Chris Sale's** contract extension — inked in the sugar-high spring of 2019 when the Red Sox could have waited to measure his health — is the worst signing in Boston sports history.

It's worse than deals given to **Rusney Castillo** or **Pablo Sandoval**. Worse than **Carl Crawford** or **Matt Young**. Way worse than **David Price** or **Daisuke Matsuzaka**. Worse than Vin Baker, Pervis Ellison, Antoine Walker, or even Rick Pitino. Worse than Kevin Stevens, Marty Lapointe, or Adalius Thomas.

Sale delivered in his first two seasons in Boston and got the final out of the 2018 World Series. This isn't about that. This is about the non-yield since the Sox went out of their way to lock him up in that fateful spring.

In the last three seasons, Sale has made 11 starts, pitched 48⅓ innings, won five games, broken three bones, endured one Tommy John surgery, and made \$90 million.

The Sox finished last in two of those three seasons.

Sale says all the right things, but his contract and his lack of production have been a drag on the franchise. Coming into 2023, he's the Ben Simmons of baseball.

There are two years left on Sale's five-year, \$145 million deal. Now 34, he is trying to make good on the final seasons of his astronomical deal.

Juan Marichal is the only pitcher since 1960 to average 20 wins or better for ten consecutive years. From 1962-1971 Marichal won 204 games.

Ichiro Suzuki is the only player to lead his league in hits 5 straight seasons. 2006-2010 for Seattle. Ichiro and **Pete Rose** are the only two players to have 200+ hits in 10 or more seasons.

Derek Jeter has the most career hits (3465) without winning a batting title.

Mariano Rivera is the only pitcher since 1920 to have over 100 post-season innings with an ERA below 1.00. In 16 series, 96 games, Rivera went 8-1, 0.70 ERA.

Hall of Famer **Eddie Murray** hit 504 career HRs. He never hit 35 in a season.

Newly elected Hall of Famer **Fred McGriff** was the first player to hit 30 HRs for five teams—Blue Jays, Padres, Braves, Rays, Cubs.

Hall of Famer **Bruce Sutter** pitched in 661 games—started none.

Grover Cleveland Alexander, Walter Johnson and Sandy Koufax are the only three pitchers to lead the league in wins, strikeouts and ERA three times.

It was a different game but you have to be impressed--twenty-one-year-old **Babe Ruth** gave up zero homers in 323⅔ innings while going 23-12 with a 1.75 ERA for the world champion Red Sox in 1916.

In 1972, the first Major League Baseball players' strike began; it lasted 12 days. Twenty years later, on April 1, 1992, the National Hockey League Players' Association went on its first-ever strike, which lasted 10 days.

Crunching Numbers

The Yankees have retired 22 numbers, Cards are second at 14. With 69 players invited to camp plus manager and coaching staff they are running out of 2 digit numbers.

The Bombers retired their first number in 1939 in honor of legendary first baseman **Lou Gehrig**, who wore No. 4. Since then, the team has retired every single-digit number except for 0. It can't issue No. 42, which MLB retired in honor of icon **Jackie Robinson**, though the Yankees also retired the number for Hall of Fame closer **Mariano Rivera**.

Then there are the numbers the Yankees have tucked away on purpose. Two of them are in reverence for recently departed franchise stars — a practice common throughout the league. They include No. 19 for **Masahiro Tanaka** and No. 52 for **CC Sabathia**. The Yankees had also shied away from giving out **Brett Gardner's** No. 11 since he last played in 2021, but top prospect and new starting shortstop **Anthony Volpe** will don it in the majors. They held out **Alex Rodriguez's** No. 13 for five years before giving it to **Joey Gallo**.

The third number remains uncirculated as a mutual service to players who don't want to wear it and the team that doesn't want to give it out. It's No. 69, a perfectly nice number most often associated with, well, you know. On a list of Yankees uniform numbers pinned to a corkboard in the middle of the spring training clubhouse, No. 69 is skipped over, like the 13th floor in a hotel.

All this leaves 75 numbers for the clubhouse staff to work with. In total, the Yankees have 75 numbers (including No. 0, worn by pitcher **Domingo Germán**) from which to choose to dole out to their 40-man roster and on-field coaching staff, which has exploded to 11 people, up from just six a decade ago. **Aaron Boone's** No. 17 likely stands out as the only truly desirable number on the Yankees' coaching staff right now, but, before him, **Joe Girardi** wore Nos. 27 and 28, and **Joe Torre** had his No. 6 retired.

With minor leaguers given a shot at some spring training games outfield prospect **Jasson Dominguez** and pitching prospect **Yoendrys Gomez** doubling up on No. 89. **Tanner Tully**, a

lefty, was given No. 80 and could have pitched to **Anthony Seigler**, a catcher given the same number.

Recently retired umpire **Joe West**, who called an M.L.B. record 5,460 regular-season games. Ten umps with more than two centuries of combined experience retired last winter, meaning this historic season will be stage-managed by 10 rookie umpires, out of 76 total, and seven new crew chiefs.

Since 2020, M.L.B. has been using the 12-camera Hawk-Eye system, installed in all 30 ballparks, accurate to within 0.16 of an inch, to capture data on every official pitch and evaluate umpire performance, which helps guide the awarding of postseason assignments and crew-chief promotions.

Umpire Scorecards, created in 2020 by a 19-year-old Boston University freshman, Ethan Singer, as a computational-statistics side project. Each morning, @UmpScorecards tweets out tidy automated scorecards of every home-plate umpire's performance the night before. At least a handful of the account's 298,000 followers are M.L.B. umpires.

Singer was delighted to hear so many big-league umps check out his work, and relieved to hear they're not mad at him. Umps get far more worked up about K-Zone, because it's right there on every TV screen. And in Singer's defense, the only reason accounts like Umpire Scorecards are able to scrape the relevant data is that the league dumps all of it — dozens of metrics for pitching results alone, with names like "sz_bot" and "plate_x" — onto Baseball Savant, its stat-junkie warehouse at MLB.com.

It's been 20 years since Michael Lewis published Money Ball, and a dozen since Brad Pitt portrayed Billy Beane. The A's are no longer ahead of the curve. 106 losses last season. No roster improvements. Lowest payroll in MLB by \$15 million. In spring training they led MLB in runs allowed and walks allowed. Playing out the string to see if Oakland or Las Vegas coughs up a sweet real estate deal to line the owners' pockets.

