

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

5.14.2023

Good morning baseball fans,

In this week's edition—R.I.P. **Vida Blue**, **Kenley Jansen** reaches 400 saves, who is the best pitcher to never win a Cy Young award?

Plus a couple of longer pieces-- struggles with Negro League stats, history of the baseball cap.

Pour yourself a coffee and dig in.

THIS WEEK'S TRVIA CHALLENGE

Name the five active pitchers who have struck out 300 or more batters in a season:

Astros 2019
Boston 2017
Dodgers 2015
Nationals 2018
(another) Astros 2019

I am in the Hall of Fame.

I won a Cy Young in 1962, with a league leading 25 wins.

I led the majors in games started 1962-63-64-65, innings pitched 62 & 64

I pitched in 5 World Series including 3 winners, my first when I was 19 years old.

I won 209 games, 2.95 ERA with 2486 strikeouts in 3432 innings pitched.

Who am I?

Clayton Kershaw passed **Jim Bunning** this week for 21st on the all-time strikeouts list with 2863. Your challenge—how many of the 20 pitchers ahead of Kershaw can you name? Don't over think this—long career, lots of strikeouts, logical names. You'll get a dozen before you know it.

3 are active, only 2 retired before 1970, 3 are lefties.

(answers at bottom)

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

Last week we highlighted **Bryce Miller's** 10K/0 walk debut for the Mariners. Miller is the first big leaguer ever to keep his ERA under 1.00 while striking out 15 or more and walking just one in his first two big-league starts. his fastball spin rate is in the 97th percentile in the sport, at an average of 2,604 rpm. Opposing hitters are hitting an anemic .033 off Miller's four-seamer so far.

Last year the Marlins lost 40 one run games. They started this year 12-0 in one run games. Go figure. It has been since 1972 that a team (the Mets) even started 11-0 in one-run games. Going 12-0 in one-run games is how a team with the worst run differential in the National League -- and the third-worst in baseball is amazing.

Email debate this week--Best pitcher never to win Cy Young.

Can't be anyone before the award was created in 1956. So no **Walter Johnson** (417 wins, 36 wins in 1913), **Grover Cleveland Alexander** (373 wins, 33 wins in 1916), **Christy Mathewson** (373 wins, 37 wins in 1908), **Carl Hubbell** (253 wins, 26 wins in 1936) or **Lefty Grove** (300 wins, 31 wins in 1931).

Winning a Cy Young is about timing—your peak season(s) when no one else has a better peak season.

Bert Blyleven 287 wins, a 3.31 ERA and 3,701 strikeouts over 22 seasons in the Majors but his best seasons 1973, as he won 20 games and posted a 2.52 ERA with 258 strikeouts in 325 innings. But his best chance of actually winning the Cy Young was arguably 1984 (19-7, 2.87 ERA), when he finished in third place behind two relievers -- **Willie Hernandez** and **Dan Quisenberry**.

Mike Mussina had a great career (270 wins, 2813 strikeouts) but it's tough when you are up against **Pedro Martinez**, **Roger Clemens** and **Randy Johnson**.

Nolan Ryan struck out a lot of batters 5714 but never won a Cy Young. The closest Ryan got was 1973, the year he went 21-16 with a 2.87 ERA and 383 strikeouts -- a single-season record in the modern era. In a close race, Ryan came in second behind **Jim Palmer** (22-9, 2.40 ERA, 158 K's).

There have been only five instances in MLB history of teammates finishing first and second in the Cy Young Award voting; **Randy Johnson** and **Curt Schilling** were involved in two of them with the D-backs, and Schilling was second both times. Schilling also had an outstanding 2004

season (21-6, 3.26 ERA, 203 K's) after being traded to the Red Sox, but once again came in second, as Johan Santana took the top spot with a 20-6 record, a 2.61 ERA and 265 strikeouts.

Juan Marichal was a great pitcher. But timing is everything. Marichal had nine All-Star seasons (10 selections overall) from 1962-71, notching a 2.65 ERA with 1,940 strikeouts and 531 walks in 2,805 innings for the Giants during that stretch. Unfortunately only one Cy Young Award was given out until 1967, and some of his contemporaries in the NL included **Sandy Koufax, Don Drysdale, Bob Gibson, Tom Seaver and Steve Carlton**.

There are a ton of strong pitchers who never won-- **Phil Niekro, Don Sutton, Luis Tiant, Dave Steib**. And a bunch of more recent guys—Adam Wainwright, Madison Bumgarner, Chris Sale. It wouldn't be shocking if **Aaron Nola or Yu Darvish or Spencer Strider or Julio Urias or Walker Buehler** having an awesome peak year.

*Which brings us to **Gerrit Cole**. **Gerrit Cole**, 2013-present (33.7 bWAR)
Closest call: AL 2nd place, 2019 and 2021*

How does a 20-win, 2.50-ERA, 326-K, 0.89-WHIP season not earn you the Cy Young? When your teammate puts up an equally impressive campaign and defeats you by the slimmest of margins. That's what happened to Cole in 2019, as his brilliant season netted a second-place finish in the AL race behind **Justin Verlander**, who went 21-6 with a 2.58 ERA, a 0.80 WHIP and 300 strikeouts.

He's led the majors in strikeouts twice. Led the NL in ERA with Houston. In 2023 Cole is 5-0 with a 2.22 ERA. Maybe his year.

The Mets are 5-13 since opening 14-7. New York didn't spend a day under .500 last season on its way to winning 101 games, second-most in franchise history.

The Mets are paying five starting pitchers more than eight teams are paying their entire Opening Day rosters.

Mets starters have thrown fewer innings than all but the Rays and Reds starters, and the Rays do that by plan with openers and tandem starts. Just two starting rotations have produced negative value by FanGraphs' WAR calculations -- the Mets and the A's. Remember, the Mets are paying five starting pitchers more than eight teams are paying their entire Opening Day rosters. They're supposed to be winning by getting good starting pitching, and instead their rotation is better than only the terrible Oakland A's.

As Joe Sheehan put it in his newsletter-- Mets have had with their \$128-million starting rotation. Mad Max, **Justin Verlander**, **Kodai Senga**, **Carlos Carrasco**, and **Jose Quintana** have combined for 16 starts, 71 1/3 innings, a 5.17 ERA, a FIP above 6.00, and 0.0 bWAR. Investors in Theranos got a better return than Steve Cohen has for his money so far.

The Mets, through the signings of Scherzer and Verlander, have defined their window as the 2023 and 2024 seasons. This is one of the oldest teams in recent baseball history, and the most expensive one ever built.

Casey Schmitt continues to live up to the hype for the Giants.

The 24-year-old infield prospect homered into the second deck at Chase Field while going 4-for-4 with three RBIs to propel the Giants to a 6-2 win over the D-backs in Thursday night's series opener in the desert.

Since making his Major League debut on Tuesday, Schmitt is 8-for-12 (.667) with two home runs and four RBIs, tying Hall of Famer **Willie McCovey** for the most hits by a Giants player through his first three games since 1901.

Schmidt has 16 total bases through the first three games of his career. Since 1901 in the NL or AL, only Jorge Soler has had more total bases through the first three games of their career.

Player	TB	Year	1B	2B	3B	HR
Jorge Soler	17	2014	3	1	0	3
Casey Schmitt	16	2023	4	2	0	2
Trevor Story	16	2016	0	0	0	4
Chris Dickerson	15	2008	0	4	1	1
Kyle Lewis	15	2019	1	1	0	3
John Bowker	14	2008	3	0	1	2
Bill Bruton	14	1953	5	1	1	1
Joe Cunningham	14	1954	2	0	0	3
Ian Desmond	14	2009	4	3	0	1

Player	TB	Year	1B	2B	3B	HR
Manny Machado	14	2012	1	1	1	2
Willie McCovey	14	1959	4	2	2	0
Mark Quinn	14	1999	2	2	0	2

The USS Cooperstown, a Freedom class combat ship, was commissioned on Saturday in New York. The ship is named in honor of the 70 members of the Baseball Hall of Fame who served during war time.

That group includes **Ted Williams**, and a replica of his Hall of Fame plaque was installed on the stateroom door of the first commander of the Cooperstown, **Evan Wright**.

A Millis native, Wright is an avid Red Sox fan who worked closely with the Hall of Fame staff to incorporate some baseball flair into the Cooperstown. There's a display in honor of **Bob Feller**, who was a gun captain on the USS Alabama during World War II and saw two years of combat in the Pacific.

Xander Bogaerts speaks four languages. So naturally he became the first player to homer in four countries in regular-season games when he went deep in Mexico on April 29. Bogaerts had previously homered in the United States, Canada, and England.

After **Willie Mays**, the next oldest Hall of Famers are **Whitey Herzog** (91), **Luis Aparicio** (89), and **Sandy Koufax** (87).

Baltimore outfielder **Cedric Mullins** became the 12th Oriole to hit for the cycle when he hit a 3 run HR in the 8th inning Friday against Pittsburgh.

Paul Goldschmidt ripped 3 HRs in a Cards win over the Tigers this week. Two players have the most three-homer games for the Cardinals during the regular season **Johnny Mize and Albert Pujols** with 4

Goldschmidt is the fifth player in St. Louis Cardinals history with multiple three-homer games as a Cardinal.

Player	Count
Johnny Mize	4
Albert Pujols	4
Mark McGwire	3
Stan Musial	2
Paul Goldschmidt	2

As a Yankee fan, it never bothered me that **Don Mattingly** managed the Dodgers and the Marlins. It doesn't feel that great that he is bench coach for the Blue Jays.

