

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

4.9.2023

Good morning baseball fans,

Adding the finishing touches awaiting resumption of round three of The Masters. The Yankees are 5-3. So it's a good Sunday.

In this issue, unbreakable college baseball records, Theo Epstein on rule changes, more pitch clock notes, bad contracts. Pour yourself a coffee and enjoy.

### **THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE**

In 1988 I was the College Player of the Year at Washington State where I went 15-0 on the mound, batted .484 with 23 HRs and a 1.434 OPS.

I went right from college to the majors as a lefty hitting first baseman.

I played 17 seasons, had 2239 hits and a career .295 batting average.

I won the AL batting title in 1993 at .363, the same year I led the majors in doubles with 54 and OBP with .473.

14 of my 17 seasons were in the American League. I played more games with Toronto than any of my four other teams.

I retired in 2005 after a brief stint with the Red Sox.

Who am I?

**Miguel Cabrera** has played 1,001 games at Comerica Park, which replaced Tiger Stadium in 2000. Only one other player has played 1,000 games in any ballpark that opened this century. A National League catcher. Which player and ballpark?

You know the most HRs in a season in the 1920's was Babe Ruth with 60 in 1927. Let's see how do you do on some other decades?

|        |                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1930's | 58 in 1932 Philadelphia A's 1B, first of back-to-back MVPs<br>58 in 1938 Detroit Tigers 1B, won two MVPs but not in '38, led AL in HRs 4 times. |
| 1940's | 49 in 1949, led NL in HRs 7 times but never MVP, righthanded leftfielder/1B.                                                                    |
| 1950's | 52 in 1956, most HRs in a season by a switch hitter, Triple Crown, AL outfielder, first of back-to-back MVPs.                                   |
| 1960's | 61 in 1961, second of back-to-back MVPs, also led majors in runs scored and total bases.                                                        |
| 1970's | 52 in 1977, NL outfielder, MVP, also led majors in RBI, Slugging and total bases, played in 3 World Series but not in 1977.                     |
| 1980's | 49 in 1987, AL rookie of the year, righthanded 1B, played in 3 World Series<br>49 in 1987, NL MVP, righthanded outfielder                       |
| 1990's | 70 in 1998, NL righthanded 1B, led majors in walks, OBP, SLUG, OPS                                                                              |
| 2000's | 73 in 2001, also led NL in walks, OBP, SLUG, OPS, 7x MVP.                                                                                       |
| 2010's | 59 in 2017, NL MVP, righthanded outfielder, now plays in AL.                                                                                    |

## MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

Great question from a subscriber—are they working on enhancing robo umps to judge check swings?

With the pitch clock forcing managers to make replay challenge decisions fast it would seem to be an opportunity to produce AI driven software that can scan replays and feed the likelihood of a reversal to the dugout fast—gotta be worth a bunch.

The Phillies started 0-4 before beating the Yankees Tuesday night. Compare that to the 1988 Orioles. They started 0-21. More than five times as many losses. The Orioles' roster included two future Hall of Famers, **Eddie Murray** and **Cal Ripken Jr.**, as well as **Fred Lynn**, a former MVP and Rookie of the Year, and **Mike Boddicker**, MVP of the 1983 ALCS.

They hired **Frank Robinson** to replace **Cal Ripken Sr.** as manager at 0-6, and proceeded to lose 15 more games. Even on the night they finally won, they could not fully celebrate. Their second baseman, **Bill Ripken**, was beamed and needed to be carried off on a stretcher. Ripken turned out to be fine. The Orioles weren't, "rallying" from 1-21 to finish 54-107.

So, if you think your favorite team has troubles, think again. At this point in 1988, the Orioles were still nearly three weeks away from winning their first game.

All 63 players who were on the Phillies roster at some point last season will get 2022 NL Champs rings.

Hot start for the Rays (8-0) but that isn't tough against Washington, Detroit and Oakland. Let's see how they do against contenders. On the plus side--according to MLB.com, the Rays' six consecutive wins by four or more runs are the most by any team during its first six games in the modern era, dating all the way back to 1884.

**Kyle Schwarber** of the Phillies had 46 HRs last year and drove in 96 runs. That is tough to do. He is tied with Alfonso Soriano who hit 46 and drove in 95 for the 2006 Nationals. 25 players have hit 40 or more with less than 100 RBI. Some big names like **Barry Bonds, Hank Aaron, Harmon Killebrew, Ken Griffy Jr., Albert Pujols, Bryce Harper and Mickey Mantle** all did it once. **Joey Gallo, Adam Dunn, Mike Trout** all did it twice.

Last week we noted that **Manny Machado** was the first player to be guilty of a pitch clock violation as a batter and receive an automatic strike. This week Machado became the first player to be ejected after he was called out on a pitch clock violation third strike.

The Orioles, Rays and Guardians—the three youngest teams in baseball—are off to a combined 12–4 start while stealing 22 bases in 23 tries. Arizona, the 10th-youngest team, has nine steals in 10 tries. Will speed and youth drive roster construction going forward?

The running game defense issue is especially acute in the later innings. For years teams built bullpens with lumbering, hard-throwing relievers who took a long time between pitches and a long time in their deliveries to max out on velocity. Those guys are getting exposed by the timer and the stolen base environment. Stolen base attempts after the sixth inning are up 20% from last year and are *90% successful* (38 of 42), up from 80%.

Meanwhile, older pitchers are having a tough time. It's way too early to think this is a trend, but the first week of Ready Baseball was rough on the guys who never pitched with a timer in the minors. Pitchers age 36 and over last year posted a 3.60 ERA—better than pitchers in their 20s and better than those in their early 30s. After one week under the clock this year? Their ERA is 5.12, worse than those in their 20s and early 30s. Again, you should not interpret that as a trend, but rather as something to monitor, as pitchers have less time to recover between pitches and innings.

The Orioles stole 11 bases without being caught in their first five games. We've never seen baseball like this in a quarter of a century. For years front-office analytic groups searched for market inefficiencies to exploit. What if under the new rules those market inefficiencies are speed, athleticism and youth?

Most stolen bases without being caught stealing, first five games

1. 1976 Reds: 15
2. 1987 Cubs: 12
3. 2023 Orioles: 11

Red Sox are first team since 1987 Expos to give up 14 straight successful steals to start the season.

The Mets did not have a single player younger than 27 on their Opening Day roster.

RBI leaders since 2013

|                         |     |
|-------------------------|-----|
| <b>Nolan Arenado</b>    | 973 |
| <b>Paul Goldschmidt</b> | 936 |
| <b>Nelson Cruz</b>      | 890 |
| <b>Freddie Freeman</b>  | 870 |
| <b>Jose Abreu</b>       | 866 |

The Red Sox became just the third team to score 9 or more runs in their first three games of the season. 1978 Brewers (who actually scored nine-plus runs in their first four games), the 1976 Reds and this year's Red Sox.

The 1978 Brewers were a big-time offensive team — they ended up leading all of baseball in runs. They had two Hall of Famers in that lineup (**Robin Yount and Paul Molitor**), a near Hall of Famer (**Sal Bando**), and big-time hitters **Cecil Cooper, Larry Hise, Ben Oglivie, Gorman Thomas and Sixto Lezcano**. Also **Don Money** was money.

The 1976 Reds might be the most complete offensive team in baseball history. They led the league in runs, hits, doubles, triples, homers, stolen bases, walks, batting average, on-base percentage and slugging percentage. They only finished second in sacrifice flies, though.

With the 2023 rule changes there will be a new emphasis on speed. Steals and success rate are up. We already know who the fastest players are, because Statcast has been tracking this since 2015. (Last year's fastest player was Arizona's **Corbin Carroll**. Over the entirety of the tracking era, it's a tie between **Trea Turner and Byron Buxton**.) But what about fastest *teams*? MLB.com dug into the data. Philadelphia, Tampa and Cleveland came out on top with the Yankees, Red Sox, White Sox and Giants the slowest.

The first player to hit three home runs in a game at Dodger Stadium--**Willie Stargell** of the Pirates (6/24/1965)

We don't spend enough time on games played. Availability is everything—if you can't play you can't contribute and the team usually takes a step back because the sub for you (at least in theory) isn't as good as you or they would have been starting. The White Sox last year had one player who played 150 games, four that played 120. The Cincinnati Reds (1803 games missed by players due to injury) and Washington Nationals (1698) led the league in total games missed by players to injuries and the injured list.

Another way to look at it-- The Red Sox were not the most injured team in MLB but the financial data is a solid implication they lost the most valuable assets of any other team due to injury. \$60 million paid to unavailable players.

**Zack Greinke** has had 300 starts in his career where he went at least five innings and gave up two or fewer runs. according to Baseball-Reference, 16 pitchers who have thrown 300-plus

games of at least five innings and fewer than two runs. **Greg Maddux** leads the way with 440 such games. And Zack came into Wednesday's game with 300.