They do have a rookie to watch. **Esteury Ruiz** stole 86 bases at an 85% success rate across three levels last year.

Want to know why the injuries to Yankee starters (Rodon, Severino, Montas) make me worry? Every MLB team used at least eight starters last season. All but two (the Astros and Rockies) used at least 10. Eight used 15 or more. The Rays used 18.

Texas Rangers went 15-35 on one run games. 9th team in last 11 seasons to lose 35 one run games in a season. Brutal.

The Blue Jays hit just 20 home runs from the left side of the plate last year, by far the fewest in the majors.

AL Central - The Guardians haven't won a World Series since 1948—the longest active title-less streak in the majors. The Twins have lost an MLB-record 18 consecutive postseason games. After the Mariners snapped their 21-year playoff drought last season, the Tigers haven't made the playoffs since 2014, tied with the Angels for the longest active drought. The Royals haven't had a winning record since '15, tied for the longest active streak (also with the Angels). And the White Sox have not won a playoff series since winning the '05 World Series, with just three postseason appearances in that span.

The Angels have three players making at least \$30 million this year (Trout, Ohtani and Anthony Rendon).

The secret sauce of Houston's run is a common recipe: pitching. In winning 101, 103, 107, 95 and 106 games over the past five full seasons, the Astros' pitchers have ranked 5, 1, 2, 4 and 1 in the league in ERA. Depth and velocity are why they dominate. Last season only the Angels, to accommodate Ohtani, had more starts on five days of rest or more than Houston.

Nobody is overworked.

Speaking of staying on top—look at the Dodgers. They won 111 games last year with **Walker Buehler** and **Clayton Kershaw** combining for 34 starts, with **Cody Bellinger** no-showing all year, with **Max Muncy** no-showing the first half. They won 106 games in 2021, played at a 116-win pace in 2020, won 106 games in 2019. Their established level of play is that of a .667 baseball team, a 108-win team. The Dodgers could give back a quarter of their 2022 wins and finish above .500 with a good shot a wild-card berth. They have some injured pitchers and lost some big contributors to free agency but they keep rolling with kids from their farm system. Forever ago, Theo Epstein spoke of turning the Red Sox into a scouting and development machine.

Andrew Friedman, one of the bright young men who came along in Epstein's wake, has actually done it with the Dodgers. They're the best until someone takes the crown from them.

Last year the A's won 60 and hit .216, making them the worst-hitting team in any full season of the Live Ball era except the 1968 Yankees.

The Braves are trying to win their 6th straight NL East division title.

Tough off-season for San Francisco—over a 14 day stretch the Giants bid for **Aaron Judge** was declined, their ace **Carlos Rodon** signed with the Yankees, and their free agent deal for shortstop **Carlos Correa** fell through.

Sandy Alcantara, Marlins, SP: The reigning NL Cy Young winner is a throwback to another era, a true ace who goes deep in games. Last season Alcantara had a 2.28 ERA, six complete games and 228 2/3 innings pitched—the most in the bigs since 2016.

The Cards trade for superstars -- from **Mark McGwire to Scott Rolen to Matt Holliday to Paul Goldschmidt to Nolan Arenado** -- and they back up the truck for them once they're wearing the birds on their chest, but signing **Willson Contreras** to a five-year, \$87.5-million contract is a surprise. It is the largest free-agent contract in franchise history for a player who wasn't already a Cardinal.

For the Cardinals, though, Contreras represents a sharp turn, really a 180 from what they've gotten from the catching position for the last 17 years. I'm hard pressed to remember a team making a change like this from one year to the next.

See, **Yadier Molina's** value has never been entirely in the runners he threw out, but rather in the ones who never even tested him. In Contreras's seven-year career, he's faced 372 steal attempts in a little over 5000 defensive innings. Over those same seven seasons, Molina faced 309 attempts in close to 6300 innings, for a team that allowed a slightly higher OBP. As a team, the Cardinals allowed just barely more than half as many steals as the Cubs did.

Molina is one of the greatest defensive weapons in baseball history. Since his first full season in 2005, the Cardinals have allowed fewer stolen-base *attempts* than all but two teams have allowed *steals*.

Contreras lengthens the Cards order with another strong bat. But, consider **Adam Wainwright** has thrown 2567 1/3 innings, tenth in MLB in that time. In that same timeframe, Wainwright has allowed just 65 steals. Wainwright has allowed just 117 stolen-base attempts in his entire career. (**Noah Syndergaard** allowed 112 before he turned 27.)

Wainwright has spent his entire career with the best security blanket since Johnny Bench. The transition from Molina to the new guy, though, is a fascinating experiment in how much of the team's steal prevention was the catching legend, and how much was the pitchers.

Most games without an ejection:

1. **Stan Musial**, 3,026
2. **Willie Mays**, 2,992
3. **Brooks Robinson**, 2,896
4. **Robin Yount**, 2,856
5. **Tony Perez**, 2,777*
6. **Derek Jeter**, 2,747
7. **Paul Waner**, 2,549
8. **Ernie Banks**, 2,528
9. **Harmon Killebrew**, 2,435
10. **Willie Stargell**, 2,360

**Perez was ejected as a manager.*

Some other folks who were known to have a temper but were never ejected:

Ted Williams

Jim Rice

George Hendrick

Dick Allen

Observation from the Joe Sheehan newsletter. Just six teams project as being out of it (Nationals, Reds, Pirates, Rockies, A's, Tigers). That leaves 24 teams with a chance to make the playoffs, and if you can make the playoffs, you can win the World Series.

Peek into the Royals dugout this season, and you'll see several new faces on the coaching staff. But the manager, bench coach and new pitching coaches are not the only changes you'll see.

You'll also be witnessing history.

Melissa Lambert, the Royals' director of behavioral science, will be the first person in her role to have a seat in the dugout in Kansas City's effort to increase mental health resources for their players and staff. She will also be the first woman to be on the Major League on-field staff in Royals' history.

In 2018, Royals senior director of behavioral science Ryan Maid met Lambert at a Major League Baseball mental health conference. At the time, Lambert was working for the Dodgers as a mental skills coach. Maid was just beginning to build his department. When the time came to expand, Lambert was the perfect candidate.

Not only does Lambert have an athletic background as a soccer player at Eastern Connecticut State, but she's a licensed professional counselor. Lambert earned her Master of Education in clinical mental health counseling from Springfield College in Massachusetts in 2009. Before baseball, she was a therapist who worked with student athletes.