The Blue Jays fired manager **Charlie Montoyo** last July and replaced him with bench coach **John Schneider**. Triple A manager **Casey Candaele** was named the interim bench coach. The Jays were 46-28 under Schneider, making the playoffs before losing in the Wild Card round against the Mariners. Schneider was retained as manager with Candaele returning to his old job.

Toronto wanted a bench coach with major league experience and Mattingly was a perfect fit given his 12 seasons managing the Marlins and Dodgers. That run included four playoff appearances.

Mattingly was a six-time All-Star and nine-time Gold Glove winner with the Yankees during his playing career. He was a hitting coach and bench coach under **Joe Torre** with the Yankees and Dodgers, then became a manager.

The 2021 Braves stand as the patron saints of slow starts. Atlanta started 19–23 and never surfaced above .500 until August, but somehow won 88 games and the World Series.

Should Yankees fans be worried? What about fans of the Mets, Mariners, Cardinals and White Sox? Slow starts mean thinning the margin of error. Entry to the postseason last year was 86 wins. With 20% of the season in the books, these teams need to get it in gear if they want to make the playoffs.

Reds prospect **Elly De La Cruz**'s 456-foot and 428-foot home runs. He also had a double that left the bat at 118.8 mph, giving him three batted balls with an exit velocity over 116 mph on the night. Since the introduction of Statcast in 2015, no *team* has had three balls hit that hard in one game. No Major League Baseball team has ever hit three balls harder than 116 miles per hour in one game during the Statcast era, which started in 2015.

Elly De La Cruz, the top prospect in the Cincinnati Reds minor-league system, did that on his own Tuesday night for the Triple-A Louisville Bats.

De La Cruz doubled in the third inning to drive in a run. That hit measured 118.8 miles per hour off the bat. It's the hardest hit ball in Triple-A and Major League Baseball this year.

A home run in the fifth by De La Cruz measured 116.6 miles per hour and traveled 456 feet.

De La Cruz then hit a home run that measured 117.1 miles per hour in the sixth. It traveled 428 feet.

Interesting observation by Joel Sherman in the New York Post: Athletics, Royals, Rockies, Nationals, Reds, and White Sox are all bad. The Rays are 17-2 against them. The Red Sox have not played any of them yet, but will play them 28 times the rest of the season.

When Boston's **Masataka Yoshida**'s hit streak reached 16 games, he became the sixth player from Japan to hit that mark. That group included **Ichiro Suzuki**, **Hideki Matsui**, and **Shohei Ohtani**. Ichiro had hit streaks of at least 16 games on 13 occasions during his career

On May 9, 1984, umpire **Joe West** ejected two camera operators from a game between the Mets and Braves who were employed in what nonuniformed role. In the fourth inning of that night's game, Mets third baseman **Hubie Brooks** was involved in a play at the plate as he attempted to score on a single by pitcher **Ron Darling**. The throw from Atlanta center fielder **Dale Murphy** arrived at home just as Brooks did. After a moment's hesitation, West called Brooks out.

New York manager **Davey Johnson** and third base coach **Bobby Valentine** began to argue with West. When they returned to the dugout, the camera operators stationed nearby showed them the replay on their monitors, so West ejected them. According to Johnson, though, West told him he was sure the replay would show that he made the right call.

"You never win those arguments, but you go out there to try to get the guy to at least say, 'I blew the call,'" Johnson said. "He gives me that, I go away. But West said to me, 'Check the replay.' So I did."

It might sound like a classic overreaction by the notoriously cantankerous Joe West to eject a couple of people who weren't even in uniform, but he was well within his rights to do it. Even today, MLB places strict limits on how replays can be shown during games, and the rule book grants umpires broad latitude to deal with all aspects of the game.

On Tuesday in Milwaukee **Mookie Betts** hit his 39th career leadoff homer, which ranks 10th in MLB history. It sailed a Statcast-projected 392 feet and registered a 103.9 mph exit velocity. off Milwaukee starter **Eric Lauer**.

19 of Betts' leadoff home runs have been as a Dodger, third in franchise history. He trails **Davey Lopes** (28 leadoff homers) and **Joc Pederson** (21).

MLB career leaders in leadoff home runs:

Rickey Henderson	81
Alfonso Soriano	54
George Springer	53
Craig Biggio	53
Ian Kinsler	48
Curtis Granderson	47
Jimmy Rollins	46

Brady Anderson	44
Charlie Blackmon	40
Betts	39

Dodgers are struggling against lefties

- **Average:** .193 (last in MLB)
- **On-base percentage:** .292 (27th)
- **Slugging percentage:** .376 (24th)
- [wRC+](#): 86 (23rd)

Fun to read about announcer Johnny Koskow. There are 90 miles between the Triple-A ballpark in Sacramento and the major-league stadium in Oakland. The trip took 30 years.

He started his broadcasting career in 1993 as the radio voice for the Cedar Rapids Kernels. That Low-A team was so cash-strapped it had to make a hard decision about whether to splurge on a fax machine or a mascot costume.

Doskow was good in that first job and listeners gravitated to him. He figured he'd spend two years in the Midwest League, get a solid year of seasoning at Triple A and settle behind a major-league mic by 1996. His estimate was only off by three decades.

Broadcasters, like players, tend to pay their dues in the minors. Doskow paid his off like a 30-year mortgage.

After more than 4,000 games of honing his craft in near-obscurity, after countless bus rides and Southwest Airlines aisle seats, after a stack of rejection letters as thick and unsettling as a Stephen King manuscript, after nailing calls on dramatic home runs and only once making a young spelling bee champion cry on the air, the Crash Davis of the broadcast booth was headed to The Show.

A rookie at 56.

"Long past the time when he deserved to get the call," veteran broadcaster Jon Miller said. "The A's made a very strong hire."

By the end of this April 14 night, Daskow will be doing [A's](#) play-by-play for the first time as a full-fledged member of their broadcast team, checking off the item that's been on his to-do list since his childhood. He's been an occasional fill-in for both the A's (a few weeks in 2012) and the Giants (one game in 2022), but this time he is in the big leagues to stay.

There are no official records for the oldest rookie play-by-play man, but Jon Miller thinks the title might belong to Bud Foster, a former war correspondent and Oakland Oaks broadcaster, who was 63 — seven years older than Daskow — when he did his lone season of A's games in 1978.



Read a discussion on whether the pitch clock is leading to bigger innings—that pitchers don't have the time to regroup. Through Monday, there had been 199 instances of a pitcher allowing four or more runs in a single inning, or about 2.12 percent of all innings pitched, according to STATS Perform. At this rate, there will be nearly 100 more such innings than there were last season, averaging out to an additional one approximately every two days.

Nathan Eovaldi set a career high with 12 strikeouts and extended his scoreless streak to 28 innings as the Texas Rangers beat the Oakland Athletics, 4-0, on Thursday night. Eovaldi pitched three-hit ball with one walk over $8\frac{1}{3}$ innings to become the third pitcher in franchise history to

post three consecutive starts of at least eight scoreless innings. **Martín Pérez** (2014) and **Charlie Hough** (1983) are the others.

With **Jacob de Grom** injured, Eovaldi's signing is huge for the Rangers. Eovaldi was an All-Star in 2021 and had an ERA in the 3.00s for four out of the last five years (the 2019 season was the only exception)

MIDDLETOWN, CT. – The Wesleyan baseball team sees their season end Sunday at Dresser Diamond, falling in game 3 of a best-of-three series with the Bowdoin Polar Bears. After taking game 1 Saturday early afternoon, the Cards fell in two straight to end their season. Wesleyan held a 2-0 lead after two innings of play and a 3-2 lead heading into the 8th, but a two-run 8th and six-run 9th propelled the Polar Bears back in front to a comfortable lead which they would hold to advance to the semifinals of the NESCAC Tournament. Bowdoin keeps their season alive, improving to 18-14 while Wesleyan ends their season 17-19.

Pirates starter **Mitch Keller**:

2021 Keller 6.17 ERA in his third MLB season, completing six innings only once and spending two summer months at Triple A.

Before 2022 demotion to the minors 203 innings, 6.12 ERA. Major league worst win pct of .241. Opponents batting .341 against him.

And Keller since being recalled: 176 innings, 3.07 ERA

On May 10, 1939, Philadelphia's Newspaper Guild raised money for charity by organizing what kind of stunt involving Phillies players attempting to catch a ball dropped from a great height.

Four Phillies players were tasked with catching a ball dropped from the top of City Hall, 521 feet in the air. After eight unsuccessful attempts, backup catcher **Dave Coble** successfully caught the ball. An estimated crowd of 10,000 people assembled to watch the attempt.

Ball-drop stunts were once a popular gimmick all across the country. In 1908, Senators catcher Gabby Street caught a ball dropped 555 feet from the top of the Washington Monument. In a 2014 *Philadelphia Inquirer* article about the City Hall stunt, SABR researcher Dennis Link said that the 1939 spectacle in Philly was one of at least four similar exhibitions that year. When a San Francisco Seals player named **Joe Sprinz** tried to catch a ball dropped from a blimp 800 feet in the air in August of that year, it hit his glove with such force that the mitt struck him in the head, knocking him unconscious and fracturing his jaw.