*\*Thirteen of the 16 are in the Hall of Fame — the exceptions are Greinke, obviously, **Roger Clemens and Tommy John**.*

**Jim Palmer**, by the way, has 299.

And while it's a limited statistic, obviously, it is impressive to me that Zack has the most such games this century, ahead of **Justin Verlander** (276), **CC Sabathia** (275), **Clayton Kershaw** (273) and **Max Scherzer** (261). Zack is a thoroughly modern pitcher. He has only 17 complete games in his career ... and five since 2011. He averages just 6 1/3 innings per start.

Digging deeper, by at least one standard, he is the least-run-supported pitcher in MLB history. Take a look at how often pitchers have gone 6+ innings, given up 1 or fewer runs, and yet their team still lost. In the history of baseball (for what Baseball-Reference has records), Greinke has had the most starts with that kind of performance where his team lost.

38 times Zack started, went 6+ innings, gave up 1 run or less and lost. Others with more than 25:

|                        |    |
|------------------------|----|
| <b>Don Sutton</b>      | 35 |
| <b>Tom Glavine</b>     | 32 |
| <b>Nolan Ryan</b>      | 31 |
| Tommy John             | 29 |
| Justin Verlander       | 28 |
| <b>Felix Hernandez</b> | 28 |
| <b>Jim Bunning</b>     | 27 |
| Max Scherzer           | 27 |

For five or six or seven innings, Greinke keeps his team in games. That's what is asked of a starting pitcher in our brave new century.

It's not pretty in Oakland. The A's drew less than 5,000 fans three games in a row this week. One day there were 3400 paid customers. Las Vegas and Nashville must be circling like sharks. In related news, the Nationals drew a crowd of only 10,754 for Monday night's game against the Rays, the second-smallest crowd since the franchise moved to Washington in 2005.

So how many of you would have taken the over on **Elvis Andrus** and 2,000 hits? Or that he has the 4<sup>th</sup> most hits of all active players?

White Sox infielder Andrus recorded his 2,000th career hit Wednesday against the Giants on a fifth-inning single to right. Here's what you need to know:

- With the hit, Andrus becomes the fourth active MLB player to reach the threshold, joining **Miguel Cabrera** (3,090), **Joey Votto** (2,093) and **Nelson Cruz** (2,019). Andrus is the 290th player ever to join the 2,000-hit club, per Elias.
- Behind Andrus are **Andrew McCutchen** (1,950), **Jose Altuve** (1,935) and **Freddie Freeman** (1,911).
- After collecting 1,743 hits in 12 seasons with the Rangers, Andrus spent two years with the A's recording 205 hits before signing with the White Sox in 2022.

Entering Wednesday, Andrus was four homers shy of 100 career home runs, ranked first among active players in steals with 336, and had played the fourth-most games among active players (1,952).

With the Rangers, Andrus made two All-Star teams and was runner-up for the 2009 American League Rookie of the Year award. From 2010 to 2019, Andrus played in at least 147 games, recorded at least 150 hits, and stole at least 20 bases every season except in 2018.

In 2017, he recorded career highs with 100 runs, 191 hits, 20 home runs and 44 doubles while holding a .297 batting average.

The Tampa Bay Rays are the tenth team in the Wild Card era to start a season with six consecutive wins. Of the previous nine teams, seven made the postseason, but just one won the World Series.

| Team | Year | Final Record | Postseason     |
|------|------|--------------|----------------|
| TBR  | 2023 | TBD          |                |
| BAL  | 2016 | 89-73        | Wildcard       |
| DET  | 2015 | 74-87        |                |
| KCR  | 2015 | 95-67        | WS Champ       |
| TEX  | 2011 | 96-66        | AL Pennant     |
| KCR  | 2003 | 83-79        |                |
| SFG  | 2003 | 100-61       | Division Champ |
| SFG  | 2002 | 95-66        | NL Pennant     |
| CLE  | 1998 | 89-73        | Division Champ |
| TEX  | 1996 | 90-72        | Division Champ |

**Gerrit Cole** says one thing the Yankees have discussed is using more of their mound visits when things start to go awry. The new rules allow for five visits in the first eight innings, and if a team runs out of its allotment, a sixth in the ninth.

Excluding pitching changes, which do not count in the totals, teams last season averaged only 1.18 mound visits per game, according to STATS Perform. The Rays led the league at 1.59. The Yankees were at 1.23.

The rate of visits, then, will be one more statistic to monitor this season while assessing the impact of the new rules. A leaguewide increase in visits would serve as an unwelcome counter to the pitch clock, slowing down the pace of play.

But when a team senses a game getting away from a pitcher, it might have no better alternative than a gathering at the mound to get things under control.

**Trayce Thompson**, hero of team Great Britain in the WBC, socked three dingers for the Dodgers last Saturday.

The Yankees clubbed seven home runs in their first three games. It was the fifth time in franchise history they had hit multiple home runs in each of the first three home games of a season. **Aaron Judge and Giancarlo Stanton** had two bombs apiece in the series. On Sunday, they both homered, and the Yankees improved to 29-2 when Judge and Stanton homer in the same game. While Judge's third-inning solo shot off **Ross Stripling** was impressive at 392 feet and 111.4 mph, Stanton outdid him with his solo shot in the same frame. Stanton's blast traveled 117.8 mph and went a whopping 485 feet, over the batter's eye — his second-longest home run since 2015, the start of the Statcast era.

Aaron Judge fun fact? He has hit 222 homers in 732 career games, which ties **Ryan Howard** for the most blasts in that span in MLB history.

The DH turned 50. **Ron Blomberg** walked into Fenway Park's visiting clubhouse with a slight limp on the morning of April 6, 1973. He was headed for the trainer's office to have his sore hamstring wrapped with athletic tape; he sustained the injury about a week earlier as the Yankees wrapped up their Spring Training in St. Petersburg.

Blomberg's chance was not assured; the Yankees had to bring him to bat in the first inning, and they quickly had two outs with nobody on. Facing ace **Luis Tiant**, **Matty Alou** doubled before **Bobby Murcer and Graig Nettles** worked walks, bringing Blomberg to the plate. Blomberg, too, worked a walk, forcing in a run. Otherwise, Boston's **Orlando Cepeda** (batting fifth that day) could have been the first DH.

Youngest players to make Yankee debut on Opening Day

|                       |                    |      |
|-----------------------|--------------------|------|
| <b>Mickey Mantle</b>  | 19 years, 179 days | 1951 |
| <b>Ben Chapman</b>    | 21 years, 111 days | 1930 |
| <b>Frank Crosetti</b> | 21 years, 191 days | 1932 |
| <b>Anthony Volpe</b>  | 21 years, 336 days | 2023 |

The Giants teed off for seven home runs Monday, one shy of their franchise record for homers in a game. The Giants' only game with more homers was the **Willie Mays** four-homer game. Five of yesterday's dingers came off the pitching of **Michael Kopech**, who became the third White Sox pitcher ever to allow five homers in a game.

On April 30, 1960 the Giants hit 8 HRs against Milwaukee in a 14-4 win over the Braves, led by the 4 HRs Mays hit.

On Monday, with the Astros down by three in the fifth, **Yordan Alvarez** launched his 100th career home run, making him the fastest in club history to reach that mark. It arrived in his 372nd career game, beating the prior record of 452 games held by former outfielder/first baseman **Lance Berkman**. Alvarez is the 19th player in franchise history to reach the 100-homer mark.

Alvarez became the fifth-fastest player in terms of games in MLB history to 100 career homers. Only **Ryan Howard** (325 games), **Pete Alonso** (347), **Gary Sánchez** (355) and **Aaron Judge** (371) got there in fewer games.

**Adley Rutschman**, Orioles catcher was just the eighth player to reach safely six times on Opening Day at any position, joining **Hideki Matsui** (2006), **Carlos Delgado** (2002), **Darren Lewis** (1992), **Ken Singleton** (1974, 13 innings), **Dee Fondy** (1954), **Eddie Robinson** (1951) and **Bobby Byrne** (1911).

The Rangers scored 27 runs in their first two games of the season, which were also their first two games under new manager **Bruce Bochy**. That's tied with the 1978 Brewers under **George Bamberger** for the second-most runs by a team in its first two games with a particular manager since 1900, according to Elias. Only the 1951 White Sox, under **Paul Richards**, had more runs to start a manager's tenure – with 30 in his first two games at the helm.

Cleveland reliever **Tim Herrin** made his MLB debut on Sunday in Seattle, facing four batters and striking them all out. If that sounds rare, it's because it is. Herrin became the first pitcher to face at least four batters in his MLB debut and strike all of them out since the mound was moved to its current distance in 1893, according to Elias.

Most walk-off home runs among second basemen in the Expansion Era (since 1961)? My **Joe Morgan and Jeff Kent** guesses were wrong. The Tigers' **Lou Whitaker** (7 walk-off HRs)

**Joey Votto** has 1,909 starts at first base, The last player to start 2,000 games at the position--**Todd Helton** (2,120 starts at first base from 1997-2013)

21 players have played 2,000+ games at 1b including some names you'll recognize: **Fred McGriff** 3329, **Helton** 2178, **Rafael Palmiero** 2139, **Lou Gehrig** 2137, **Jeff Bagwell** 2211, **Andres Galarraga** 2106, **Steve Garvey** 2059, **John Olerud** 2053, **Willie McCovey** 2045, **Albert Pujols** 2026, **Keith Hernandez** 2014. The all-time leader is **Eddie Murray** with 2413.