There are 20 women in uniformed coaching roles in baseball this season, most of them with minor league teams.

The Red Sox have **Chloe Gosselin** working as a development coach associate at Fenway South. She is a Northeastern graduate, where she was a student manager of the baseball team.

Taylor Jackson is coaching with High A Greenville. She previously worked with the teams at the University of Alabama and Louisiana Tech.

With minor leaguers now part of the Players Association, a collective bargaining agreement was made with MLB that will be voted on by owners this coming week. The five-year deal includes minimum salaries across all levels topping out at \$35,800 in Triple A, offseason pay, better

housing, travel, and medical care, and an agreement not to contract the number of minor league teams. But beginning in 2024, teams can choose to have 165 players under contract during the season and 175 in the offseason, a reduction from 190 and 180. That would not include players in the Dominican Republic academies.

There were 269 foreign-born players from 19 countries on Opening Day rosters, just under 29 percent. The Dominican Republic accounted for 104 of those players, with Venezuela second with 67.

I'm guessing you could win a beer knowing the only Padre besides **Tony Gwynn** to win an NL batting title was **Gary Sheffield**, with a .330 batting average in 1992. Speaking of Gwynn...

TONY GWYNN

Gwynn had an awesome career. 3,141 career hits and posted an absurd .338 batting average -- the best mark since **Ted Williams**. He played 20 years in the Major Leagues and was inducted to the Hall of Fame on his first try in 2007.

On June 9, 1981, a young Tony Gwynn received the phone call that every ballplayer dreams of. He'd been drafted to play baseball professionally, No. 58 overall, by the San Diego Padres -- the team just down the road from where he had played collegiately at San Diego State.

That fact was only just beginning to sink in when Gwynn got another phone call about an hour later, this one wholly unexpected. He had been drafted again -- to play professional basketball, by the San Diego Clippers in the 10th round.

He still holds the all-time SDSU assist record (590), as well as the records for most assists in a season (221 as a junior) and most assists in a game (18 vs. UNLV on Feb. 5, 1980).

BETTING BASEBALL FUTURES

If you don't mind tying up capital for the whole season, here are over/under wins totals. (I like Blue Jays over 90.5, A's under 59.5).

MLB 2023 AMERICAN LEAGUE WIN TOTAL ODDS

Teams Listed in order of Projected Wins per Division

AL EAST OVER/UNDER WINS

- N.Y. Yankees 94.5
- Toronto 90.5
- Tampa Bay 89.5
- Boston 78.5
- Baltimore 76.5

AL CENTRAL OVER/UNDER WINS

- Cleveland 86.5
- Minnesota 84.5
- Chicago White Sox 83.5
- Detroit 68.5
- Kansas City 68.5

AL WEST OVER/UNDER WINS

- Houston 97.5
- Seattle 86.5
- Texas 81.5
- L.A. Angels 81.5
- Oakland 59.5

MLB 2023 NATIONAL LEAGUE WIN TOTAL ODDS

Teams Listed in order of Projected Wins per Division

NL EAST OVER/UNDER WINS

- Atlanta 96.5
- N.Y. Mets 94.5
- Philadelphia 89.5
- Miami 75.5
- Washington 59.5

NL CENTRAL OVER/UNDER WINS

- St. Louis 88.5
- Milwaukee 86.5

- Chicago Cubs 76.5
- Pittsburgh 67.5
- Cincinnati 65.5

NL WEST OVER/UNDER WINS

- L.A. Dodgers 96.5
- San Diego 93.5
- San Francisco 81.5
- Arizona 74.5
- Colorado 65.5



RICKEY HENDERSON

Rickey Henderson's stolen base record is so preposterous he's 468 steals ahead of second-place, Hall of Famer **Lou Brock**. To put that in perspective, the active leader in steals – Dee Strange-Gordon – is more than 1,000 behind Henderson at 336. Henderson stole 100 or more bases three times, including 130 in 1982, which still stands as the single-season record. Only three other players ever hit the 100-steals mark in a season and only one other — **Vince Coleman** — also did it three times. How many steals would Rickey have with the new rules on limited pickoffs and bigger bases?

Henderson stole three or more bases in a game 71 times in his career, including four steals 19 times, and five steals once, on July 29, 1989. He led the American League in steals nine times in the 1980s and led the majors five times. Henderson stole more bases in 1982 than any big-league team did last year. (Texas again topped the chart with 128.) Pre-season stolen bases are at 2.3 per exhibition game versus 1.6 a year ago.

Consider this: A 19-year-old phenom who just got called up to the big leagues would have to average 50 stolen bases a year and play 29 seasons to catch Rickey. Let's say he's super fast and averages 65 steals. That player would still have to extend his career 22 years to surpass Henderson. Beyond having elite speed, great health and a long career, getting on base enough would be an issue in the era of high strikeouts and home runs. Henderson's 81 homers to lead off a game are a major-league record (second place is a distant 53) and he walked an astounding 796 times to lead off an inning. He owns a career .401 on-base percentage over his 25-year career.

Some Henderson career highlights:

10x All Star

2x World Series champ

3x Silver Slugger

AL MVP

All-time stolen base leader

All-time lead off HR leader

First ballot Hall of Famer

2023 POSSIBLE MILESTONES

Last year we had **Albert Pujols** topping 700 home runs and **Miguel Cabrera** surpassing 3,000 hits. Here are some possibilities for 2023:

Miguel Cabrera: 15th all-time in hits

Last year, Cabrera became the 33rd member of the 3,000-hit club, and now, there's still more climbing to do. He enters the year with 3,088 hits, which ranks 24th all-time. Here are the next nine ahead of him, according to the Elias Sports Bureau:

- 15. **Cal Ripken Jr.:** 3,184
- 16. **Adrian Beltré:** 3,166
- 17. **George Brett:** 3,154
- 18. **Paul Waner:** 3,152
- 19. **Robin Yount:** 3,142
- 20. **Tony Gwynn:** 3,141
- 21. **Alex Rodriguez:** 3,115
- 22. **Dave Winfield:** 3,110
- 23. **Ichiro Suzuki:** 3,089

He had 101 hits last year, which would put him just ahead of Ripken, so 15th seems like a realistic target.

Yordan Alvarez: 100 career home runs and beyond

Alvarez, who hit a career-high 37 homers last season, has gone deep 98 times in just 368 career games. If he gets to 100 within his first two games of 2023, he'd be the fourth-fastest to do so by games, and at the very least, he should be within the top eight.