Last year, **Luis Arraez** spoiled **Aaron Judge**'s shot at a triple crown by beating him out for the American League's batting title. This year, after being traded from the Minnesota Twins to the Miami Marlins, Arraez could join another Yankee, **DJ LeMahieu**, in one of the rarest distinctions in baseball: winning a batting crown in both leagues. (LeMahieu, who won the N.L. crown with a .348 average for the Colorado Rockies in 2016 and the A.L. crown with a .364 average for the Yankees in the pandemic-shortened 2020 season.)

Ed Delahanty won the N.L. crown by hitting .410 for the Philadelphia Phillies in 1899, and then won the A.L. crown by hitting .376 for the Washington Senators in 1902, both of which are mentioned on his Hall of Fame plaque in Cooperstown.

Some ambiguity about the 1902 A.L. title arose because sites like Baseball Reference credit **Nap Lajoie** with a .378 average for Philadelphia and Cleveland that year. But the Elias Sports Bureau, M.L.B.'s official scorekeeper, has Lajoie at .366 and has not been provided with compelling evidence that his line should be changed. And while there was no official qualifying standard for a batting title before 1950, an argument for Lajoie as the 1902 batting champion would also lack merit as he did not meet the typically accepted measurements of playing in 60 percent of his team's games (he played in 87 games during a 154-game season) or having 3.1 plate appearances per team game (his 385 fell 92 short).

Entering Thursday's games, Arraez, who hit .316 in 2022, was hitting .398, an incredible 51 points ahead of **Ronald Acuña Jr.** of the Atlanta Braves, who was second in the majors at .347.

He has spread the ball around, pulling 30.4 percent of his hits, having 38.3 percent go up the middle and hitting 31.3 percent the other way, according to M.L.B.'s Statcast system, making him one of only 13 batters this season to have at least 30 percent of his hits fall in each location.

For all his success, Arraez doesn't hit the ball hard. His 49 hits through Wednesday were the third most in the majors, behind Toronto's **Bo Bichette** and Acuña, but 41 of them were singles. Arraez's hard-hit rate of 20 percent — hits in which the ball travels faster than 95 miles per

hour — ranked 259th out of 263 qualified batters, according to Statcast, light-years behind Toronto's **Matt Chapman**, who was leading the majors at 67 percent.

In baseball's integrated era (1947 to the present), only one hitter, **Rod Carew**, has led the majors in batting average by 50 or more points in a season, which Carew did by hitting .388 for the Minnesota Twins in 1977, far ahead of the N.L.'s leader, **Dave Parker** of the Pirates, who hit .338.

The major league record for largest batting average lead goes all the way back to the first officially recognized major league season, 1876, when Chicago's **Ross Barnes** hit .429, 63 points ahead of Philadelphia's **George Hall**.

THE RAYS ARE FOR REAL

The regular season is barely 20 percent complete. But as the Rays continue to roll (they bumped a bit the rest of the week and sit at 31-11), their early-season performance looks even more staggering from a historical perspective.

A 3-0 shutout of the Orioles on Monday night improved the Rays' record to 29-7, matching the 1939 Yankees, 1928 Yankees and 1912 Giants for the third-best mark after 36 games since 1901.

The complete list, followed by the outcomes of the respective seasons:

- 1984 Tigers, 31-5. Won World Series.
- 1902 Pirates, 30-6. No World Series (the first was in 1903).
- 1939 Yankees, 29-7. Won World Series.
- 1928 Yankees, 29-7. Won World Series
- 1912 Giants, 29-7. Lost World Series.
- 2023 Rays, 29-7. ????

Impressive, no doubt. But as an indicator of World Series potential, the Rays' 29-7 record means only so much.

Best run differentials after 36 games since 1901.

- 1902 Pirates, +123
- 1912 Giants, +120
- 2023 Rays, +118
- 1939 Yankees, +116

- 1905 Giants, +113
- 2016 Cubs, +109

The two clubs that were not on the previous list, the 1905 Giants and 2016 Cubs, both won the World Series.

The Rays have done just about everything right. They have an .855 team OPS, which is best in the Majors, and a 2.93 team ERA -- also the best in the Majors. They've got a legitimate MVP candidate in **Wander Franco** and a legitimate Cy Young candidate in **Shane Bieber**.

And Joe Sheehan highlighted the Rays start in his daily newsletter—great stuff every day, well worth a subscription.

Back on April 9, I wrote about the then 9-0 Rays and the teams they were chasing. Well, they caught all of them, eventually running their record to 13-0, tying the all-time record for wins to start a season. With last night's 8-2 win over the Yankees, the Rays are "just" 21-9 since we last checked in -- the Orioles and Braves are actually a few percentage points better in that time -- and 30-9 overall.

The greatest starting stretch in baseball history belongs to the 1984 Tigers. If you're a fan of a certain age, "35-5" is one of those figures that sticks in your head. That Tigers team was one of the greatest of my lifetime, lost a bit in history because it was one of just two playoff teams in Detroit in a quarter-century span. Those Motor City Kitties nearly doubled up their opponents over the season's first six weeks, scoring 236 runs and allowing just 120.

Built around an incredible crop of homegrown talent that included Hall of Famers **Alan Trammell, Jack Morris, and Lou Whitaker** (if they make me call Morris a Hall of Famer, then I get to call Whitaker one), the Tigers were as deep as any team in history. Their top 14 hitters by playing time all had at least a 95 OPS+, and that low man, **Tom Brookens**, was an excellent defensive third baseman. **Sparky Anderson** platooned on all the corners and at DH at a time when teams carried enough position players to pull that off. The pitching was nearly as deep; eight pitchers accounted for 89% of the team's innings, and all had at least a 98 ERA+ and 4.09 FIP. Baseball Prospectus, in a wonderful ongoing series by Steven Goldman and Rob Mains, ranked the 1984 Tigers as the 19th-most dominant team in baseball history.

That team is on an island when it comes to great starts.

Staying Hot (Best 40-game starts, 1901-2022)

Tigers 1984 35-5

Yankees 1939 33-7

Yankees 1928 33-7

Giants 1912 33-7

Pirates 1902 33-7

Seven teams at 31-9

It's a quirk of baseball history that no teams have ever started 32-8, while 12 have started within a game of that figure in either direction. The Rays lost a couple of close games in Baltimore this week, their eighth and ninth of the season, so the best they can do is join the group at 31-9. Nine teams have started 30-10, including the 2020 Dodgers, and a whopping 25 have started 29-11, including last year's Yankees. The last team to start 31-9 or better was the 2001 Mariners.

Getting to 31-9 is a separator. Of the 12 teams to start the season playing .775 ball or better through 40 games, seven won the World Series, including the '84 Tigers and '98 Yankees. That 58% hit rate drops to 33% for the 30-10 teams and 28% for the 29-11 teams. This is trivia more than anything else -- there's no meaningful difference in those three records -- but the gap is wide enough that you can see some signal there if you want.

One of the teams that didn't win the Series illustrates the challenge the Rays face. Of those seven champions, five won their leagues and advanced directly to the World Series. (A sixth, those 1902 Pirates, had no Series to advance to.) The Rays, though, like the 2001 Mariners, will have to win three short series to claim a championship. If we make them a completely unrealistic 70% favorite in every one of them, they have a 34% chance to win the World Series. If we lower that to a more realistic, but still exaggerated, 60% chance to win each series, they have a 22% chance -- a significant underdog -- to win the title.

I am not going on an expanded-playoffs rant today, but one of the worst effects of playoff expansion is how difficult it makes things on truly great baseball teams. Our sport just doesn't map well to short series.

All of that puts the cart well ahead of the horse. The Rays haven't clinched anything yet, though they have utterly dominated the first six weeks of the season. They lead MLB in runs scored, and are a tick behind the Rangers in R/G. They are lapping the field in advanced measures of offense, with a 142 wRC+ (25 points ahead of second), .301 Equivalent Average (22-point lead), and 114 DRC+ (six-point lead). There are some comps to those '84 Tigers; 13 Rays have at least 60 plate appearances, and 12 have at least a 96 OPS+. Wander Franco, **Randy Arozarena**, and **Yandy Diaz** start most every day, and around them **Kevin Cash** plays everyone on the roster in an assortment of platoons and pseudo-platoons, just as Anderson did nearly 40 years ago.

We expect the Rays to find talent by making trades and by signing low-cost free agents and by teaching sweepers to beer vendors. What this team finally has, though, is the homegrown core,

their Trammell/Whitaker/Morris/Lance Parrish group. Franco, who made his MLB debut at 20 less than two years ago, leads the AL in bWAR while hitting .318/.374/.554 and playing plus defense at shortstop. Shane McClanahan is following up his breakout season by further establishing himself as a true #1 starter -- 1.76 ERA, 3.22 FIP in seven starts. Josh Lowe, the team's first-round pick in 2016, is hitting .314/.369/.637. **Brandon Lowe** was doing a great Whitaker impersonation for a month, though a 2-for-39 stretch has dragged his numbers down and opened the door for **Taylor Walls**, another homegrown Ray, to chip away at his playing time.

These Rays now have that group of young, drafted/signed-and-developed superstars around which almost every recent championship team has been built. They have their strongest talent base since the **Evan Longoria/David Price** days, and you can argue that this core is better than that one.

For a 30-9 team, though, there are concerns. One starter, **Jeffrey Springs**, has already been shut down for the season with a torn UCL. **Pete Fairbanks**, who has a 0.85 ERA since the start of last season, is out with forearm inflammation, and has also had circulatory issues like the ones that forced him from last year's Wild Card Series game in Cleveland. Lefty **Garrett Cleavinger** is probably done for the year after tearing his right ACL. Those three pitchers had combined for a 1.26 ERA in 35 2/3 innings.