Yankee fans are baffled by **Joey Gallo's** hot start (He hit .159 for the Yankees in 140 games and struck out about 39% of the time). Gallo was little league teammates with **Bryce Harper**. He whiffed an average of 2x per game in AA ball.

Before all the Yankees showed up for the first game of the season, 1B **Anthony Rizzo** gave them each the same gift: two 750 milliliter bottles of Chianti — and they weren't cheap. Both were from 2016. The Sor Bruno was from Il Cellesse, a winery in Poggibonsi, Italy, and it retails for about \$130. The other was even nicer: an Il Solatio from the Castello di Albola winery in Chianti, Italy, which goes for as much as \$470.

That wasn't all. In blue ink, he wrote notes addressed personally to every single member of the Yankees' roster.

"It said he's excited to go on this journey with us and he's honored to be our teammate," Rizzo said he wanted to congratulate everyone for making it to Opening Day. Rizzo said he learned the gesture from **Jon Lester and Jayson Heyward** when he was with the Cubs.

Why are the Red Sox giving up so many runs and so many HRs? "Before I look at any other factors, let's check off the parts that we can control. We can't control the weather, we can't control the ball," said pitching coach **Dave Bush**. "Are we making our pitches? That's where I default to. Did the pitch go where we wanted it to? There's less likely to be damage if we get the pitch where we want it to. If it's in the middle of the plate, it tends to get hit harder. Sometimes it's not any more complicated than that."

On that front, the Red Sox have been the worst team in baseball. Entering Tuesday, 9.7 percent of their pitches — nearly one out of every 10 — had been located in the heart of the strike zone, the highest (worst) percentage of any staff in the big leagues. Opponents were hitting .455 and slugging 1.091 with four homers on those offerings. DUH.

Interesting graphic during a game this week—in 2022 shifts were deployed in 33.5% of all at bats.

**Anthony Volpe** stole third base in the seventh inning of the Yanks' 6-0 win against the Giants on Sunday, he became just the fifth player since 1901 to steal a base in each of his first three MLB games. He's the first to do it since the Reds' **Billy Hamilton** 10 years ago. In the minors Volpe After swiping 33 bases in 2021, he stole 50 bases last season while only being thrown out seven times.

Angels superstars **Mike Trout and Shohei Ohtani** had been hitting the ball hard early this season, they both came into last Sunday's finale against the A's without a homer.

But that changed in a hurry in the fifth inning, as they connected on back-to-back blasts on consecutive pitches to help lift the Angels to a 6-0 win at the Coliseum to secure a season-opening series victory. The two mammoth shots traveled a combined 881 feet, as Trout's was projected at 434 feet to dead center and Ohtani's was projected at 447 to right-center. Both clanked off the green batter's eye in center field.

Marlins **Sandy Alcantara** tossed his fourth career shutout in Tuesday night's 1-0 win over the Twins. **Avisail García's** second-inning homer against **Kenta Maeda** proved to be the difference in a game clocked at a brisk one hour and 57 minutes.

The 27-year-old Alcantara did so on 100 pitches, picking up where he left off during his 2022 National League Cy Young Award-winning campaign, when he recorded a MLB-high six complete games -- more than every other club. After tossing an MLB-low 14.20 pitches per inning in 2022, Alcantara was just as economical. In three of his nine innings, he needed fewer than 10 pitches. He never threw more than 18 in a frame. The Twins got one runner as far as 2B. In the first week of the season Alcantara is the only starter to get past the 7<sup>th</sup> inning, just 9 starters even started the 7<sup>th</sup> inning.

With the Marlins riding a three-game skid, they needed Alcantara to serve as a stopper, just like he did in 2022. Last season, he recorded a 2.31 ERA, and the club went 15-6 in 21 starts Alcantara made following a defeat.

Nice story-- On Monday, Milwaukee's rookie **Brice Turang** played second base for the Brewers. Turang was drafted out of high school in 2018, his father played in the big leagues, his mother was a softball star at Long Beach State, he grew up in a crazy athletic family (all four of his sisters were Division I athletes), he worked his way through the minor leagues, playing in Helena and Zebulon and Appleton and Biloxi and Nashville, and finally he's here in the big leagues, and he blasts his first big-league home run, and it was a grand slam, and it was during the Milwaukee Brewers' home opener, and his family went nuts about it, and his teammates went nuts about it

According to commissioner Rob Manfred. The owners, he said, have done the math. At a luncheon speaking engagement last week hosted by the Paley Media Council in New York, which I moderated, Manfred said MLB surveyed minor league teams after last season to see

whether the shorter games impacted their concession sales, especially beer. He said the data showed no significant decline in concession sales.

**Vic Raschi** was already 28 when he broke into the Yankees' starting rotation for good in 1948. He then ran off consecutive records of 19-8, 21-10, 21-8, and 21-10. The Springfield, Massachusetts native had tremendous determination and a blazing fastball. His size (6'1" 205 lbs.) and the menacing scowl on his dark, unshaven face were helpful, too. He never missed an assignment although his knees deteriorated painfully.

With the Yankees, Raschi was a big-game winner. He won the 1948 All-Star Game, driving in the winning run. And he beat Boston on the final day of the 1949 season to break a first-place tie with the Red Sox, then won the WS clincher against Brooklyn, a feat he duplicated against the Giants in 1951. He two-hit the Phillies 1-0 in the 1950 WS, and won twice more against the Dodgers in the 1952 WS. Raschi was a fair hitter (.184 career average). On August 3, 1953 his seven RBI set an AL single-game record for pitchers. In February 1954, he was sold to the Cardinals for \$85,000 after contract battles with the Yankees.

**April 4, 2016: Trevor Story** went deep twice in his Major League debut for the Rockies on this date seven years ago, thus becoming the first National Leaguer to accomplish that feat in his first game in the bigs. No one else from either circuit has done it since. Both dingers came off Zack Greinke, who was making his first start for Arizona in the Opening Day contest.

**Justin Turner** says the first baseball game he went to was at Cal State Fullerton, his alma mater.

"My dad grew up with one of the coaches there," he said. "So I got to go down to the dugout, hang out with the guys, go to practice with them, hit in the cages with them. I was 7 or 8?"

When he was 11, he became the bat boy for the next three years. He worked with three players who later logged 41 combined years in The Show: **Mark Kotsay, Aaron Rowand, and Reed Johnson.**

"Those three guys are kind of my favorite guys to watch," he said. "And then, ironically, I ended up playing in the major leagues against all three of them. They all said the exact same thing: 'I feel old'."

Turner says now he feels the same thing.

“Crazy enough, when I played at Cal State Fullerton, **Matt Chapman** [Toronto third baseman] was actually my bat boy, and now he’s playing in the big leagues and we’re playing against each other,” he said. “So it’s kind of cool.”

From the “they don’t make them like that anymore” file, **Livian Hernández** was a rare bright spot for the 2005 Nationals during their inaugural season. Washington finished 81–81 and sent two players to the All-Star Game: Hernández and **Chad Cordero**. While Hernández’s 3.98 ERA and 1.429 WHIP were nothing to write home about, he continued to do what he did best: eat up innings. For the third year in a row, Hernández led the NL in innings pitched. His 246⅓ innings were the most in the majors (the second year in a row that he led the majors in that category). He threw 114 pitches per start, which is unheard of today. Since 2000 (the first year for which data is available), there have been only seven instances of a pitcher averaging 114 pitches or more per start—three by **Randy Johnson**, two by **Justin Verlander** and two by Hernández. No one has averaged 110 per start since ’14.

**Dan McGinn**, the pitcher, died in Omaha about a month ago at age 79. Here are five Dan McGinn facts.

Fact 1: He was the first Montreal Expos player to hit a home run. He hit it in the Expos’ first game on April 8, 1969; the Expos played the Mets at Shea Stadium. McGinn came up with the score tied in the fourth inning (he had come in to relieve starter **Mudcat Grant**) and he hit the home run off of none other than **Tom Seaver**.

Fact 2: It was not just the only home run McGinn hit in his career — it was also his lone RBI. He did hit a triple in 1972 ... and that one also came against the Mets, this time off legendary relief pitcher **Tug McGraw**.

Fact 3: He was nicknamed “Dangerous Dan” ... but not because of baseball. He was a punter at Notre Dame and earned the nickname for pulling off a long punt after the ball was snapped over his head.

Fact 4: He got **Frank Robinson** out the only time he faced him.

Fact 5: Both of his sons, Mark and Shawn, played for a time in the minor leagues. Shawn was a 52nd-round pick of the White Sox in 1991, and Mark was a 38th-round pick of the Mets in 1992.

Cincinnati's **Hunter Greene** has already thrown 44 pitches at 100 mph or faster. Last week we mentioned Cardinal **Jordan Hicks** was clocked at 103.8. **Aroldis Chapman**, now pitching for the Royals, clocked 103.5 mph.

Have you ever heard of someone hitting for the cycle and throwing a no-hitter in the same game?