Fewest games to 100 career HR:

- Ryan Howard:** 325
- Pete Alonso:** 347
- Gary Sanchez:** 355
- Aaron Judge:** 371
- Ralph Kiner:** 376
- Joey Gallo:** 377
- Ronald Acuña Jr.:** 378
- Chuck Klein:** 390
- Bob Horner:** 390

Zack Greinke and Clayton Kershaw: 3,000 strikeouts

Greinke enters with 2,882 strikeouts and Kershaw with 2,807. That means that 3,000 is very much on the radar for each of these former teammates over the course of the season. The last pitcher to join the 3,000-strikeout club was **Max Scherzer**, who became its 19th member. The 3,000 mark is certainly elite territory: of the 19 pitchers to reach it, the only ones not in the Hall of Fame are **Roger Clemens and Curt Schilling** -- plus **CC Sabathia**, Scherzer and **Justin Verlander**, who are not yet eligible.

Greinke is 118 strikeouts away from the mark. He had just 73 last year. Kershaw needs 193 -- a mark he hasn't reached since he struck out 202 batters in 2017. The last time Kershaw made at least 25 starts, in 2019, he had 189 strikeouts.

Max Scherzer and Justin Verlander: 10th all-time in strikeouts

From former teammates to former-turned-current-again ones -- the Mets' top two starters enter the year 12th and 13th all-time in career strikeouts. Verlander is 12th with 3,198 and Scherzer is 13th at 3,193, both within striking distance of 10th all-time. Here's the relevant list, according to Elias:

9. **Walter Johnson**: 3,515
10. **Greg Maddux**: 3,371
11. **Phil Niekro**: 3,342

Verlander is 174 strikeouts from passing Maddux, and Scherzer is 179 from the mark. Verlander had 185 last year, and Scherzer had 173 in 23 starts, so both are realistic with healthy seasons.

Craig Kimbrel and Kenley Jansen: 400 saves

Each of these prolific closers is on the cusp of joining an exclusive club. Only six pitchers have amassed at least 400 saves. Kimbrel enters '23 with 394 saves and Jansen with 391. The Phillies will be the seventh team Kimbrel records a save with; the Red Sox will be Jansen's third.

Kimbrel needs six saves for 400 and has had fewer than 10 in just two seasons: 2020, when he had three save opportunities and notched two, and in his first MLB season in 2010, when he was 1-for-1 in save situations. Jansen needs nine. He last had fewer than 10 in 2011, when he was just two years removed from being a Dodgers Minor League catcher. That year, he went 5-for-6 in save situations.

ONE CONTENDER WILL BE HURT MORE THAN THE REST BY THE DEFENSIVE SHIFT BAN

Los Angeles was the master of the shift and used it to its advantage. With the ban on the defensive strategy starting this season, the Dodgers and other teams might get stuck.

Tom Verducci, Sports Illustrated

The Dodgers' secret sauce is off the menu for this season.

While the ban on defensive shifts is great news for hitters, especially left-handed hitters, it's bad news for Los Angeles, which enjoyed an edge over the rest of baseball for the past four seasons with how well it deployed extreme defensive positioning.

No team since 2019 shifted more often and more effectively than the Dodgers. That edge goes away now that all teams must position two infielders on each side of second base and no deeper than the infield cutout, which is 95 feet from home plate.

"Not shifting will definitely have an effect but it is still all relative," says Andrew Friedman, the Dodgers' president of baseball operations. "The gap might not be as large between the best and worst team as it has in the past.

"That said, some of it is prioritizing good defenders as well as generating weaker contact [last point is my intuition]. Also, some portion of that comes from outfield positioning, which remains unchanged."

Friedman is baseball's Secretary of Defense. With the Rays, he and manager **Joe Maddon** were early adopters of shifts. In a three-game sweep of the Yankees to open 2012, for instance, the Rays caught so many line drives that New York hitting coach Kevin Long scoffed, "They're not above the game by any means. They hit the jackpot against us in the first series ... They were in the perfect spot. Come on, man. That's not going to happen all year."

It did. The Rays led the major leagues in lowest batting average allowed on balls in play.

After Friedman left to run the Dodgers in 2015, he used their enormous resources to elevate the art (and science) of the shift. Here are the best teams in baseball at turning balls in play into outs over the past eight seasons (when Friedman has been running the Dodgers) and in the seven seasons prior (when he was running the Rays). Friedman is the common denominator.

Lowest Batting Average on Balls in Play

Year	Team	BABIP	MLB BABIP	Next Lowest
2015-2022	Dodgers		.272 .296	.286 by Astros, Rays
2008-2014	Rays		.282 .298	.286 by A's

At each stop, Friedman's teams have created a significant edge by taking away hits with how well they play defense, especially with their positioning. You must start with this: a large part of that success is the quality of their pitching. Weak contact is easier to defend than hard contact. Fly balls are easier to defend than ground balls. Since 2015, the Dodgers have allowed an MLB-low batting average of .224. Their expected batting average allowed is .223. Only four teams have a lower delta between batting average and expected batting average in that time: the Cubs (-.004), A's (-.001), Cardinals (0) and Guardians (0).

Yes, the Dodgers have very good pitchers. But the amount of time and resources they devote to positioning has been industry leading. Los Angeles was one of the first teams to deploy laminated defensive positioning "cheat sheets" for fielders to keep in their back pockets. The cards are specific to each pitcher and are swapped out upon each pitching change.

In 2016, the Mets complained to MLB that the Dodgers used laser-guided measuring devices before a game at Citi Field to assist with their defensive positioning. MLB said the use of such devices was illegal only with in-game use.

The Dodgers have been the best at defensive positioning even though they have not had many superior defenders. They won the World Series in 2020, for instance, often with **Corey Seager** at shortstop, **Chris Taylor** at second base and **Max Muncy** at third base. In Friedman's time with the Dodgers, only two Los Angeles position players have won a Gold Glove: outfielders **Mookie Betts** and **Cody Bellinger**.