Tyler Glasnow has yet to make his debut after suffering an oblique injury in March, and he was pulled from a rehab start after one inning Wednesday. **Shane Baz** is out for the year following Tommy John surgery. Rookie **Taj Bradley**, sent back to Triple-A, has not handled the demotion well: 17 runs allowed in nine innings over three starts, with six walks and five strikeouts. He's supposed to be, I'm not making this up, transitioning from a six-day cycle to a five-day cycle, but his first two starts back at Durham were made on five days' rest.

The Rays have an actual ability to acquire low-demand pitchers and make them better. That's real, and you can see it all over this roster. It doesn't, however, mean they have a bottomless well of arms. Of late, they've gone back to using openers on days when McClanahan, **Zach Eflin**, and **Drew Rasmussen** aren't scheduled. The Rays rotation leads MLB in ERA and FIP, and the problems at the back will hopefully be addressed once Glasnow and Bradley return.

Of greater concern is the bullpen, where the Rays are scrambling. Waiver bait **Heath Hembree** showed up for a few days, as did similarly stationed **Chase Anderson**, and now the Rays are just stunting, bringing in **Jake Diekman**, who couldn't keep his job in the horror show that was the White Sox pen. Without Fairbanks and Cleavinger, the Rays are faking it. The bullpen has an overall ERA of 3.08, top five in baseball, but with a 4.06 FIP that is middle of the pack. Rays relievers have struck out just 18.7% of the batters they've faced, and, well, here we go again...

Another Bad Chart (lowest relievers K%, 2023)

Athletics 16.9%

Rays 18.7%

Nationals 19.0%

Brewers 20.3%

Red Sox 21.0%

Maybe Fairbanks comes back just fine, maybe Jake Diekman turns into **Josh Hader**, maybe your neighbor's 12-year-old son picks up seven saves for the Rays in August. Right now, though, the Rays bullpen stands out as a real concern.

One thing to watch for is that the Rays have a lot of up-and-coming bats who may not have anywhere to play. Four of their top five prospects are hitters, including **Curtis Mead and Kyle Manzardo**, stuck at Triple-A without much path to the majors. **Jonathan Aranda**, who graduated from prospect lists last year, is also in Durham. Of the three, only Manzardo is playing well at the moment; all of them, however, could serve as trade chips for a team that has two more highly-regarded infielders, **Curtis Mead and Junior Caminero**, coming up behind them.

The Rays have been great, and their spot in the 2023 tournament is all but assured. For a 30-9 team, though, there are more cracks in the foundation than you would like to see. Over the next six weeks, they'll have to figure out how much pitching they really have, and how much they still need to acquire.

Drafting Ain't Easy

We've talked here about the voodoo science of drafting baseball players. Yes, Orioles catcher **Adley Rutschman** looks like a no brainer pick that worked out.

Go back a decade to the draft of 2013.

Three players separated themselves from the rest in the 2013 Draft.

Stanford right-hander **Mark Appel** had been a first-rounder the year before but declined to sign with the Pirates. San Diego third baseman **Kris Bryant** outhomered 223 of the 296 NCAA Division I teams all by himself. Oklahoma righty **Jon Gray** drew **Gerrit Cole** comparisons after transferring from Eastern Oklahoma State JC.

It rarely works out where the very best prospects go at the very top of the Draft, but it did a decade ago. The Astros chose Appel with the No. 1 overall pick, followed by the Cubs grabbing Bryant and the Rockies taking Gray.

*Astros Actual pick: Mark Appel, RHP, Stanford (\$6.35 million bonus). Better choice:-**Aaron Judge**: first round, No. 32, Yankees (\$1.8 million).*

Bryant topped the Minors with 43 homers in 2014, won the National League Rookie of the Year Award in 2015 and then became NL MVP and a World Series champion in 2016. His career has tapered off since the Cubs traded him in mid-2021, but he was a four-time All-Star in seven years in Chicago and everything the franchise could have hoped for.

Rockies: **Cody Bellinger**, 1B, Hamilton HS, Chandler, Ariz.

Actual pick: Jon Gray, RHP, Oklahoma (\$4.8 million). Better choice-Bellinger: fourth round, Dodgers (\$700,000).

There were other misses:

Twins: Jeff McNeil, SS, Long Beach State

*Actual pick: **Kohl Stewart**, RHP, St. Pius X HS, Houston (\$4,544,400). Better choice-McNeil: 12th round, Mets (\$50,000).*

Guardians: Tim Anderson, SS, East Central (Miss) CC

*Actual pick: **Clint Frazier**, OF, Loganville (Ga.) HS (\$3.5 million). Better choice-Anderson: first round, No. 17, White Sox (\$2,164,000).*

Red Sox: Hunter Renfroe, OF, Mississippi State

*Actual pick: **Trey Ball**, LHP/OF, New Castle (Ind.) HS (\$2.75 million). Better choice-Renfroe: first round, No. 13, Padres (\$2,678,000).*

Mets: Nestor Cortes, LHP, Hialeah (Fla.) HS

*Actual pick: **Dominic Smith**, 1B, JSerra HS, San Juan Capistrano, Calif. (\$2.6 million). Better choice-Cortes: 36th round, Yankees (\$85,000).*

Brent Rooker, A's left fielder/DH leads the majors with a 1.088 OPS and is second in the league with 10 home runs. He has 26 RBIs and a .431 on-base percentage. Incredible. Rooker, 28, was selected by the Twins in the 38th round of the 2016 MLB Draft, but did not sign. He was drafted again by the Twins with the 35th overall pick in 2017. The Mississippi State product made his major-league debut in 2020, and played seven games for Minnesota. The following year, he batted .201 with nine home runs in 58 games for the Twins. In 2022, he bounced around with

the Padres and Royals, going a combined 4-for-32 with no home runs. So where did he go from there? To Oakland. The rebuilding A's gave him a chance as their everyday designated hitter. So, what does he do? He proceeds to hit .313 and lead the league in slugging percentage (.657) and OPS.

Rooker isn't the only A's player getting attention – at age 22 years, 269 days **Jordan Diaz** became the second youngest A to hit 3 HRs in a game when he unloaded against the Yankees.

In 1925 **Mickey Cochrane** hit 3 homers for the Philadelphia A's at age 22 years, 45 days. Diaz is ahead of **Reggie Jackson** in 1969 (age 23 years, 45 days), **Mark McGwire** in 1987 (age 23 years, 269 days), **Jose Canseco** in 1988 (age 24 years, 1 day) and **Jimmie Foxx** in 1932 (age 24 years, 262 days).

Diaz has already hit nine homers, equaling his total from last season

Yennier Cano posted an 11.50 ERA in 13 appearances last year for the Twins and Orioles, a 4.32 ERA in 11 outings at Triple-A Norfolk last year ... and now has been the best reliever in MLB this season. In 13 games with the Orioles this season, Cano has allowed no runs, three hits and zero walks while striking out 21 in 17 2/3 innings.

Shohei Ohtani made history this week with his strikeout of **Jeremy Peña** of the Astros. It gave Ohtani 502 career strikeouts, passing Hall of Famer **Babe Ruth** on the all-time strikeout list, per the Elias Sports Bureau, for the most K's thrown by a two-way player. Ohtani also now has the most career strikeouts in AL/NL history with at least 100 homers at the plate. Ohtani lost game to Astros. I watched some of it. It was something to watch Ohtani throw a 97 mph 4 seam fastball and a 75 mph curveball in the same inning.

Last year, **Matt Chapman** hit .229 in 621 plate appearances for the Blue Jays. The year before, he hit .210 in 622 plate appearances for the A's. The year before that, he hit .232 with Oakland in the shortened 2020 season. So what's he hitting this year? How about .349, with 17 doubles, and leading the AL in both categories. Looks like a big payday (he is a free agent after this season) in Chapman's future.

Speaking of big paydays, Ken Rosenthal writes:

Urías' looming payday

I wrote today about Dodgers left-hander **Julio Urías** and why he figures to be a coveted free agent this offseason. It's pretty simple: Not only is Urías an ace, but he also is young, especially for an elite starting pitcher hitting the open market. His free-agent contract will begin with his age-27 season.

To understand the rarity of Urías' circumstances, consider the top 10 pitching deals in major-league history, and the ages of the pitchers entering the first years of those contracts. The agreements that were extensions, not the results of open bidding, are denoted by asterisks.

- **Gerrit Cole** \$324M 29
- **Stephen Strasburg** \$275M 31
- **David Price** \$217M 30
- **Clayton Kershaw** \$215M 26*
- **Max Scherzer** \$210M 30
- **Zack Greinke** \$206.5M ... 32
- **Jacob deGrom** \$185M 35
- **Justin Verlander** \$180M 30*
- **Félix Hernández** \$175M 27*
- **Stephen Strasburg** \$175M 28*

(Strasburg appears on the list twice because he opted out of his first deal after the 2019 season).

Urías has another advantage as well. In his career, he has thrown only 645 regular-season innings, plus 58 2/3 in the postseason. That relatively small workload stems in part from the shoulder surgery he underwent in 2017, costing him almost two full seasons. He also has benefited from the Dodgers handling him with care.

Derek Jeter needed 155 plate appearances with the bases loaded before the Yankees captain cracked the first and only grand slam of his storied career. At least in that department, **Anthony Volpe** has already matched his idol. Volpe's fifth-inning shot off A's reliever **Rico García** marked the 22-year-old's fourth long ball since earning a place on the Yankees' Opening Day roster, coming off his bat with an exit velocity of 107.4 mph and traveling a Statcast-calculated 419 feet to the loading dock in center field.