Well, now you have. Meet **Brady Ware** of the DII University of Indianapolis Greyhounds, who had the kind of day that only feels achievable if you're playing as **Shohei Ohtani** in MLB The Show.

The graduate student finished 4-for-4 at the plate with two runs and five RBIs ... while striking out 11 batters across seven hitless innings against Drury University in Game 2 of a doubleheader.

**Masataka Yoshida** batted fourth in his first seven games as a rookie. The last Red Sox rookie to do that was 24-year-old Watertown native **Jack Hoey**, who hit cleanup in his first nine games in 1906.

Hoey was productive at first but ultimately hit .232 over parts of three seasons and was back in the minors by 1908.

There hasn't been a season with 3,000-plus stolen bases since 2012 (3,229)

The Portland Sea Dogs hired Rylee Pay to join Emma Tiedemann in their radio booth. They're the second all-female booth in baseball history.

Seems like pace of play rule changes are yielding desired results. As of Friday we've had 30 games under two and a half hours already — but only one that lasted over three and a half hours! (And that was a 10-9 game.) At this point last year, we'd already had 34 games that dragged on for 3:30-plus, *but only one under 2:15*. Nine games this season haven't even lasted 2 hours and 15 minutes. Last year, there were only four games under 2:15 *in the first three months of the season combined!*

The Orioles had stolen five bases in a game (or more) twice in their last 1,702 games. So what happened when they flipped that rule-change switch? They stole five in *two games in a row*, Games 1 and 2 of this season.

The Phillies allowed 22 runs in the whole World Series last year — in six games. At one point last week in Texas, they allowed 27 runs to the Rangers *in only 13 innings*.

**Jayson Heyward** played for the Cubs last year. He hit 0 HRs and Wrigley. This season as a Dodger, Heyward homered at Wrigley in two straight games.

The bad news: The A's scored a total of three runs in their first three games this year.

The good news: They then scored 11 runs in their fourth game.

The bad news: They lost anyway, to the Guardians, in an extremely weird and wild 12-11 game.

The worse news: You know how many times the A's had scored 11 (or more) and lost — not just last year but *over the previous 20 seasons*? That would be none.

**Max Muncy** of the Dodgers struck out 5 times on Opening Day. First time in his career. He became just the second player since 1920 to whiff 5 times on Opening Day-- **Ron Karkovice** of the 1996 White Sox.

The Rangers lost 94 games last year and did not sweep a series. They started 2023 by sweeping the NL Champ Phillies.

**Rocco Baldelli** is still the manager of the Twins, just like last year. He wrote out exactly the same lineup (of position players) in Games 1 and 2 of this season. How many times did he write out exactly the same lineup in any two games in a row last season. Zero.

**Giancarlo Stanton** hit a home run against the Giants measured by Statcast at 485 feet. Only longer HRs at the new Yankee Stadium were a pair by **Aaron Judge** in 2017, 496 and 495 feet.

Before Statcast at the old Yankee Stadium three that were paced off:

**Mickey Mantle, 508 feet** — This rocket landed in the 12th row of the center-field bleachers on Aug. 12, 1964.

**Mickey Mantle, 502 feet** — Mantle squashed this one into the ninth row of those center-field bleachers on June 21, 1955.

**Lou Gehrig, 493 feet** — Don't buy any used Old Yankee Stadium seats purporting to be the one this blast hit on June 7, 1929, *because it hit the center-field fence*, beyond the flagpole, for a triple. Just a reminder that the original dimensions of this stadium were absurd.

**Aaron Judge** hit the first HR of 2023, in the first inning of Opening Day against the Giants. The last defending HR champ to be the first to hit a homer the following season was **Juan Gonzalez** of the Rangers back in 1993.

Since **Babe Ruth** became the first man to hit 60 homers, a mere 96 years ago, four men have broken either the major-league or American League single-season record Ruth set back then: **Roger Maris, Mark McGwire, Barry Bonds** and **Aaron Judge**. They all homered on Opening Day of the following season.

**Josiah Gray** of the Nationals gave up the most homers in the majors last year—38. In his first start this year he gave up back-to-back HRs to the first two batters he faced-- **Ronald Acuña Jr. and Matt Olson**.

We mentioned Oriole catcher **Adley Rutschman** went 5 for 5 with a walk at Fenway Park on Opening Day. **Ted Williams, Jim Rice, David Ortiz, Mookie Betts** never went 5 for 5 with a walk at Fenway. **Yaz** did it once.

On Tuesday **Brian Anderson and Garrett Mitchell** of the Brewers hit back-to-back HRs in back-to-back innings. Only the fifth time in MLB history that has happened:

**May 26, 1930 — Goose Goslin/Joe Judge**, for the Yankees (fourth/fifth inning)

**May 6, 1941 — Hank Greenberg/Bruce Campbell**, for the Tigers (second/third)

**Aug. 6, 1992 — Gary Sheffield/Fred McGriff**, for the Padres (first/second)

**June 13, 1998 — Javy Lopez/Andrew Jones**, for the Braves (second/third).

The Royals scored the most runs in spring training. Then they started playing actual games — and got shut out in their first two games of the season.

The Rangers outscored the Dallas Cowboys, 27-23, in the first two games of their respective seasons.

Houston Astros **Cristian Javier** did this in his final trip to the mound last season (Game 4 of the World Series):

Six innings, zero hits allowed.

Now here's what that same Cristian Javier did in his first trip to the mound this season (last Friday against the White Sox):

Six innings started and *a hit allowed in every one of them*.

The Rocket City Trash Pandas — the Double-A affiliate of the Los Angeles Angels — threw a combined no-hitter Saturday but lost 7-5 to the Cincinnati Reds Double-A affiliate Chattanooga Lookouts. In the top of the seventh, the Lookouts scored seven runs despite not registering a hit. The seven runs were scored on six walks and three hit-by-pitches. Ouch.

## **PITCH CLOCK**

While the time savings from the pitch clock have been impressive, Ken Rosenthal pointed out a down side-- Many fans and baseball people already consider the pitch clock a hit, but during spring training Phillies right-hander **Zack Wheeler** identified a lingering issue that remains unresolved.

"I always kind of go back to Bryce hitting that home run in the playoffs last year," Wheeler said, referring to **Bryce Harper's** dramatic go-ahead homer in Game 5 of the National League Championship Series. "That wouldn't have happened if we had these rules in place. Sometimes, guys need a moment, especially in high leverage."

When Wheeler said, "that wouldn't have happened," he wasn't talking specifically about Harper's two-run shot off Padres right-hander **Robert Suarez**. No, he was talking about the rhythm of the plate appearance, the tension that built through seven pitches, culminating in what Fox broadcaster Joe Davis called a "swing for the ages."

Fifty seconds elapsed between **J.T. Realmuto's** single and Suarez's first pitch to Harper, 20 more than is now permitted. The time between each pitch averaged approximately 25 seconds, five more than is now allowed when a runner is on base. Both Harper and Suarez had more time to think, to breathe, adding to the drama.

Would the sequence have been as memorable under the new rules? Well, it certainly would have been condensed. And while the pitch clock is serving its intended purpose, dramatically improving the pace of play while reducing times of games, a broader question remains: Would adding time to the clock or even eliminating it during close-and-late situations, particularly in the postseason, better serve the sport?

"Our feet are not in stone with respect to the pitch clock," Manfred said on the Rich Eisen Show. "We saw it in the minor leagues. We've seen it in spring training. We want to see it in regular-season games, particularly in situations that are high leverage. We will talk about what should happen in those situations. And we certainly have the capacity to make adjustments on the fly during the course of the season."

Manfred's answer was in response to a question from Eisen about the thrilling six-pitch **Mike Trout-Shohei Ohtani** showdown that concluded the World Baseball Classic, which was played

without a clock. With no one on base Ohtani averaged approximately 26 seconds between pitches, 11 seconds more than the new limit. But consider the whole context.

Ohtani effectively was performing in a new role, pitching as a closer for the first time since 2016, when he was still in Japan. And if the clock had been used in the tournament, he almost certainly could have adhered to the 15-second limit. Ohtani pitched 2 1/3 innings in spring training and six innings in his first regular-season start without committing a violation.

The Trout-Ohtani at-bat was compelling not because of the time between pitches. What made it special was the spectacle of two of the game's best players, Angels teammates no less, competing against one another with the tournament on the line. Ohtani's strikeout of Trout, with two outs in the ninth inning and his team leading by one run, clinched the title for Japan.

What about perhaps the all-time greatest drawn-out postseason confrontation, **Kirk Gibson's** epic pinch-hit appearance against future Hall of Famer **Dennis Eckersley** in Game 1 of the 1988 World Series? That sucker lasted approximately 5 minutes and 25 seconds — not including the 1:19 it took Gibson, dealing with a bad left hamstring and swollen right knee, to emerge from the dugout and find his way to the batter's box.

The scene played out like a movie, before the at-bat even commenced. Gibson applied pine tar to his bat in the on-deck circle, took some practice swings, then began his slow walk to the plate. Upon reaching the box, he pawed repeatedly at the dirt with his left foot, then stepped out for more practice swings. The 30-second limit between batters would have sucked the drama out of the moment. Heck, Gibby might not have been physically capable of getting to the plate in 30.