Los Angeles took a big leap forward with its defensive strategies in 2019. Look at how the Dodgers under Friedman rose to the top of the pack as they shifted more:

Dodgers Defensive Ranks under Friedman

Year	Defensive Efficiency	BABIP	Shift %
2022	1	1	1
2021	1	1	1
2020	2	2	1

2019	2	2	1
2018	8	6	10
2017	1	3	13
2016	5	4	17
2015	12	14	24

That is a serious upgrade. The more the Dodgers shifted, the better they played defense. How much better? Here's a look at the best and worst teams over the past four seasons at defending balls in play—and how shifts played a part in their strategies:

Lowest BABIP, 2019-2022

Team	BABIP	Shift % Rank
Dodgers	.263	1
Astros	.274	2
Cards	.280	26

Highest BABIP, 2019-2022

Team	BABIP	Shift % Rank
Red Sox	.319	23
Royals	.309	25
Rockies	.309	

The Dodgers and Astros were defensive wizards when it came to positioning (behind terrific pitching, of course). The Cardinals relied more on fabulous defenders than shifts. On the negative side, the Red Sox play in a hitter's park and have long been poor at interior defense, the Royals probably should have been shifting more in a big ballpark and the Rockies just have too much acreage to cover at Coors Field to ever be a great defensive team.

What really jumps out is how much better the Dodgers are than everyone else, even the Astros. Shifts are designed to take away hits on hard contact. The Dodgers became superb at it once they went all in on shifts in 2019, as this chart proves:

Ground Balls Hit 95+ mph vs. Dodgers

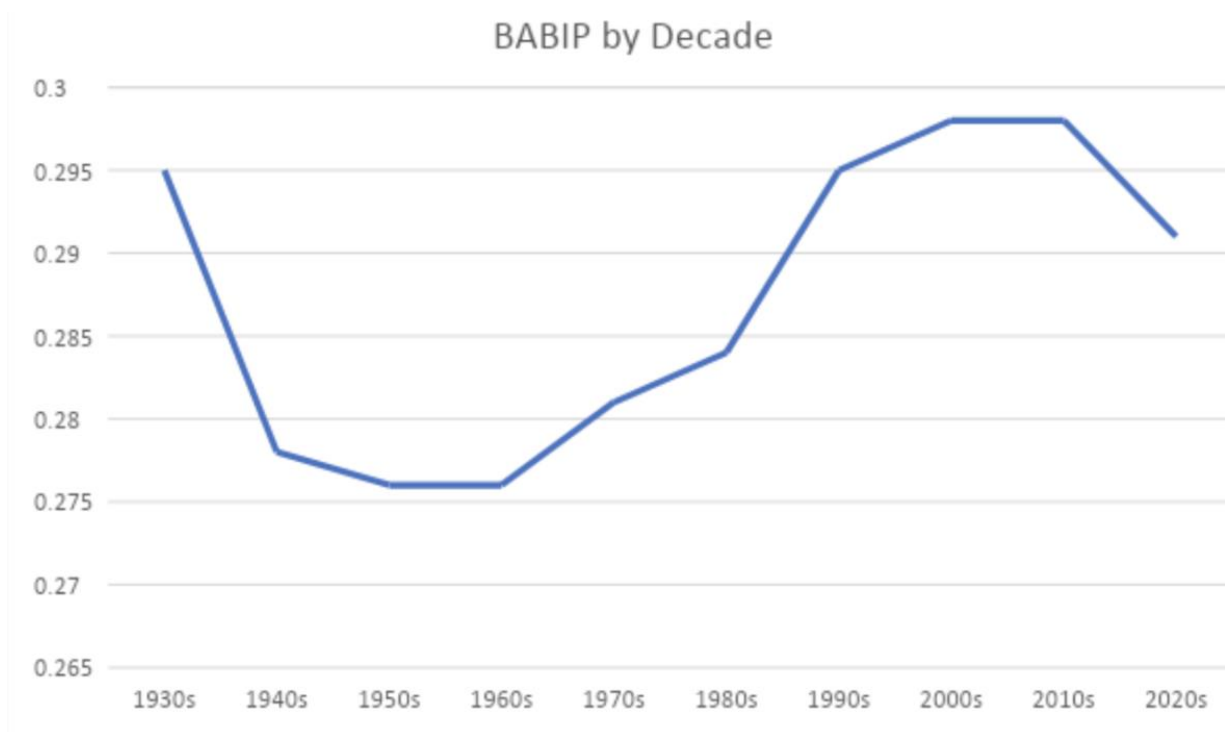
Year	Number	Hits Avg.
2018	505	.406
2022	490	.335

The Dodgers should have yielded 199 hard-hit ground-ball hits last season if they played the same way they did in 2018. Instead, their shifts and positioning took away 35 such hits. Those hard-hit ground-ball hits are coming back this year. As Friedman points out, the ban on shifts cuts the gap between the best and worst defensive teams. That's where the edge is lost.

Further, the Dodgers have an unsettled infield situation. Their presumed shortstop, **Gavin Lux**, blew out his knee in spring training and is out for the year. Their most used middle infield is expected to be shortstop **Miguel Rojas**, a 34-year-old who has never started more than 132 games at the position, and second baseman **Miguel Vargas**, a bat-first rookie.

Without shifts, the overall MLB batting average is bound to rise, perhaps by as many as 15 points. Last year it was .243, the worst since the all-time low in 1968 sparked massive rule changes (lowering the mound, redefining the strike zone).

Shifts have been banned for one reason: they worked too well (despite your consternation on a few mis-hit, opposite-field balls that would otherwise be outs). They worked so well that three years of this decade produced the first downturn in BABIP *in seven decades*:



Back in the halcyon days of the shift, in 2018, the Brewers confidently fielded what they called their “offensive line” infield: first baseman **Jesus Aguilar** (277 pounds), second baseman **Travis Shaw** (230), shortstop **Jonathan Schoop** (247) and third baseman **Mike Moustakas** (225). They just let those guys mash at the plate knowing that finely tuned shifts covered for their lack of range on defense.

Those days are over. The world of defense has been flattened. The Dodgers’ edge has been dulled. In this new world, range and athleticism trump front-office intellect.

BEWARE CATCHERS, THE ROBOTS ARE COMING

Once an obscure art, pitch framing has become an essential MLB skill. But with robo umps seemingly destined for the big leagues, it is suddenly endangered.

By Emma Baccellier, Sports Illustrated

Charlie Greene tries to find something he can compare to what might soon happen to MLB catchers. He can’t.

The Brewers’ catching instructor reaches for a few analogies. This would be like telling a quarterback he can’t make passes of over 50 yards, he says. It would be like telling a basketball player he can’t dunk or take a three-pointer. But Greene knows these

comparisons aren't quite right. Those are physical acts, and he is talking about something artistic, philosophical, almost existential. As the veteran coach sees it, this is not about placing artificial limits on talent or making the position harder. It's about taking away the heart of what it means to *catch*.