Coincidentally, the blast looked a lot like Jeter's first career grand slam on June 18, 2005, off the Cubs' **Joe Borowski** -- directed almost toward the same left-center-field area of Yankee Stadium, albeit the version located across East 161st Street. The future Hall of Fame shortstop

was then eight days shy of his 31st birthday. At 22 years and 12 days, Volpe became the youngest Yankee to hit a grand slam at any iteration of Yankee Stadium; **Mickey Mantle** (July 26, 1952, July 29, 1952, and July 6, 1953) and **Melky Cabrera** (July 5, 2006) all were younger when they hit slams on the road for New York.

Volpe became the club's first rookie to hit a grand slam in a game he played at shortstop, improving to 3-for-3 with seven RBIs and a walk with the bases loaded during his brief career.

Yogi Berra hit 295 home runs while in the lineup at catcher, still the most all-time by a left-handed hitting backstop. **Brian McCann** is second (269 home runs as a catcher)

With win over the Reds, **Justin Verlander** has beaten every MLB team.

Justin Verlander joined an exclusive club on Wednesday, becoming the 21st pitcher in Major League history to beat all 30 teams.

While striking out seven over seven innings of one-run ball, Verlander helped lead the Mets to a 2-1 victory over the Reds at Great American Ball Park.

The 40-year-old ran into trouble in the first inning when leadoff hitter **Jonathan India** came around to score on **Jake Fraley**'s double to right field. But from that point on, Verlander did not allow a single hit, retiring 18 of the last 19 batters he faced, including the final 10, with the lone baserunner coming on a walk.

Verlander was his quintessential self in the seven-inning outing, his 252nd of at least seven frames in 484 career starts. The right-hander became the first pitcher to beat all 30 teams since former teammate **Gerrit Cole** achieved the feat on July 10, 2021, when he beat the Astros pitching for the Yankees. Mets teammate **Max Scherzer** also did so on May 11, 2016.

The only Hall of Fame pitcher to defeat all 30 current MLB clubs is **Randy Johnson**.

Speaking of 40 year old pitchers...

40 year old aces are few and far between. **Nolan Ryan** tossed two no-hitters in his 40s and twice finished in the top five in voting for the Cy Young Award. At 41 and 42, **Greg Maddux** won consecutive Gold Glove Awards. In their 40s, **Tom Glavine** and **John Smoltz** each appeared in an All-Star Game. In his age-40 season, **Randy Johnson** twirled a perfect game and finished runner-up for the National League Cy Young Award. He then pitched five more seasons.

Of those 5, Ryan threw the most innings age 40 and up—1271 with 143 strikeouts. Johnson also topped 1000 age 40 and up innings with 1004 K's.

How will Verlander fare at age 40? Historically, Verlander's season last year ranked as one of the best. No pitcher in his age-39 season had ever thrown more than 150 innings with a sub-2.00 ERA until Verlander tossed 175 innings with a 1.75 ERA after returning from Tommy John surgery. Including the postseason, he still made 32 starts and tossed 195 innings. Last season, he allowed more than three runs in just two of 28 starts.

On May 11, 1977, with his team mired in a 16-game losing streak, Braves owner **Ted Turner** put on a uniform and managed his team from the dugout?

He had purchased the Braves only a year earlier and wasted no time taking a hands-on approach.

Atlanta went 70–92 in Turner's first year in charge and finished last in the six-team NL West. After a decent 8–5 start to the 1977 season, things began going downhill in a major way. After losing both ends of a doubleheader in Pittsburgh to stretch their losing streak to 16 games, Turner had seen enough. He told manager **Dave Bristol** to take 10 days off. Turner himself would be managing the team while Bristol was away.

The sight of Turner in uniform was farcical, players said. Reliever Buzz Capra said the owner wore his stirrups backward. **Phil Niekro**, the scheduled starter for the game, jokingly asked Turner where he was going to have him hit in the lineup. To Niekro's surprise, Turner told him he'd let him choose his spot in the lineup.

"I don't think that's going to work, Ted," Niekro replied. "Put me in that ninth spot."

Third base coach **Vern Benson** and bullpen coach **Chris Cannizzaro** had to explain to Turner what he was and wasn't allowed to do as a manager, but the game didn't go as disastrously as you might expect. The Braves lost, but by a score of only 2–1. Their losing streak reached 17 games.

Turner's plan to manage the team during Bristol's 10-day leave of absence hit a snag, though. He received a call from National League president Chub Feeney, who informed him of Rule 20-E, which prohibits any person from managing a team in which they own stock. Benson managed the series finale in Pittsburgh, which Atlanta won to snap its weeks-long streak, but when the Braves returned home, Turner appealed Feeney's ruling to MLB commissioner Bowie Kuhn. As Kent Hannon detailed in *Sports Illustrated* at the time, Turner took the field in uniform before the first game of the Braves' homestand, taking batting practice and fielding groundballs at second base.

The spectacle of Turner managing the team again drew 20,000 fans to Atlanta–Fulton County Stadium. But before the game started, Turner received a telegram from Kuhn that was also read aloud by the stadium’s public address announcer: “Given Mr. Turner’s lack of familiarity with game operations, I do not think it is in the best interest of baseball for Mr. Turner to serve in the requested capacity.”

Turner quickly telephoned Kuhn, whom he refers to as “the Big Chief,” and asked, “How am I supposed to get the experience?”

“In the stands, like the other owners,” said the Big Chief. “Why can’t you be like everybody else?”

“Because I’m in last place,” Turner said.

The Braves never got out of last place. They lost that game against the Cardinals to drop to 9–23. Bristol was reinstated as manager the following day, and Atlanta went 52–78 the rest of the way.

Fernando Tatis Jr., Padres converted shortstop now playing outfield. Clocked this week on a throw from the outfield at 100 mph. Tatis ended the third inning of a loss to the Twins by recording his second outfield assist of the season. He delivered a one-hop strike to catcher Brett Sullivan to nail Carlos Correa -- a throw that clocked in at an even 100 mph. Tatis’ throw was the fastest on an outfield assist in the Majors this season.

Lou Gehrig holds the record for consecutive games played by a Yankee, a tally of 2,130 that stood league-wide until **Cal Ripken Jr.** surpassed the Iron Horse in September 1995. Second-longest streak by a Yankee belongs to **Hideki Matsui**’s streak of 518 consecutive games played to open his [Major League career](#) ended on May 11, 2006, when he fractured his left wrist and was removed from a game against the Red Sox in the top of the first inning. Matsui had also played in 1,250 consecutive games with the Yomiuri Giants, giving him 1,768 consecutive games played as a professional.

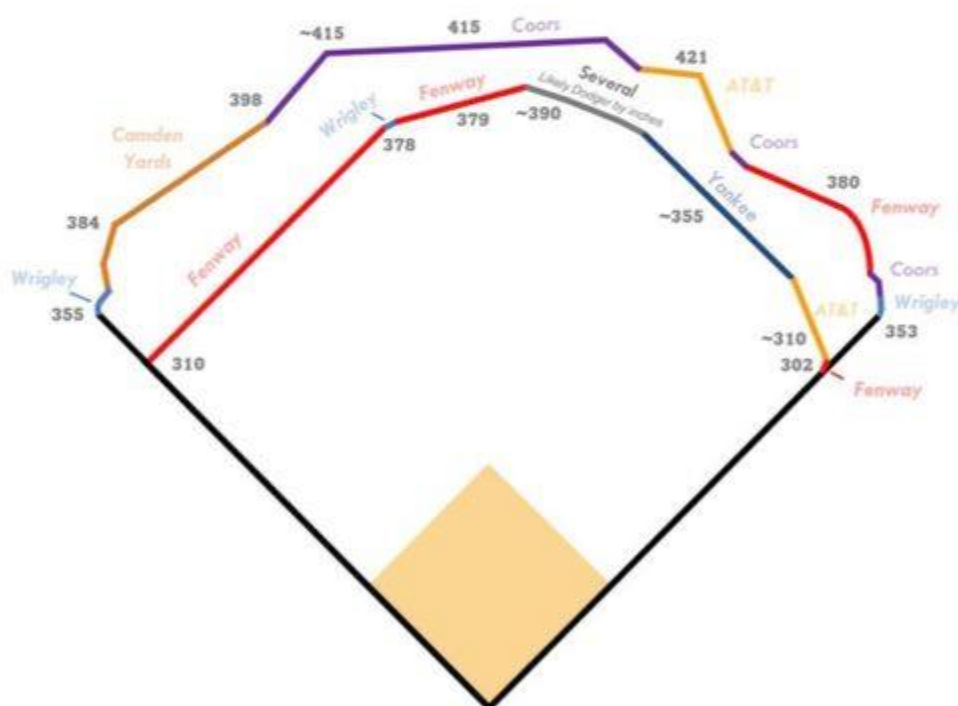


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[OC] Longest & Shortest MLB Outfield Walls Mash-up

Image



KENLEY JANSEN REACHES 400 SAVES, 7TH PLACE ON ALL-TIME SAVES LIST

Kenley Jansen is the seventh pitcher in history with 400 saves. Three of them — **Mariano Rivera**, **Trevor Hoffman**, and **Lee Smith** — are in the Hall of Fame and **Billy Wagner** is trending that way, having received 68.1 percent of the votes last year with two years left on the ballot. Jansen could join them someday. He has 20 postseason saves, a World Series title, and three

All-Star games on his résumé. By the time he's done playing he could have 450 or more saves and climb to fourth all-time. Not bad for someone signed as a 17-year-old catcher by the Dodgers in 2004 and didn't become a pitcher until he was 21. At 35, Jansen isn't ready to retire. He's in the first season of a two-year, \$32 million deal with the Red Sox and has already set a goal to pitch beyond that contract, perhaps until he's 40.