The at-bat itself would have been problematic not only because of the clock, but also because of the new two disengagements rule. With **Mike Davis** on first, Eckersley threw over four times. He need not have worried, of course, about being called for a balk after failing to pick off Davis on his third attempt. As it turned out, Davis eventually stole second on 3-2.

Gibson, too, would have been flagged under the new rules. At least twice, judging from the video, he was not ready to hit with eight seconds remaining on the clock. Thirty-five years later, the penalty for such a delay is an automatic strike. But as the at-bat progressed, he obviously had no such concerns.

Catcher **Ron Hassey** paid Eckersley a mound visit. Gibson, after everyone was again set, called timeout, reminding himself of what the late Dodgers scout, Mel Didier, had predicted from Eckersley: "Pohd-ner, as sure as I'm standing here, you're going to see a 3-2, back-door slider." Sure enough, Eckersley threw the pitch. He later called it stupid, saying he should have kept throwing Gibson fastballs.

“High flyball into right field ... she is gone!” Scully cried. And then, after remaining silent for more than a minute as Gibson circled the bases, the legendary play-by-play man added his famous coda: “In a year that has been so improbable, the impossible has happened.”

There is no way that at-bat, one of the greatest in the game’s history, would have evolved the same way under the new rules. No way it would have created the same memories. No way it would have resonated the way it still does today.

“That’s one of the first things I thought of,” Gibson said in a telephone conversation Monday. “Drama is built through various means. (The at-bat) would have been a lot shorter.

“There are a ton of moments in general where you need to give each team the opportunity to think things out and plot through rough seas. Baseball has always been that way. It should be allowed to be that way. Whether it’s in the ninth inning, extra innings, I don’t know what the balance would be. But I think that it’s part of the game. You don’t want to lose that ability.

“Everybody likes where the game is moving, but at what expense? They did a really good job of trying to make a change without really knowing how it would come out. But you’re definitely going to lose some moments ... You want those moments. You want everybody to have that moment. The big moments, they come from almost unpredictable, unfathomable, unthinkable (places).”

Eckersley, reached by telephone Sunday night, expressed similar sentiments.

“I have no problem with (the clock). I like it so far,” Eckersley said. “But to go back to that, thinking about late in the game, it did occur to me that if they’re going to be lenient, it should be on moments like that. You just don’t want to make a mistake either way.

If MLB altered the clock in the late innings, two different sets of rules would apply in the same game. If the league made an adjustment in the playoffs, two different sets would apply in the regular season and postseason.

Well, guess what?

The league, with its extra-inning rule, already allows for such discrepancies. In the regular season, an automatic runner is placed on second base starting in the 10th inning of tie games. But in the postseason, the ghost runner goes poof, and that little wrinkle goes away.

If the league is inconsistent with one rule, it can be inconsistent with another. But with the pitch clock, things would get complicated.

First off, what would be the right point of the game to add time to the clock or eliminate it? Just in tie games or save opportunities in the ninth? Or in all close-and-late situations, which occur when the batting team is leading by one run, tied or has the potential tying run on base, at base

or on deck? Either way, relievers would be pitching under different circumstances than starters, as is the case with the extra-inning rule.

A change in the postseason would raise different questions. The league says it adopted the clock in part because its surveys indicated fans wanted more action and less time between plays. The postseason, when the greatest number of fans are watching, would seem an odd time to go back to the old ways, and stretch times of games back to the 3-to-4 hour range. Shorter games in October also would provide another advantage, allowing more younger fans to watch games to their conclusion.

There is no easy answer, at least not yet. The league has shown a willingness to tweak the new rules in response to player concerns, allowing, for example, umpires to delay the start of the clock after a pitcher covers first, third or home. But Yankees ace **Gerri Cole**, echoing Manfred, said he will not have a better feel for whether the league should pull back on the clock in certain circumstances until more of the season is played.

Cole, whose 5-0 victory over the Giants on Opening Day was completed in 2:33, neatly summed up the pros and cons when asked if something will be lost if big at-bats in October are less prolonged than in the past. His seeming preference, as I suspect the league's will be, is to break with the past, and fully embrace baseball's new age.

"I love the drama of those moments, that's for sure," Cole said. "But I like two hours and 33 minutes on Opening Day."

#### Interesting point of view from the Wall Street Journal

The primary goal of Major League Baseball's new pitch clock is to shave 20 or 30 minutes off the sport's plodding three-plus-hour games. But the rollout of the clock this season raises an intriguing side question: What difference could a spare half-hour per night make in the life of a major-league ballplayer?

The answer may be a clearer mind, fresher legs and the ability to play more—not fewer—games. That could make baseball's drive to speed up its games a counteraction to the one of the creeping trends that has detracted from the competitive and entertainment value of the sport: load management.

In some other sports, especially the NBA, the drive to prevent and manage injuries and player fatigue has created a situation in which fans often don't know whether the players they paid to see will actually be in the lineup. MLB's pitch clock, however, has the built-in benefit of creating more rest for players by definition.

Twenty-five minutes per game may not seem like a drastic change, but the cumulative total presents a staggering change to the time the players will spend on the field in a season. Over the course of a 162-game season, that would add up to a spare 67½ hours per team. On a week-by-week basis, that would strip around 2½ hours of playing time per week—essentially shortening the player’s workweek by the time it would take to play nearly a full regular-season game.

At the MLB level, there are a lot of clubs that are big believers in the rest and sleep benefits of getting home a half-hour earlier every single night.”

Many MLB teams have invested heavily in understanding player health and performance in recent years, as the best way to field a team is to keep your most talented (and most expensive) players on the field for as many games as possible. Injuries are expensive, and they can cost a team wins.

As part of these efforts, many teams have invested in technology that can give them objective measurements about player fatigue and how a player’s strength and flexibility fluctuates throughout the year. Players are typically unreliable narrators when it comes to self-reporting their own physical status, so tracking baseline numbers in spring training allows teams to make more informed decisions about when to rest a player or when to let him play in 10 games straight.

The 2023 season will be a fascinating case study for those who work in performance science departments for major-league teams, but those who manage the players themselves are beginning to think about how it may affect their rosters now.

“For any human to achieve sustainable high performance, you need to be optimized in multiple domains,” said Brandon Marcello, a high-performance strategist who has consulted with major-league clubs. “The physical domain, the cognitive domain, the social domain, and the emotional domain all need to be interconnected. They influence each other.”

The impact of shortened games won’t just benefit players by shortening their time standing around in the outfield, Marcello says, but will allow them to get started on their recovery time sooner and have more time for other activities outside the game.

A quicker departure after a getaway game means getting on the team plane a half-hour sooner and landing in the next city a half-hour sooner. For teams like the Yankees and Angels, who routinely play night games before travel, that half-hour could feel significant when their heads hit the pillow in the middle of the night.

Fans may not fully appreciate how much time there is for baseball players’ minds to wander in the course of a long game or inning. “I think it’s going to improve focus,” said White Sox manager **Pedro Grifol**. “Think about all the time out there, all the thoughts that creep in our minds between pitches.”

"It's easier to drift mentally when you're in a long inning," Texas manager **Bruce Bochy** said. "There are more mistakes, more errors. It's just hard to focus over a longer period of time."

#### Best Violations (from mlb.com)

**10. Juan Soto** managed to cram in a timeout and a clock violation Sunday *on the same pitch* (which, of course, was never actually thrown).

**9.** I think Mets pitcher **Carlos Carrasco** actually topped him, though — by committing a violation *before his first pitch of the season!*

**8.** Braves pitcher **Collin McHugh** issued a walk in which *he didn't know the count*, because he was still trying to figure out whether he'd gotten nailed for a timer violation.

**7.** We've had several PitchCom-related misdemeanors. But here's the best of all: Blue Jays ace **Alek Manoah** got nabbed with a violation on Opening Day because his catcher, **Alejandro Kirk**, *didn't insert the PitchCom earpiece in his ear correctly*.

**6. Camilo Doval's** first save of the season for the Giants included pitch-clock violations in the at-bats that produced *all three outs he recorded* (one before the first pitch of a strikeout of **Aaron Hicks**, and another in the middle of an at-bat that wound up producing a game-ending double play).

**5.** The Mets' **Mark Canha** got rung up for a classic Strikeout Not Looking on Monday. And it was a first for him in more ways than one. Why did he not make it back into the batter's box on time? He said it was because he was waiting for the scoreboard in Milwaukee to put up the velocity of the previous pitch — and instead, as he remembered it, *the scoreboard just flashed: GO BREWERS!*

**4.** Colorado's **Elehuris Montero**, Tuesday at Dodger Stadium, went down in history as the first Strikeout Not Looking ever awarded for *trying to call timeout twice in the same at-bat!* Sorry, Elehuris. Only one TO per customer these days, so next time, remember to count to two.

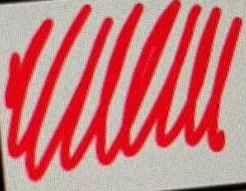
The best part of that bizarre whiff (if "whiff" is the right word for a strikeout in which strike three was never thrown): Dodgers broadcast/quipster **Orel Hershiser** watched Montero get rung up and asked: "Do they throw the ball around (the infield)?"