He is talking about an automated strike zone—a “robo ump.” After experimenting with the technology in independent ball and across the minor leagues, MLB will use an automated zone in all 30 Triple A parks in 2023, meaning its introduction to the majors will likely follow. Nothing is official yet. But the men who relay signs know one when they see one.

The system can determine balls and strikes with optical tracking data—a perfect, or at least perfectly consistent, zone. (One version in Triple A will be a full robo ump, determining every pitch, while the other will be a challenge system like that of professional tennis, where a human umpire calls the zone, but each team has three challenges per game for computer review.) Some people welcome the efficiency and fairness of an automated ball-strike system (ABS). Others bemoan the loss of the proverbial “human element.” But for catchers, the stakes are different: The robo ump might remove a significant piece of their skill set. Gone could be the need to “frame” a pitch—to receive it in a way that maximizes the chance of the umpire calling it a strike. At its most basic, this means keeping body movement smooth when catching anything on the edges of the zone. But many catchers see it akin to an art. And now it may be about to disappear.

Which stings all the more given the evolution of framing in the last decade.

Long considered a niche skill—emphasized heavily by some catchers and not at all by others—framing got a jolt from new technology. With the advent of pitch-tracking data in the late 2000s and early '10s, front offices suddenly began to analyze framing as a measurable skill, and soon they quantified its effects. The art looked more like science. It didn't take long for front offices, in their pursuit of an optimized version of baseball, to realize how valuable a piece of the puzzle pitch framing could be. After all, a catcher might have only a few balls to block during a game and even fewer runners to throw out on the base paths, but he would catch upward of a hundred pitches. Maybe just a handful that would otherwise be called balls could be framed as strikes. But they'd add up. That understanding led to a revolution. In a few years, pitch framing went from arcane skill to sabermetric hot topic to catching fundamental. It started as a way to gain a competitive edge on the margins. Then it became a necessity. Now? A relative of the technology that sparked its rise might kill it off.

In essence, pitch framing became valued when it could be measured, and the tools used to measure it might now be used to dismantle it. For catchers, it's not just the end of an era. It's the death of a craft.

“It's that artistic side,” says retired catcher **Jeff Mathis**, a defensive specialist recognized as one of the best framers of the past two decades. “That's out the window. Just catch it; put yourself in position to block or possibly throw, and let the robots take over.”

Catchers know you may not feel sorry for them. *Pitch framing is why baseball needs ABS in the first place*, you might say. But they see it differently. They don't talk about their job as manipulating the ump or luring him into obviously incorrect calls. (Which they couldn't do, anyway: Even a framer like Mathis could never make a ball *that* far outside a strike.) Instead they see it as a quest to make their pitchers look as good as possible, doing their best to ensure they don't *lose* any obvious strikes.

"I don't think you're trying to fool the umpire," says Tigers director of coaching Ryan Sienko, a former catcher whose current job is focused on the position. "What you're trying to do is keep the ball in the strike zone as much as you can."

Or, per the reigning framing king: "I'm not worried about the umpire," says Yankees catcher **Jose Trevino**, who led MLB in most framing stats in 2022. "I'm worried about my pitcher."

There have been catchers taking pride in framing as long as the position has existed. But it was traditionally hard to notice and harder to measure. It didn't show up in a box score or highlight reel. It was, in a sense, the ultimate representation of human interaction in baseball. Yes, it was about the imperfect judgment of the umpire, but it was also about the connection between pitcher and catcher. It was about trust.

"It's something you have to have a lot of pride in," Mathis says. "You're catching 150 pitches a night, you know, maybe closer to 175. It's easy to take four or five pitches off. But those four or five pitches that you take off might not get called strikes. You might botch one, you might have that pitcher look at you as you catch it, you might deflate his confidence."

Naturally some catchers had always prioritized framing. But there was no consistent language—"framing," "presentation," variations on "receiving"—let alone consistent instruction. There were certainly no statistics.

Then came pitch-tracking data.

One of the first people to use PITCHf/x to study framing was a baseball fan and hobbyist researcher named Dan Turkenkopf. He'd figured that framing might be statistically important. But even he was surprised when he tried to quantify it. His first analysis, published on the blog "Beyond the Box Score" in 2008, found the difference between the best framer (**Gregg Zaun**) and worst (**Gerald Laird**) had been equal to 25 wins in '07.

The numbers were soon refined. But Turkenkopf's framework held true: Pitch framing could have a massive impact. And since clubs had not paid much attention to it—let alone tried to cultivate it—the gap between good and bad was huge. Quickly, front offices took note. (They also took the bloggers publishing this work: Turkenkopf is now the Brewers' vice president of baseball research and innovation.) Smart teams recognized a small investment in research could pay dividends on the field.

“It was a pretty quick diffusion through the league to start really making changes, once teams kind of got on board with this being a measurable skill,” Turkenkopf says.

At first, front offices focused on identifying the best framers in the game and picking them up before others understood their value. Then savvy teams started thinking bigger: They didn’t want just to find the best framers but to develop more of them. What had once been an opaque art was becoming a cold, hard darling of the analytic set.

“You were still gaining at the margins a lot,” says Sienko. “Whether it be by just drills or techniques or learning how to understand what the numbers were.”

An industry of coaches and consultants popped up. Strategies became more sophisticated. Trevino laughs now at film from 2016 or ’17, when the style was a catch-and-stick method that now looks unnatural. “Those videos,” he says, “I’m trying to hold the ball as still as I could, but I’m trying to move it up towards the strike zone.” The numbers got more specific, and the coaching more advanced. And soon the landscape evened out. The game’s strongest framers had more competition. The weakest had disappeared. If pitch framing had once been a market inefficiency for teams to exploit—well, here was efficiency.

“When I first started, there was a drastic difference between the best and the worst,” Greene says. “Now, the gap is maybe only a couple wins. . . . Everyone’s caught on.”

All this happened within the space of a playing career. In 2005, pitch framing had been intangible. By ’10, it was measurable, which in turn made it valuable. This meant that in ’15, it was inescapable, and in ’20, it was fundamental to the position. It had been observed, quantified, refined and, finally, almost, taken for granted.

“It took over the position,” says Tigers manager **A.J. Hinch**, a former catcher himself. “It got to a place where that’s the first thing you look at when evaluating a catcher.”