First save in 2010 in relief of **Clayton Kershaw**. Fourteen seasons, 780 2/3 innings, 1,124 strikeouts, 3,088 batters faced, two heart surgeries, a trio of All-Star appearances, a World Series championship and three teams later, Jansen took the mound for the Red Sox against the Atlanta Braves on Wednesday night. Coincidentally, the Braves were the second big league team Jansen ever pitched for, notching 41 saves for Atlanta last year after his first 350 came with the Dodgers between 2010 and 2021. Jansen needed 15 pitches on Wednesday to reach the mark, pumping cutters at 99 mph. He got **Sean Murphy** to fly out to center before **Eddie Rosario** doubled. But Jansen buckled down and got **Ozzie Albies** to fly out and **Travis d'Arnaud** to strike out. He pointed to the sky and appeared to let out a big sigh of relief.

The list of pitchers who've recorded 400 saves is short. Jansen is just the seventh in history to do so with **Craig Kimbrel** (397) about to become the eighth. The three next closest active pitchers highlight the rarity of the feat: 35-year-old **Aroldis Chapman** with 316 saves, 38-year-old **Mark Melancon** with 262 and 29-year-old **Edwin Díaz**, who's out for the year with a knee injury, at 205.

Now, with 400 saves on his resume and under contract through the end of 2024 in Boston, Jansen has a chance to inch even further up the saves record book. Billy Wagner (422), **John Franco** (424) and **Francisco Rodríguez** (437) could all be within reach this year, leaving just Lee Smith (478), Trevor Hoffman (601) and Mariano Rivera (652) ahead of him.

After Wednesday's save — his ninth of the year — Jansen has an 0.77 ERA with 17 strikeouts and three walks in 11 2/3 innings this year.

With the save for the Red Sox, Kenley Jansen became the seventh player in major league history to reach 400 career saves.

Rk	Player	SV	From	To
1	Mariano Rivera	652	1995	2013
2	Trevor Hoffman	601	1993	2010
3	Lee Smith	478	1980	1997
4	Francisco Rodríguez	437	2002	2017
5	John Franco	424	1984	2005

Rk	Player	SV	From	To
6	Billy Wagner	422	1995	2010
7	Kenley Jansen	400	2010	2023
8	Craig Kimbrel	397	2010	2023
9	Dennis Eckersley	390	1975	1998
10	Joe Nathan	377	1999	2016

R.I.P. VIDA BLUE

My best friend in Westfield NJ George Bacso and I were allowed to take the bus and subway to Yankee Stadium as kids to watch the Yankees. I was a Yankee fan, George loved the Oakland A's. Age 14, 1971, on June 1 and August 15 we ventured to the stadium (the second game with our dads) to see the A's and with their ace **Vida Blue** on the mound.

I've been lucky to see some great pitchers live—**Ron Guidry, Nolan Ryan, Pedro Martinez, Tom Seaver, Roger Clemens, Luis Tiant**. But no one was as dominant as Vida Blue. He threw bullets.

Blue, a flamethrowing left-hander who became the youngest MVP in AL/NL history in 1971 and helped the Athletics win three straight World Series championships from 1972-74, died on Saturday. He was 73.

Selected by the Kansas City A's in the second round of the 1967 MLB Draft out of De Soto High School in northwestern Louisiana, Blue made his debut at the age of 19 in 1969, the franchise's second year after moving to Oakland.

While Blue only made 18 appearances (10 starts) for the A's over his first two seasons, his dominance after being called up in September 1970 served as a preview of what was to come.

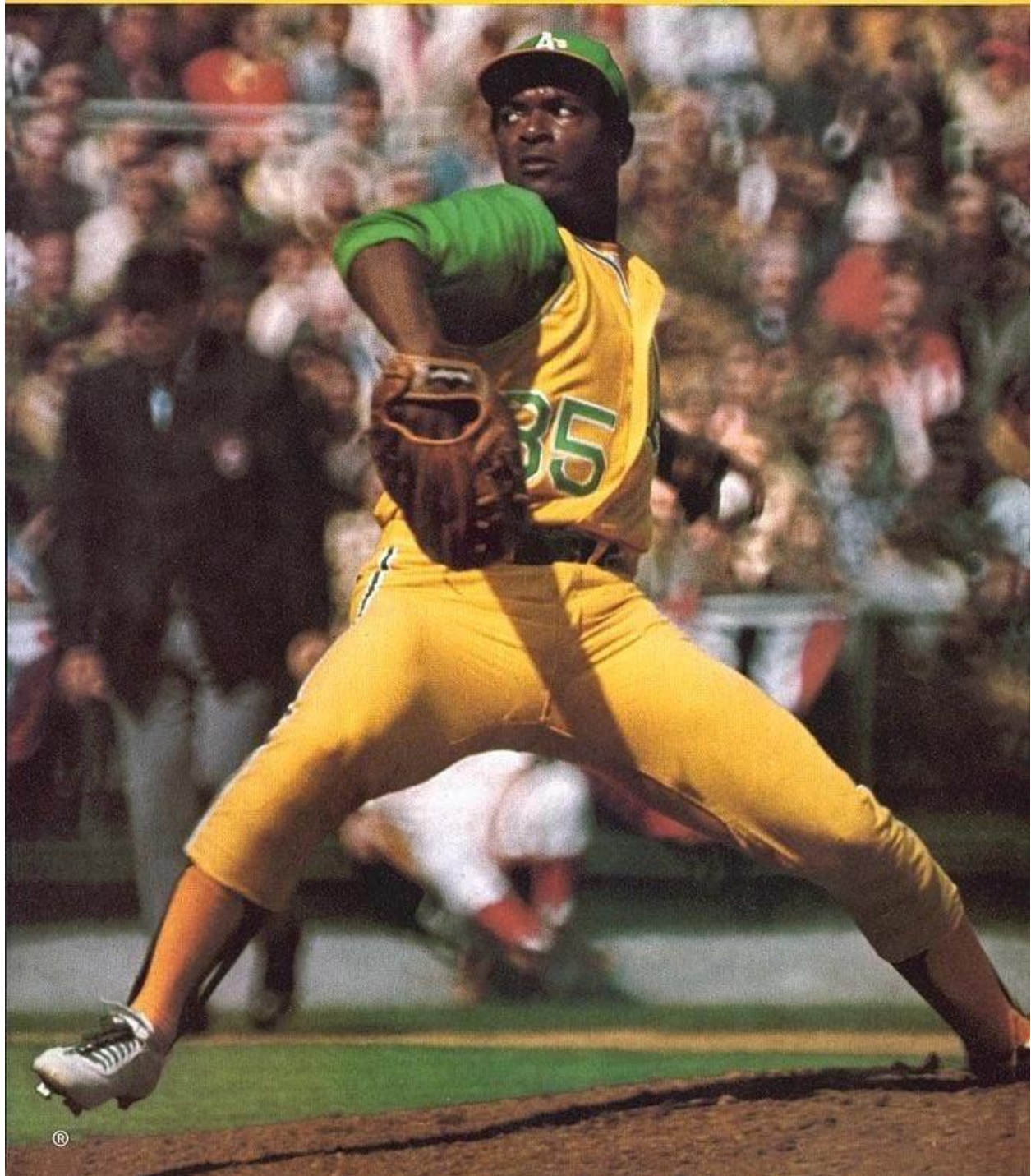
Two starts after throwing a one-hit shutout against the Royals in Kansas City, Blue took the mound at home against the Twins and tossed a no-hitter, striking out nine and allowing only one batter to reach base on a fourth-inning walk. At 21 years and 55 days old, Blue remains the youngest player since the start of the Live Ball Era in 1920 to throw a no-hitter.

Sports Illustrated

MAY 31, 1971 60 CENTS

YEAR OF THE HOT ONES

Hottest of all, Oakland's Vida Blue



Blue's career took off in 1971, as he won the AL Cy Young and MVP Awards after going 24-8 with a 1.82 ERA and 301 strikeouts over 312 innings. In doing so, he became the fifth player to win both awards in the same year. 24 complete games and eight shutouts and working 312 innings, the most in nearly 60 years by a pitcher in his first full season. Blue lost his first start and then won eight in a row, all complete games. From June 1 through July 21, he averaged more than nine innings in a stretch of 11 starts (twice he went 11 innings).

On the road, his starts were the highest-attended non-opening day games for six A.L. teams: Baltimore, Boston, Detroit, Kansas City, the Washington Senators and the Angels. At the Coliseum, his 20 starts accounted for 40 percent of the season attendance.

Blue went on to make six All-Star teams during a 17-year career that saw him spend time with the Giants and Royals in addition to the A's.

Blue spent nine seasons with the A's, winning three straight World Series titles (the only team besides the Yankees to do that) and earning three All-Star selections, before being traded across the Bay to the Giants during Spring Training in 1978. San Francisco sent seven players and \$300,000 to Oakland for the southpaw.