**3.** More great (or not so great) moments in Strikeouts Not Looking:

- **Rafael Devers** on Opening Day at Fenway (more Fenway history!)
- Oakland's **Seth Brown** on Monday in Oakland (more Coliseum history!)

- Miami multi-time offender **Avisaíl García** (the first hitter in history to rack up multiple clock not-speeding tickets)
- And finally, of course, the most ballyhooed of all, **Manny Machado** — with the first-ever Strikeout Not Looking/ejection daily double.

So what's the new scorecard symbol for Strikeout Not Looking? Here's how Phillies broadcaster Scott Franzke is handling it (with an upside-down K):

|                                                                                   |                                                                                     |                                                                                    |                        |                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 5                                                                                 | 6                                                                                   | 7                                                                                  | 8                      | 9                                                                                   |
| 8                                                                                 |                                                                                     | F9                                                                                 |                        | OP<br>36-1                                                                          |
| .882 .782                                                                         |                                                                                     |                                                                                    |                        |                                                                                     |
|  |    | K                                                                                  |                        |  |
| .687 .895 29yc                                                                    |                                                                                     |                                                                                    |                        |                                                                                     |
|                                                                                   | K                                                                                   |  | K                      |                                                                                     |
| .945 .743                                                                         |                                                                                     |                                                                                    |                        |                                                                                     |
|                                                                                   |  |                                                                                    | F7                     |                                                                                     |
| .708 .690 31yc                                                                    |                                                                                     |                                                                                    |                        |                                                                                     |
|                                                                                   | K                                                                                   |                                                                                    | 6-4 <sup>K</sup><br>E3 |                                                                                     |
| .486 .733                                                                         |                                                                                     |                                                                                    |                        |                                                                                     |

2. Another classic moment in Mets versus The Clock: **Pete Alonso** was such a slowpoke, literally walking back to first base after a foul ball on Opening Day, that his compadre **Jeff McNeil** was too busy watching him amble to get back in the box on time. So ... *that's a non-speeding ticket for you!*

1. Finally, it always pays to be friendly ... *unless there's a pitch clock ticking!* So last Friday, Mets catcher **Tomás Nido** chatted up Marlins hitter **Nick Fortes** so long and amiably before his at-bat, *he got a first-pitch strike-one clock violation out of it!*

### **UGLY CONTRACTS**

**Chris Sale**, Boston Red Sox. Remaining- Two years, \$58 million

**Aaron Hicks**, New York Yankees. Remaining- Three years, \$30.5 million

**Anthony Rendon**, Los Angeles Angels. Remaining- Four years, \$152 million

**Marcell Azuna**, Atlanta Braves. Remaining- Two years, \$37 million

**Stephen Strasburg**, Washington Nationals. Remaining- Four years, \$140 million

**Patrick Corbin**, Washington Nationals. Remaining- Two years, more than \$59 million

**Christian Yelich**, Milwaukee Brewers. Remaining- Six years, \$162.5 million

**Madison Bumgarner**, Arizona D'backs. Remaining- Two years, \$37 million

**Kris Bryant**, Colorado Rockies. Remaining- Six years, \$158 million

### **TUFFY WHO?**

Which MLB player, who had hit just three home runs the year before, hit three home runs on Opening Day 1994 off Mets starter **Dwight Gooden**? That would be **Karl "Tuffy" Rhodes**. He had played 107 games in the majors over four seasons to that point and hit a grand total of five home runs. In 15 games for the Cubs in 1993, he had three homers. But Rhodes won the center

field job in spring training before the '94 season and was batting leadoff in Chicago's Opening Day game against the Mets at Wrigley Field.

The little-known Rhodes proceeded to homer in three straight plate appearances against Mets starter Dwight Gooden—in the first, third and fifth innings. (Rhodes was such an obscure figure that Cubs reliever **Dan Plesac** later told Marquee Sports Network, "I didn't even know who Tuffy Rhodes was, and he was on my team.") Gooden was due to face Rhodes again in the sixth, but Mets manager **Dallas Green** pulled him. Rhodes instead worked a walk against **Eric Hillman**. He later picked up a single off New York closer John Franco to put a bow on his 4-for-4 day. Despite Rhodes's big day at the plate, the Cubs lost, 12–8.

Gooden's rough outing was a sign of things to come. He recorded a 6.31 ERA over seven starts before he was suspended in late June for a positive cocaine test. (After a second positive test, he was suspended for the entire 1995 season.)

Rhodes's big day was not a sign of things to come for him, though—at least not in this country. He lost the starting center field job in mid-June to **Glenallen Hill**, and, after spending most of the 1995 season with the Red Sox' Triple A affiliate, Rhodes signed with the Osaka Kintetsu Buffaloes in Japan. He went on to become one of NPB's best foreign-born hitters over a 13-year career in Japan. In 2001, he tied **Sadaharu Oh**'s single-season NPB record with 55 home runs in 140 games. Over the course of his career in Japan, he hit 464 homers, compared to just 13 in the majors.

### **MLB TO TEST ANOTHER PRE-TACKED BALL IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE**

Major League Baseball will test another version of a pre-tacked ball in the Double-A Southern League this season, reports Hannah Keyser of Yahoo! Sports. The league has floated the idea of "enhanced grip" baseballs for a few seasons.

Various iterations of pre-tacked balls have been tested in Spring Training, the Arizona Fall League, and at different levels of the minors in recent years. Those experiments took on increased urgency during the 2021 campaign, when MLB enforced a midseason crackdown on the ban on grip-altering foreign substances.

The foreign substance ban came in response to increasing spin rates, as MLB determined too many pitchers were using grip enhancers to improve the raw quality of their stuff as opposed to "merely" aiding control. The crackdown wasn't without criticism, however, with one prevalent concern being hitter safety if pitchers had less feel for the ball. In an effort to address those fears, MLB has sought prototypes that allow pitchers an improved grip without artificially creating dramatically more pitch movement.

Last June, Evan Drellich of the Athletic reported that MLB had kicked around a pair of pre-tacked prototypes in the Double-A Southern and Texas Leagues. However, Keyser writes those experiments were scrapped relatively early on after it became clear those solutions were unsatisfactory. MLB has made unspecified changes in response to player feedback to create a new iteration that'll be tested this year. According to Keyser, the Southern League will use the pre-tacked ball for the first half of the season before going back to the standard ball — which is manually mudded prior to games — for the second half of the year. MLB will compare the two halves' data and decide whether the prototype warrants further experimentation.

It's unclear whether MLB will be able to create a pre-tacked ball it deems sufficient for major league use. For now, they'll continue tinkering in the minors with an eye towards potential implementation at the highest level far down the line.

### **INSIDE MLB'S RULE CHANGES—THEO EPSTEIN ON WHAT HAS STOOD OUT, WHATS NEXT**

Editor's note—this piece from The Athletic is on the long side. But I am a big Jayson Stark fan and when Theo Epstein talks, I listen.

Jayson Stark, The Athletic

You think it was hard busting those curses in Boston and Chicago? Ha. That was a breeze compared to Theo Epstein's current line of work:

Fixing baseball.

"We have to remember that I think we're fixing something," Epstein told **Doug Glanville** and me, on the latest Starkville edition of "The Athletic Baseball Show." "Hopefully, we're improving something, but we're also fixing something, right?"

OK, so officially, Epstein's title these days is special consultant for Major League Baseball, not VP of Baseball Fix-ups. But for the past two years, he has played a huge role in the rule changes that have gone from his bulletin board to every ballpark on the continent.

So there's nothing more riveting than listening to him explain the vision behind those rule changes. But before we move along to those explanations, he has this important message — on why baseball needed "fixing" in the first place.

"No one, 30 years ago, would have sat there and said: 'Let's design a set of rules and a set of equipment so that one day, we'll get to a point where the league hits .243,'" he said. "No, that's

not baseball. The league should not be hitting .243. The league should be hitting a lot higher than .243.

“Nobody would have designed a set of rules and equipment that would lead you to one ball in play every four minutes, or generational lows in stolen bases and doubles and triples. And no one would design a game and say: ‘Let’s limit the amount of athleticism on the field.’”

So we’re really trying to get away from the way the game has changed, unintentionally, in the last couple of decades. ... Really, we’re course-correcting.”

All right, and how is that course-correcting going? Amazingly well, actually.

You know that pitch clock that was designed to speed up the games? It’s working. The average time of a nine-inning game: down 25 minutes! In 2022: 3 hours, 3 minutes. In 2023 (through Monday): 2:38.

You know those shift limits designed to bring back the long-lost ground-ball hit? They’re working. The league batting average this year when the ball is put in play? Up eight points, from .290 to .298.

You know those new pickoff rules and larger bases, designed to inspire more base-burgling? They’re working. There were only 40 stolen bases — and just 57 attempts — through the first five days last season. Those, too, have increased, with 84 steals and 100 attempts through the first five days this season.

But just because the results are so encouraging — five-day/small-sample alert notwithstanding — doesn’t mean baseball has reached peak “Kumbaya” euphoria. We’ve heard grumbling from players. We’ve heard venting from fans. And nobody pretends any of this has been sheer baseball perfection.