Framing is not dead yet. Executives around the league stress this: While catchers and their coaches nervously anticipate a funeral, pitch framing still means something in the major leagues, and teams will recognize it until it doesn’t.

“We’re experimenting with different ways as an industry to think about calling balls and strikes,” says Red Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom. “But we don’t know yet which direction that’s going to go.”

The technology has been refined since ABS was first tested in the Atlantic League in 2019. The Triple A tests this season will be split: During the week, a robo ump will determine every pitch, but weekends will have a challenge system. “Number one, in terms of what we hope to learn, is to get a firmer read on player preferences between the two systems,” MLB commissioner Rob Manfred said in February. “We do not have a fixed idea or timetable on ABS.” He said Triple A was chosen this year specifically to get as close as possible to a major league environment.

The challenge system is pitch framing's last hope. "If there's no challenge system, framing just goes away," Royals executive vice president of baseball operations and general manager J.J. Picollo says. "But if there's a challenge system, your catching profile's going to be the same." For anyone wary of an automated zone, the challenge system can feel like a good compromise, generally preserving human judgment while turning to the computer for the most consequential situations. But there's a big gap between that and exclusively automated balls and strikes.

"I'm not excited about the idea of total ABS. . . . I'm a little guarded about what that's going to bring," says Orioles executive vice president and general manager Mike Elias. "I worry about unintended effects towards the catching position."

Such as?

"If you remove one huge component from the defensive skill set, just totally take it away, that the other parts of the pie chart of what it means to be a good catcher are going to fill it in," he says. "And I don't know how the filling in is going to happen, exactly. It may not be something that we like."

That could mean more focus on how a catcher handles the running game (especially with new rules to revive the stolen base: larger bags and limited pickoff moves). It could mean the position becomes less about defense and more about offense. It could mean something else. "It offers new challenges," Sienko says. But it almost certainly means the position will look different.

"It's not going to be as pretty," Mathis says. "Because guys won't have to worry about where they're catching—just keep it in front of you, and it's called ball or strike, and then we move on to the next pitch."

There is, of course, a natural rebuttal to this: That's how it should be. For those in favor of an automated zone, the whole point is calling ball or strike and then moving on to the next pitch, no frustrations or tricks. There are objective truths here. And yet . . .

"Most of the umpires are very good at this," Greene says. "Maybe you miss a couple. But I think the human element is all part of it. There's a human element in every sport."

The term *human element* is one that comes up often in these conversations. In some cases, it's simply a euphemism for the ability to be wrong. But in others, it's something else, a catch-all term for art and uncertainty and emotion. It's either incidental to baseball or it's the whole point.

"It's the human interaction and human element of the game. That's fun," Hinch says. "So we'll give it a chance, and the game will probably be more accurate, and it'll be better for it. But there's a part of the purity of the game that we were raised on that will change."

This is where an automated strike zone differs from using replay review to verify a home run or a tag play. The home plate umpire has a role unique not just in baseball but in professional sports: He does not offer his judgment on specific moments or in extreme cases but on every last pitch. His choices—literally—shape the game. Which is reason either to remove that responsibility entirely or to recognize it as an essential part of the game.

It took all of two days for the first ejection after the Atlantic League adopted its original automated zone in 2019. The honor belonged to High Point Rockers pitching coach (and 1988 Cy Young winner) **Frank Viola**. “Do your f---ing job!” he yelled at the umpire when frustrated with the zone from the computer. So the ump did part of the job he had left: He tossed Viola. Then he returned to signaling the balls and strikes being called by the computer above. There was confusion, Viola later said; he had been unsure who (or what) was in charge. But the implication lingered: Isn’t this *your* job?

“It’s the human element of the game, the balls and strikes from the umpire,” Trevino says. “You take that out, and it’s just like, *O.K., what are we really doing?*”

Trevino had 5,525 framing chances in 2022. His favorite? In early September the Yankees were playing the Rays, and Tampa Bay third baseman **Yandy Díaz** stepped into the box against New York reliever **Clay Holmes**. Two outs. Bottom of the ninth. A potential tying run at third and winning run at second. The tension of the moment stretched until the count was full.

And here was the 3–2 pitch: a 102-mph sinker that sank a touch more than Holmes wanted. Díaz knew it. He didn’t swing. But Trevino knew it, too. And he received the pitch with an easy confidence befitting a strike. His gracefulness made the movement hard to spot, even on replay. All the video shows is that one second, the pitch is coming in low, and the next, Trevino has secured it inside the zone.

This was strike three.

“You put so much work in on the receiving end for that one moment, right there, that time and place,” Trevino says. “All of a sudden, everything just kind of is full circle. The ball is down—you worked on this move for however many years—strike three.”

It was a perfect example of the desire for an automated zone. That was a ball. It was low, and Díaz knew, and he struck out nonetheless. The call was wrong. Had it been right, Tampa Bay might have won the game, and who knows how much else. It was a straightforward case of wrong and right where human judgment erred in a way a computer never would.

Yet it was also a perfect example of why there’s resistance to an automated zone. There’s the elegant, slight motion of Trevino’s glove as he converts ball to strike, the product of countless hours of dedication to his craft. There’s the fierce emotion of the whole moment. Umpire **Vic Carapazza** delivered the strike call with gusto—a splashy, dramatic punchout—as if to assert his

confidence in it. Díaz threw down his helmet and twisted his shoulders in frustration. The whole moment thrummed with passion.

Carapazza believed what he saw; Díaz believed what *he* saw; Trevino did not have to believe his eyes because he believed in his hands. There was something to feel in part because there was something to argue over. It felt like art in more ways than one.

MLB shared this highlight on its website as “Clay Holmes seals 2–1 victory.” Trevino would never take issue with that description—his job is to make his pitcher look his best, after all, and that’s what he did—but he knows the truth. Holmes set up the victory. Trevino sealed it.

He made it art. He made the pitch a piece you wanted to look at—and then, just as crucially, he made you question what you saw. He framed it.

MORE ON ROBO UMPs

Triple A gets robot umpires

The Automatic Ball-Strike System (ABS) was tested in the Pacific Coast League last season and now it’s coming to the International League starting on April 25.

A tracking system identifies the location of pitches and transmits that information to the home plate umpire via an earpiece. There’s very little lag time.