Blue's first season in San Francisco was another remarkable one, as he posted a 2.79 ERA and 2.68 FIP en-route to a fourth All Star appearance, a top three finish in Cy Young award voting, and a 12th place finish in NL MVP voting. He would pitch in San Francisco for three more seasons, picking up another two All Star appearances along the way, before pitching for the Kansas City Royals for two seasons. Blue returned to San Francisco in 1985, posting a 3.82 ERA in 287 2/3 innings between the 1985 and 1986 seasons before retiring at the end of the 1986 campaign.

Blue finished his career with a 209-161 record, a 3.27 ERA, 2,175 strikeouts, 143 complete games and 37 shutouts over 3,343 1/3 innings.

Blue actually was a switch-hitter, and remains the answer to one of the great trivia questions: who was the last switch-hitter to win American League M.V.P.? He was not much of a hitter (.104 for his career).

"It was like watching **Bo Jackson** walk onto the baseball field, or **Mike Trout**," said **Buck Martinez**, former catcher and longtime broadcaster who struck out 15 times against Blue. "I was 10 years old when **Willie Mays** walked onto Seals Stadium for the first time and I was like, 'Wow, that's Willie Mays.' You could tell. You didn't have to see him do anything, and you didn't have to see his number. But you knew that was Willie Mays. Same with Vida Blue."

Note the similarities between his career totals and those of his former teammate and Hall of Famer **Catfish Hunter**:

Catfish: 224-166, 3.26 ERA, 104 ERA+, 2,012 Ks, 954 walks, 36.3 bWAR, 37.2 fWAR.

Vida: 209-161, 3.27 ERA, 108 ERA+, 2,175 Ks, 1,185 walks, 44.9 bWAR, 49.2 fWAR.

Catfish Hunter was about three years older than Blue, and those three years led to Hunter becoming the first big-money free agent and led to him becoming eligible for the Hall of Fame before the parade of 300-game winners changed the voters' mindset about what qualifies someone for the Hall of Fame.

By the time Blue became eligible for the Hall of Fame in 1992, it had been more than 20 years since his legendary season, and the drug issues were fresher in the mind. Also, Tom Seaver came on the ballot that year. Blue got just 23 votes. The next year he got 37. Two years after that, he fell off the ballot.

Still, he was a great one. In 1971, when he won the Cy Young in the American League, **Fergie Jenkins** won the Cy Young in the National League. It was the first time in baseball history that Black pitchers swept the Cy Young awards. It has not happened since.

He topped out at 8.7% on the baseball writers' ballot for the Hall of Fame in 1993, and he was inducted into the A's Hall of Fame in 2019.

Blue served a brief prison sentence for attempting to purchase cocaine and was suspended from baseball by Kuhn, missing the entire 1984 season as a result. After being reinstated and spending 1985-86 with the Giants, Blue returned to the A's as a free agent, but he abruptly retired in February 1987.

THE NEGRO LEAGUE ARE MAJOR LEAGUES—BUT MERGING THEIR STATS HAS BEEN ANYTHING BUT SEAMLESS

Stephen Nesbitt, The Athletic

On Dec. 16, 2020, Sean Gibson awoke in Pittsburgh to a few inches of freshly fallen snow and a flurry of missed calls from friends and reporters. Major League Baseball had just announced it was formally recognizing seven Negro Leagues as major leagues and adopting the statistics of the more than 3,400 players in those leagues from 1920 to 1948 into the official record.

Gibson read MLB's press release that morning in stunned silence. The desegregation of baseball's record books would mean his great-grandfather, **Josh Gibson**, a legendary Negro Leaguer, a Baseball Hall of Famer, a prolific power hitter and a Black man who died at 35 three months before **Jackie Robinson** broke baseball's color barrier, would soon be rightfully listed alongside all-time MLB greats in a handful of single-season and career hitting categories.

But how soon the statistics would be incorporated was not made clear. Sean Gibson figured he'd hear an update on MLB's progress in 2021. Or in 2022.

"Now here we are in 2023," he told *The Athletic* earlier this spring. "I think we've been patient. We're just hoping things happen soon."

MLB's plan to integrate Negro League numbers and statistical legacies with its own remains years from completion. More than two years after its announcement, MLB is still in the initial phase of the project: data acquisition.

The league office was unable to reach an agreement with Seamheads Negro Leagues Database, the most complete set of Negro League statistics ever compiled, to use its data. The league ended its protracted negotiation with Seamheads this spring and now intends to use Retrosheet's nascent database — a work in progress that Retrosheet president Tom Thress said likely won't be finished for at least five years — as the basis for its records.

The next phase would be for Elias Sports Bureau, MLB's official statistician, to verify the database and determine how to fold it into the league's official record, a process that a league spokesperson said will include input from Negro League researchers and families. That alone will be a Herculean task, one requiring the review of original documents underlying the database and myriad judgment calls regarding how to account for incomplete or conflicting information. Some of baseball's sacred numbers will be eclipsed. Records will fall. Hell will be raised. But none of that will be done before the database is, which all adds up to a lot more waiting.

An MLB spokesperson said there remains no set timeline for the completion of the project. "What we said from the beginning was, this is more about doing it correctly as part of history than doing a rush job," the spokesperson said. "That's why we went to the people (Seamheads) that had the expertise and the most knowledge on those statistics first."

The news that MLB and Seamheads are not partnering, prolonging an already lengthy project, comes as an unwelcome surprise for those hoping the finish line was in sight. "I'm shocked," Sean Gibson said after hearing the update. He sighed. "It's sad. I feel like Major League Baseball jumped the gun. They should have had all that worked out before they made the announcement."

In the aftermath of MLB's December 2020 announcement, some in the research community expressed concern to *The Athletic* that MLB and Elias were ill-prepared to handle the

complexities and dilemmas of incorporating Negro League numbers, but none questioned where the data would originate. It was all but spelled out in the league's press release: Commissioner Rob Manfred specifically commended Seamheads researchers Gary Ashwill, Scott Simkus, Mike Lynch and Kevin Johnson, then John Labombarda, head of editorial at Elias, was quoted as saying, "We look forward to working with (MLB's official historian) John Thorn and the people who worked on the research and construction of the Seamheads Negro Leagues Database."



It seemed a foregone conclusion the rewriting of MLB's record books would be based on the indispensable database created over the past decade and a half by Seamheads researchers. And yet, that partnership never fully materialized.

Representatives from the league office and Seamheads met on and off over the past two-plus years, but after a meeting around Opening Day this spring failed to result in a deal, MLB elected to pursue Retrosheet as an alternative. According to sources familiar with the negotiations, the sticking point for Seamheads was not compensation but rather concerns about control of the data, how it would be used and who would have a say in its implementation.

An MLB spokesperson declined to divulge details of the discussions. Seamheads researchers turned down multiple interview requests for this story.

Because Retrosheet is a nonprofit that makes its historical play-by-play accounts publicly available and free of charge, that route features fewer roadblocks for MLB — the trade-off being that Retrosheet's database is still being built. MLB does not have (or need) a formal agreement in place with Retrosheet regarding its Negro Leagues data, but according to sources familiar with their conversations, their partnership is expected to include a consulting agreement.

MLB contends it did not act prematurely in revealing its plans to integrate Negro League stats, as it was one part of a larger announcement made as the culmination of the league's 2020 centennial celebration of the founding of the Negro National League. In the announcement, MLB also stated it was "correcting a longtime oversight in the game's history" by elevating the Negro Leagues to major league status, and admitting error on the part of the 1969 Special Committee on Baseball Records, which excluded Negro leagues from consideration when it identified six other "major leagues" since 1876. In the past two years, as negotiations with Seamheads held up the statistics project, MLB made other efforts to promote the legacies of Negro League players, such as the Webby Award-winning series "Undeniable" — MLB's first-ever animated show — and a Negro Leagues storylines mode on MLB The Show.

"The 2020 recognition of the Negro Leagues from 1920-1948 as Major Leagues has provided a greater platform for the stories of 3,400 players to be told to a new generation of fans," MLB said in a statement to *The Athletic* last week. "The inclusion of their records into Major League history speaks to their triumph, in their own day and now. The statistics will point fans to underlying lessons that the Negro Leagues have taught to Baseball and to America."

There was from the outset of MLB's Negro Leagues statistics efforts a mismatch between internal and external expectations. Initially, those involved with the project expected it would be completed in a matter of years, not months, even if a deal with Seamheads came together quickly. MLB has historically been thorough and systematic with incorporating changes to the record. (It took 70 years for Hack Wilson to get his 191st RBI and 34 years to unearth Roger Maris' ghost RBI.) But after the announcement, as fans and reporters (including on the league's site) launched into debates about how Negro League stats will impact MLB records, the league did little to cool expectations. It wasn't until two months later that Labombarda told *The Athletic* he expected the process to be lengthy. Had MLB communicated that the process could take the better part of a decade, Sean Gibson said, "we wouldn't be talking about this right now."

Larry Lester, a renowned researcher and a co-founder of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, was specifically mentioned in MLB's December 2020 announcement but has not been involved in its Negro League efforts. He wondered why he was hearing this update from a reporter, not from the league. Lester suggested MLB be more transparent about its process by giving quarterly reports on its progress — or lack thereof — to assure the public the incorporation of Negro Leagues statistics is still a priority. "When I go to a store and see it's crowded," he said, "it makes me feel good when the person behind the counter says, 'We will be right with you.' I

A black and white photograph of four Negro League baseball players standing in a line on a field. They are wearing light-colored uniforms with a large 'C' on the chest and dark caps with a 'C' on the front. The player on the far left is wearing dark shoes, while the others are wearing lighter-colored shoes. The background shows a baseball field with a fence and bleachers.