So we asked Theo about all of that. The whole conversation is worth hearing. But here are the highlights, as he pulled back the curtain on every one of these changes, plus some we might see ahead.

What have we learned (so far) from the pitch clock?

**On what he misses most — the 1,000 batting-glove adjustments a game or the full chorus of every walk-up song:** “Well, at my advancing age,” Epstein quipped, “I miss the free bathroom break, where you could sneak one in and not miss a pitch, or certainly not a ball in play.”

**On what we should take away from those 25 minutes missing from the average time of a game:** That time-of-game data is “important,” he said. But if we just focus on time-of-game numbers, we’re missing the part that’s much more significant — namely, the pace of these games.

“The pace of play is something more emotional and more visceral,” he said. “And I think the general reaction to watching this pace of play is that this is the way baseball is meant to be played, and frankly, is the way it was played for most of its history.

“You know, Bill James made a great point a while back, about how there used to be a pitch timer (in the old days). It was called the sun. And when you had to get the game in with no lights, when you had to get the game in before sundown, or maybe even get a doubleheader in, no one was stepping out of the box. No one was adjusting anything. It was, hey, let’s get this thing in while we still can. And that’s the way that the pace of baseball evolved.”

Answering player complaints about the clock

**On players blaming bad results on feeling rushed:** I asked him about Phillies catcher J.T. Realmuto’s comments to *The Athletic*’s Matt Gelb, about how “with the pitch clock, you can’t ever slow the pitcher down” — and similar grumblings from pitchers and hitters in the first week.

“I guess I’d make two main points in response to that,” Epstein said. “The first is about the adjustment period, and what we learned in the rollout in the minor leagues. And the second is about listening.”

In the minor leagues, “players did adjust,” he said. “And they also gave us qualitative feedback ... that after about three, four weeks of playing under the pitch timer-rules, it became second nature and not something they ever had to really think about again, and that they adjusted their routines and their natural rhythms to coincide with the parameters of the pitch clock.”

But if issues remain after that adjustment period, they can still be addressed by MLB, Epstein said. He referred to remarks by commissioner Rob Manfred last week as evidence that “none of this is necessarily set in stone. And that is important, that we continue to listen and be open to adjustments in the future to make sure we get it right.”

Through five days of regular-season games, pitch-clock violations had already dipped below one per game (for both teams combined). But MLB will be monitoring that rate closely, because “the ultimate goal is essentially to have as few violations as possible,” Epstein said, “and that no one ever really notices the timer. You want to be like the 24-second shot clock in basketball or the delay-of-game (penalty) in the NFL, where there’s (0.5) delay-of-game penalties per game.

“I’ve never heard anyone come back from an NFL game and say, ‘It was a great game, but the delay-of-game penalties ruined the whole thing,’” he said. “Same with the NBA. No one comes back and says, ‘The shot clock ruined the game.’”

But down the line, he promised, the league is still open to changes to the pitch timer — and to all the other rules.

“We want to hear about players’ experiences, and what (they can’t) adjust to, and what is available in terms of improving the rule,” he said. “Now I don’t think anything significant about the rules is going to change. ... But as commissioner Manfred said the other day, it’s unlikely that we got every single thing right about this. And that’s important, to stay in listening mode, monitor how things play out, see where we are a couple of months in, and make improvements as needed as we go.”

Would MLB dare to turn off the pitch clock in October?

Earlier this week, *The Athletic*’s Ken Rosenthal wrote a thought-provoking piece on whether it might be good for baseball to switch off the clock during the postseason — even if it was only in the most dramatic late-inning moments. So I asked Epstein if that was a possibility.

“I’m not the right person to answer that,” he said. “(As) the commissioner said the other day, it’s important that we pay attention and monitor how the 2023 season plays out, and we’ll all be watching those ‘late-and-close’ situations.”

But “from what I’ve seen so far,” he went on, “I haven’t sensed any diminution in the drama. The drama and the intrigue is still there. It’s just coming at you a little bit quicker than it did before.”

Ken asked in his column whether some epic baseball moments, recent and not so recent — **Shohei Ohtani** versus **Mike Trout** in the WBC ... Bryce Harper’s NLCS-clinching homer last year ... **Kirk Gibson**’s iconic homer in the 1988 World Series — would have been the same with a clock. Epstein reflected on that.

“One of the great things about baseball is the drawn out tension and anxiety of the late-and-close situations,” he said. “I think it does that far better than any other sport. And we’re not going to lose that — and I’m not sure we have — in a pitch-timer world. But if something’s lost and can be gained with a small adjustment, it’s great that the commissioner and everyone involved are open and willing to continue to listen, to make sure we get the rules just right.”

It pays to steal (again)

**On the doubling of the stolen-base rate:** I laid out all the numbers that showed that the stolen base is back. Here’s a surprise: Epstein wasn’t buying it.

“Just listening to you,” he retorted, “I would think that the games in the last four days have just been this track meet where every game was like an Orioles game, five stolen bases a game and everyone is safe the entire time.”

Wait. You mean that’s not accurate? Nope. Guess again, Epstein said. Through Monday, the rate of stolen-base attempts is only 1.44 per game — for both teams. Which “to me,” he said, “is not excessive at all.”

He laid out the history. Even last year, the rate of attempts was about 1.3 per game. In the 2000s (2000-09), it was 1.63. But back in the 1980s, which he called “the golden age of base stealing,” the rate was 2.27 attempts per game.

“So look,” he said, “if stolen-base attempts continue to rise, I think that’s a good thing. But as far as it being too much, like, wake me up when we’ve left the 1980s in the dust.”

Shifts happen? Not anymore

**On how much offense the shift ban is producing:** You know all those numbers we mentioned earlier, about how the average on balls in play is up? Epstein and his friends are in wait-to-see mode on all of that.

I asked him about data that showed the average was also up on hard groundballs up the middle. His cautious response went like this: “That’s a good example of us needing to take a step back and get a big sample size and see how things are going to play out.”

In case the shift ban doesn’t produce more hits up the middle, he said, baseball will continue to test out the triangular “pie slice” behind second base as a “no-fly zone” for infielders. You’ll see that “at some point in the Florida State League, I believe,” he said.

**On the best part of the shift ban — the fun of watching athletic infielders play defense:** You know how teams used to hide lead-footed guys like Mike Moustakas at second base in the late, great shifting era? Well, with no shifts, the second baseman isn’t an “afterthought” anymore, Epstein said.

“I guess one thing that stood out to me in spring training,” he said, “was how noticeable it was that the second baseman was on the spot now, in a key defensive position, the way shortstops traditionally are.”

**On whether this will change strategy or team building:** I mentioned a conversation I had this spring with a manager and a general manager on the heightened value of a single and a stolen base. So I asked Epstein about those ripple effects: Does that affect strategy? Does it affect hitters’ approach? Does it affect the draft? Does it affect team building?

His reply: “I think yes, to all of those. And that’s the way it should be.”

If these changes work, he said, it means clubs will have more of a choice on how to build their team. They can still build around home runs and on-base skills, if they’re into that. But they also can build around bat-to-ball skills and base running. And if that’s how this turns out, he said, it will be better for baseball than even the short-term rise in steals and ground-ball hits.

“I think diversity is a great thing,” Epstein said. “Diversity of approach and diversity of style of play is a great thing. It just makes for a better product. And I think sometimes it takes putting

guardrails in place, to make sure there's not one style of play, or even one type of player, that can dominate the game."

Next up: Are the robot umps coming?

**Is the home-plate ump about to go the way of the brontosaurus?** The electronic-strike-zone test lab arrives in all 30 Triple-A parks this season. And that experiment will go a long way toward determining if the ABS (Automated Ball/Strike System) is the next big MLB rule change, as soon as a year from now.

Epstein did a thorough job of laying out the pros and cons of all the options — ABS calling every pitch, a challenge system, or leaving all of this in the hands of the umpires. I recommend you listen to that rundown on the podcast. It's amazing. But even he isn't sure where this is headed.

"The bottom line is, we don't know whether baseball's better without ABS," he said. "And if it's better *with* ABS, whether we're better off doing the full ABS or the challenge (version). But I think a lot of those questions are going to start to be answered this year in Triple A. And it'll be fun to talk to players, talk to fans, talk to umpires and dig into the data, to see if we can start to make this muddy picture a little bit more clear."

But there's one more thing everyone needs to keep in mind.

"You have to figure out exactly what you're solving for with ABS," he said. "You don't want to force a solution without a problem. Do you just want better umpiring? Do you want every single call to be right? Do you want a more level playing field? What's the exact thing you're solving for? That's important to figure out."

Change never sleeps

And one final message from Theo: This work isn't done. It's never done. Because baseball is never done evolving — probably in ways we can't even comprehend right now.

"If the last 10 to 20 years have proven anything," he said, "it's that the game is going to change, no matter what. Whether we pass rule changes or we don't pass any rule changes for a decade, the game is going to change — because players and teams are going to find new strategies and new ways to optimize performance, to use data and technology in different ways that change the way the game is played.