Triple A teams will follow those rulings Monday to Thursday. From Friday to Sunday, there will be a challenge system. The umpire will call balls and strikes in the traditional way, but each team will get three challenges. Only the pitcher, catcher, and batter can challenge, not the manager, and it must be signaled right away.

The pitch will then be reviewed to see if the call changes.

MLB commissioner Rob Manfred is a proponent of ABS. MLB’s competition committee will at some point after this season decide whether to stick with umpires calling games, use ABS, or use a challenge system.

One unintended outcome of ABS are players shrinking.

Not literally. But to ensure that the strike zone is called correctly, players have their heights measured with that information put in the system. **Aaron Judge**, obviously, has a larger strike zone than **Jose Altuve**.

When the measurements were done on minor leaguers, a number of players were suddenly an inch or two shorter than what was listed by their teams.



RUBE WADDELL

George “Rube” Waddell was born in Bradford, Pennsylvania on October 13, 1876. He was one of the best pitchers in the history of professional baseball, but today he is mostly remembered for his unconventional behavior and antics, both on and off the field.

Waddell didn’t attend school often as a child. Instead, he preferred hanging out at local fire stations and following them as they went out on calls. He was later remembered by locals as having a hobby of throwing rocks at birds, an odd and cruel talent that undoubtedly helped him when he later began his career as a baseball pitcher. At 18 he tried out for and was given a roster spot on a local semi-pro baseball team. In his short time there a fellow player called him “Rube” because of his simpleminded nature, a nickname he embraced and was known as for the rest of his life. His incredible pitching talent was quickly realized and he was awarded a professional contract by the Louisville Colonels.

Over his 13-year professional baseball career, Waddell accumulated numerous accolades. In 1905 he led the American League in wins, strikeouts, and lowest earned run average, winning the “Triple Crown.” He led the league in strikeouts for six straight seasons. (In 1903 and 1904 Waddell had back-to-back seasons with over 300 strikeouts, a feat that wouldn’t be repeated by another player for over 60 years.) To this day, Rube Waddell holds the single-season record for strikeouts in the American League by a left-handed pitcher. In exhibition games, to show off, he would occasionally wave his teammates off to the side of the field and successfully play defense with only his catcher.

Despite all of this, Waddell is better known for his eccentricities that were exacerbated by his lifelong struggle with alcoholism. He was notorious for arriving at the stadium moments before the game began, still wearing his street clothes. He would change into his uniform while walking through the grandstands, occasionally stealing and chugging fans’ beers as he went. On more than one occasion he ran out of the stadium because he heard a firetruck drive by blaring

its sirens and he chased after it to help. He once left mid-game because he decided he would prefer to be fishing. Opposing fans would sometimes successfully distract him by holding up puppies, which Rube would gleefully run off the mound to play with. After the 1905 season, Waddell's contract was amended to forbid eating crackers in bed after numerous complaints from his roommate, catcher **Ossee Schreckengost**.

In the off-season, Waddell would pick up odd jobs that included bartending, semi-pro football, and wrestling alligators in traveling circuses. He was notorious for going on multi-day drinking binges and marrying women he met while he was drunk—it's unknown how many wives Waddell had over his lifetime. After a drunken brawl in 1908, a warrant for his arrest was issued in Massachusetts. For the rest of his career, Waddell missed games whenever his team traveled to Boston. After the 1908 season, his team's owner paid Waddell to be the groundskeeper of his remote hunting lodge in an attempt to keep him out of trouble. But his drinking got worse—in 1909 he passed out while on the pitcher's mound in the middle of a game.

After the 1910 season, no professional teams wanted to hire Waddell, and he was forced to play semi-pro. In the winter of 1911, Rube was working on a farm in Hickman, Kentucky, when it was struck by catastrophic flooding. He spent hours in the frigid waters stacking sandbags and reinforcing levees and afterward came down with pneumonia and tuberculosis that hampered him for the rest of his life. By 1913, his health problems became too severe to continue playing. Waddell moved to San Antonio, Texas, where his sister lived and could care for him as his tuberculosis worsened. He died on April 1, 1914, at 37 years old, and was buried there.

Pitcher **Walter Johnson** said "Rube Waddell had more sheer pitching ability than any man I ever saw" and his longtime manager **Connie Mack** described him as "the atom bomb of baseball long before the atom bomb was discovered." During his lifetime he was often described as childlike and simple, but modern analysts have concluded that he likely had a developmental disability or similar condition that couldn't have been diagnosed at the time. In 1946, Rube Waddell was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Waddell played 13 seasons from 1897-910 for Louisville, the Cubs, Pirates, A's and Browns. He went 193-143 with a 2.16 ERA. 2961 innings pitched, 2316 strikeouts. On 1905 he won 27 games for the Philadelphia A's.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE ANSWERS

Your Opening Day bonus, four questions today. (answers at bottom).

No player has hit 45 homers in back-to-back seasons I over a decade. Here are the last five to do it:

2007-2009 NL 1B, 4 straight seasons 45+ including MVP

Ryan Howard

2005-2006 AL DH, lefty

David Ortiz

2000-2004 NL Leftfielder, lefty, five straight seasons 45+

Barry Bonds

2001-2003 AL infielder, righty, MVP in 2003, three straight seasons 45+

ARod

2001-2003 lefty 1b?DH, in AL in 2001-22, NL in 2003

Jim Thome

There are 3 two-time MVPs who are Not in the Hall of Fame

AL 1960-1961, lefty outfielder

Roger Maris

AL 1996, 1998, righty outfielder, drove in 157 runs in 1998

Juan Gonzalez

NL 1982-1983, righty outfielder

Dale Murphy

I am 4x AL All-Star 3B.

I am a 4x Silver Slugger

I have been a regular AL MVP contender:

- 2017: 3rd (behind **Jose Altuve** and **Aaron Judge**)
- 2018: 3rd (behind **Mookie Betts** and **Mike Trout**)
- 2019: no MVP votes
- 2020: 2nd (behind **José Abreu**)
- 2021: 6th (**Shohei Ohtani** won unanimously)
- 2022: 4th (**Aaron Judge** set a new American League single-season home run record)

five top-six finishes in the MVP voting in the last six years, including three top-three finishes.

2023 is my 11th season with the only MLB team I have played with.

Who am I?

JOSE RAMIREZ, Guardians 3B

Name the seven current MLB franchises that have never had a 100-win season.

Blue Jays, Rangers, Marlins, Nationals, Brewers, Padres, Rockies.

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