"So we have to be very careful stewards of the game," Epstein said, "to make sure we monitor that and continue to put guardrails in place only when necessary, to make sure the best elements of the game show up on a nightly basis for our fans."

*For more from Epstein — on how to bring down strikeouts, on enforcing sticky stuff, on the potential benefits of a shinier and tackier baseball, on understanding that some fans will never*

*embrace change, and for another fun episode of Know Your Theo Epstein Trivia, check out the new Starkville episode of “The Athletic Baseball Show.” Listen free wherever you get your podcasts.*

## **COLLEGE BASEBALL’S MOST UNBREAKABLE RECORDS**

*Wayne Cavadi | NCAA.com*

Jim LaFountain and **Robin Ventura** are two names well-known in college baseball lore. They both pulled off feats decades ago that have yet to be matched in the NCAA baseball official record books.

We wondered what other records out there are so formidable that they are likely to never be eclipsed. So, we searched each of the 74 pages in the Division I books to see what else we could find.

Here is a look at the DI college baseball records that we think will (probably!) never be broken:

**Jim LaFountain’s three grand slam day — March 24, 1976** That actually undersells his day: LaFountain also had a two-run home run for a total of four dingers and 14 total bases, all by the fourth inning. But it was his grand slam in the second inning and two more in the third inning that has his name in the college baseball record books more than four decades later. There have been six players to replicate the two in an inning, but three in a game? Nary a one. Just think about those numbers one more time. You’d be hard-pressed to pull that off in a video game.

**Marshall McDougall’s 16-RBIs in a game — May 9, 1999** When the dust settled in this memorable game, Florida State defeated Maryland 26-2. Sixteen of those runs came off the bat of second baseman Marshall McDougall. He started off the day with a base hit and then blasted six home runs in his next six at-bats — also the NCAA single-game record — and powered his way past LaFountain’s mark of 14-RBI in a single game with his 7-for-7 day.

### **Pete Incaviglia’s 100 career home runs**

Whether it’s because of a different ball or a different bat or a different era, there is no one that will come close to Inky’s mark. In fact, there hasn’t been a player even in the conversation since Florida’s Matt LaPorta’s career ended in 2007 — and he was still 26 home runs shy of Incaviglia’s mark. His 48 home runs in 1985 accounted for almost half his blasts and is a single-season record that will likely never be touched either.

### **LSU's 188 home run onslaught in 1997**

Vanderbilt led college baseball with 100 home runs in 2018, leaving the Commodores 88 shy of this absurd season by the Tigers. LSU had nine players hit double-digit home runs, powered by Brandon Larson's 40 and Eddy Furniss' 17. Furniss found his place amongst the greatest college baseball home run hitters of all-time, as did Brad Cresse who "only" had nine home runs in his 1997 debut. The Tigers homered in every one of their 70 games that championship season.

**John McBroom goes 9-for-9 for Air Force on May 10, 1967** You have to wonder how often a hitter even comes to the plate nine times in a game, never mind get a hit in every one of them. McBroom had a day that was as good as most player's weeks in the Falcons' 38-7 victory over Colorado College. Per the Air Force baseball record books, McBroom ripped a single-game record five extra-base hits — two doubles, two home runs, and one triple — to go along with four singles (that's 19 total bases, folks) while driving in 12 of the Falcons' 38 runs.

### **Robin Ventura's 58-game hitting streak — 1987**

The amazing thing about Ventura's massive hitting streak is it is only part of the greatness of his career. Here's a guy who led the nation in RBI as a freshman in 1986 and then won both the Dick Howser and Golden Spikes Award two years later in 1988. In between, Ventura recorded what he will forever be remembered for in Oklahoma State's run to Omaha in 1987.

Here's a fun fact about the hitting streak. It came to an end in the College World Series against Stanford. That day **Jack McDowell** — who would become the Chicago White Sox first-rounder that same season — was the pitcher who ended the streak. A year later, Ventura would be reunited with McDowell as the White Sox's 1988 first-round MLB draft pick.

**(Note:** Per the Division III record books, Damian Costantino of DIII Salve Regina hit in 60-straight games from April 1, 2001, to March 10, 2003. Though this wasn't DI, nor in a single-season like Ventura's, it is certainly impressive enough to mention.)

### **Phil Stephenson's career runs scored record**

Let's be honest. Wichita State's greatest offensive weapon of all-time could have his career as an unbreakable record. He's college baseball's all-time leader in hits (418), total bases, (730), walks (300), and stolen bases (206). So, why does his runs scored record stand out?

Stephenson crossed home plate 420 times from 1979-82 with the Shockers. While all of the above records have been approached in recent history, there hasn't been anyone even close to Stephenson's run record. The next closest is BYU's Gary Cooper, 100 runs short of the Shockers' all-time great.

### **George Plender tosses 57.2 scoreless innings in 1954**

The Vermont ace's record actually extends into 1955 when he made it into the third inning of his first start before someone actually scored a run on him for 60-straight shutout innings. The one-season stretch really stands out, especially when you consider he threw six straight shutouts to end the 1954 campaign. Many think Plender is amongst the first to master the knuckle-curve which may very well have contributed to his success.

### **Arizona State goes nearly 10 years without being shut out**

The way these college baseball players tear the cover off the ball these days with launch angle and exit velocity metrics available, it may be possible that a run like this starts. But as of right now, there's no one even close to this. From April 7, 1995, to February 15, 2004, the Sun Devils played 506 straight games without being shut out. The next closest to this feat? Coastal Carolina went 349 games from April 16, 1983, to April 10, 1989.

### **Mike Martin's 40-win seasons for 40 years**

"Eleven" — as he became known around both Florida and Omaha — is the winningest coach in NCAA history in every sport at every level with more than 2,000 victories. His Florida State career came to an end in June of 2019, fittingly in Omaha, where he finished off his 40th consecutive 40-win season. Most coaches won't hang around that long as it is, especially not with that success.

### **Florida Atlantic ties Texas' mark of 34-straight wins**

In 1977, the Longhorns opened their season winning 34 consecutive games. The streak — which lasted from Feb. 18 to March 25 — ended in a heartbreaker, with Texas losing to Rice in 14 innings by a final score of 4-3. Twenty-two years later FAU tied the mark, going from Feb. 19 to April 17 without a loss.

### **Don Guillot's single-season stolen base mark**

Guillot was a nightmare on the base paths from 1983-97 for the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Broncs. His 107 stolen bases in 1987 broke the NCAA single-season record set two years prior by UCF's Tim Barker. The amazing thing was Guillot needed 15 fewer games to do it. As the story goes, UTRGV's all-time stolen base and runs scored leader had his thumb broken on his 106th stolen base. The next day, he went out and stole 107 while scoring three runs. The man was just unstoppable once he got on base.

## **THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE**

In 1988 I was the College Player of the Year at Washington State where I went 15-0 on the mound, batted .484 with 23 HRs and a 1.434 OPS.

I went right from college to the majors as a lefty hitting first baseman.

I played 17 seasons, had 2239 hits and a career .295 batting average.

I won the AL batting title in 1993 at .363, the same year I led the majors in doubles with 54 and OBP with .473.

14 of my 17 seasons were in the American League. I played more games with Toronto than any of my four other teams.

I retired in 2005 after a brief stint with the Red Sox.

Who am I?

**JOHN OLERUD**

**Miguel Cabrera** has played 1,001 games at Comerica Park, which replaced Tiger Stadium in 2000. Only one other player has played 1,000 games in any ballpark that opened this century. A National League catcher. Which player and ballpark?

**YADIER MOLINA** (1,045 games at Busch Stadium, which opened in 2006)

You know the most HRs in a season in the 1920's was Babe Ruth with 60 in 1927. Let's see how do you do on some other decades?

1930's            58 in 1932 Philadelphia A's 1B, first of back-to-back MVPs

**JIMMIE FOXX**

58 in 1938 Detroit Tigers 1B, won two MVPs but not in '38, led AL in HRs 4 times.

**HANK GREENBERG**

1940's            49 in 1949, led NL in HRs 7 times but never MVP, righthanded leftfielder/1B.

**RALPH KINER**

1950's            52 in 1956, most HRs in a season by a switch hitter, Triple Crown, AL outfielder, first of back-to-back MVPs.

**MICKEY MANTLE**

1960's            61 in 1961, second of back-to-back MVPs, also led majors in runs scored and total bases.

**ROGER MARIS**

1970's            52 in 1977, NL outfielder, MVP, also led majors in RBI, Slugging and total bases, played in 3 World Series but not in 1977.

**GEORGE FOSTER**

1980's            49 in 1987, AL rookie of the year, righthanded 1B, played in 3 World Series

**MARK MCGWIRE**

49 in 1987, NL MVP, righthanded outfielder

**ANDRE DAWSON**

1990's            70 in 1998, NL righthanded 1B, led majors in walks, OBP, SLUG, OPS

**MARK MCGWIRE**

2000's            73 in 2001, also led NL in walks, OBP, SLUG, OPS, 7x MVP.

**BARRY BONDS**

2010's            59 in 2017, NL MVP, righthanded outfielder, now plays in AL.

**GIANCARLO STANTON**

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