When Dave Smith started Retrosheet in 1989, its founding mission was both basic and impossibly lofty: to uncover play-by-play data for every pre-1984 Major League game, computerize those accounts and provide them to the public for free. For the past 34 years, hundreds of Retrosheet volunteers have helped the non-profit inch closer to that goal, scouring scorebooks and newspaper microfilm to piece together baseball history one play at a time.

“This seems insurmountable,” Smith would say to researchers lost in the weeds of early 1900s American and National League seasons, “but it’s a finite number of games.”

Then that number grew in 2020. It’s still technically finite, but it’s much more difficult to nail down.

“With the AL and NL, we know what that number is. We can calculate it. We know the schedule of the 1885 Boston Beaneaters,” said Thress, who succeeded Smith as Retrosheet president last year. “The problem is, I have no idea how many games the 1936 Kansas City Monarchs played.”

With Retrosheet’s Negro Leagues database, which Thress began in the summer of 2020, he hoped to provide what did not already exist publicly: game-level stats. For as comprehensive as the Seamheads database is, the data is displayed in season and career totals. “When they say Josh Gibson hit 18 home runs in 51 games in 1936, I don’t know what those 51 games are,” Thress said. Ashwill told *The Athletic* in 2021 that Seamheads planned to eventually display day-by-day numbers. That has yet to happen. That means others, like Thress, can’t simply look through Seamheads game logs to recreate season schedules. He had to start from square one.

It quickly became clear to Thress that he wouldn’t be able to achieve Retrosheet’s gold standard: the full play-by-play rundown. In many cases, it simply did not exist. Some box scores were available, but other times he’d find a line score with a sentence of summary. “In some cases, we don’t even have a line score,” he said. “There’s a two-sentence blurb that the Memphis Red Sox beat the Birmingham Black Barons last night, 3-2. That’s all you know. The challenge there is, how do we present this data? Because it doesn’t fit in Retrosheet’s baseline format.”

The answer was to modify Retrosheet’s standard. Now, the requirements for a game to be added to the site’s Negro Leagues database are that it be clear when a game was played, where it was played and its final score. “If that’s all you know, that’s all you know,” Thress said, “and we want to be able to present that.” For the 1948 season, Retrosheet found 542 games. It has box scores for 242; the others give as much information as possible.

It is agonizingly slow work, but rewarding. Researchers liken unearthing a box score lost to time to striking gold. Once, while at a speaking engagement in Excelsior Springs, Mo., author Phil Dixon mentioned he couldn’t find a certain 1920s Kansas City Monarchs game in any newspaper in the state archives. An audience member told him bound editions of the local newspaper were kept in the vault at a bank in town. Dixon descended into the basement of the bank and emerged a short time later with photos of the lost Monarchs box score on his phone.

While working on the 1943 Negro American League season, Thress saw a reference in the Chicago Defender to a Chicago American Giants game against the Birmingham Black Barons in Kewanee, Ill. “I lived in Chicago for 29 years,” Thress said. “I had never heard of Kewanee.” None of the three newspaper archives he’s subscribed to have access to the Kewanee Star

Courier. Then he discovered it was searchable through the town library's site. "And damned if I didn't find a box score for that game," Thress said. "That was the most amazing thing."

Currently, the team working on Retrosheet's Negro League database comprises Thress and four volunteers. Thress builds season schedules. Volunteers fill out a game file for each contest and return it to Thress. More volunteers might help, Thress said, but the bottleneck is at his desk. This isn't the only thing he's working on. On a recent Saturday, Thress was proofing the 1913 AL/NL season when he paused to discuss the Negro Leagues project with a reporter.

Retrosheet researchers typically work in reverse. So, in 2020, Thress started with the 1948 Negro National League season. Now he's working on 1939. (The 1943-48 seasons are already available on Retrosheet's site.) By that math, Thress said, it'll take five years to complete the project. "I'd love for it to be quicker," he said. "I fear it's more likely to be longer. But I don't know."

While MLB remains years away from incorporating Negro League statistics into its official record, the visibility of those numbers has already increased exponentially. Baseball Reference, the go-to source for major league statistics, started licensing Seamheads' extensive Negro Leagues database in June 2021. While that agreement doesn't include game-level data — box scores and individual game logs that MLB and Elias will require for their record-keeping — Baseball Reference now displays season and career totals for Negro Leaguers and includes them among its leaderboards. So instead of **Barry Bonds** joining **Babe Ruth and Ted Williams** among the career leaders in OPS+, it's Oscar Charleston in third.

FanGraphs followed suit in February 2023, updating its statistical database with Negro Leagues data licensed from Seamheads. David Appelman, founder and owner of FanGraphs, acknowledged that his site generally plays second fiddle to Baseball Reference regarding historical data, but he felt it was important for Negro League statistics to appear on both sites and be easily accessible in the places people are most often perusing statistics. "At this point, if you don't have those Negro Leagues as part of your major league data, there's an incompleteness to it," Appelman said.

Still, some editorial judgment calls, like the ones MLB and Elias eventually will have to make, are required. For instance, Josh Gibson's OPS+ is higher than Ruth, Williams or Charleston, but he is not listed among Baseball Reference's career leaders because he does not meet the 3,000 plate appearance threshold for career rate stats. However, that could change if seasons in which storied clubs competed as independents — such as his time with the Homestead Grays and Pittsburgh Crawfords from 1930 to 1934 — come to be counted as major league seasons. Forman said Baseball Reference rewrote portions of its code base to account for leagues of different lengths and cases of incomplete stats. Appelman said FanGraphs treated the data as it would any historical major league data, though it did make a slight modification to its Wins Above Replacement formula to account for certain data gaps.

Forman spoke recently to students at University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn., about the massive infrastructure installed for generations around chronicling the stories and stats of the American and National Leagues. Newspapers documented every game. The well-funded league offices tracked stats and saved them in bound volumes. The Negro Leagues and Black baseball didn't have the same resources, Forman said, and so when presenting their scattered stats now, "you have to accept that you're making up for some of that lack of investment."

There have long been spirited debates between researchers about which stats to use when comparing Negro League and MLB players. Negro Leaguers sometimes played 100 fewer league games in a season than their MLB counterparts, then participated in unofficial barnstorming contests, All-Star games and series against White teams. Lester prefers to focus on rate stats. He'd compare the strikeouts per nine innings of **Satchel Paige** versus **Nolan Ryan and Roger Clemens**. He'd look at Josh Gibson's home runs per at-bats and see he landed somewhere between Bonds and **Hank Aaron**. "Once people start looking at these numbers and over-analyzing them, which they always do, they'll find there's really no difference," Lester said.

"My small fear is that the Negro League stats will be absorbed into the major league history and disappear like a Walmart coming to a town and all the mom-and-pop stores disappear," he said. "We want to immerse those stats with Major League stats but also keep their independence. That's not easy to do. You want inclusion, but you want exclusivity at the same time."

At the time of MLB's announcement, the Seamheads database included figures from 73 percent of known Negro League games played between 1920 and 1948. They continue to uncover more games and identify errors. Updates are pushed out to Baseball Reference and FanGraphs and, in turn, the unofficial leaderboards reflect the changes.

Dixon, the researcher who found Monarchs box scores in a bank vault, worries the public will reject Negro Leagues numbers once they see that the small samples of games. He has written numerous Negro Leagues books and knows there are numerous games either not accounted for in the Seamheads database or not considered because they weren't league games. "Hopefully people accept the statistics," he said, "but it'll never be complete."

For Sean Gibson, who runs the Josh Gibson Foundation and is a member of the Negro League Family Alliance, news of MLB's lack of progress toward incorporating Negro League statistics stings on a number of levels. He had hoped that Ron "Schoolboy" Teasley, who at 95 is one of the few surviving players who played in the Negro Leagues from 1920 to 1948, would live to see his name and numbers in MLB's official record. Now the likelihood of that is waning.

Sean Gibson worked with Forman on Baseball Reference's Negro Leagues launch, and he appreciates that awareness of Negro League players and teams is spreading. But for as much as it pleases him to see his great-grandfather's stats on the Seamheads, Baseball Reference and FanGraphs sites, he's anxiously awaiting another. "Nothing is bigger than Major League Baseball," he said. "You can't get no bigger."

THE LONG, STRANGE HISTORY OF THE BASEBALL CAP

Michael Clair, mlb.com

You could be forgiven for thinking the baseball cap was always there, perched upon humanity's head from the very first day we walked on the Earth, as eternal as the tallest trees or the deepest ocean. But, of course, that's not true.

In fact, long before baseball caps were the ubiquitous fashion choice for ballplayers, musicians, and Marvel heroes trying to blend in with a crowd, baseball teams didn't even *wear* caps. That's right: Had the game of baseball developed differently, perhaps we'd all be wearing big straw hats with our favorite club's logo written across the front.

"It's the people's crown. It's completely egalitarian," New Era's senior VP of Brand, Mark Maidment, told MLB.com about the cap. "You can put it on and you can feel great whether you're a taxi driver, or you're gonna play to 200,000 people at Coachella."

"The baseball cap is a really great marketing tool," Tom Shieber, senior curator for the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, said. "I don't think they realized it was a marketing tool for a long, long time. People get it now, right? I mean, entire businesses are based on it. Because it's right there. It's a billboard, right above your head, where people pay attention."

But where did the cap come from and how did it get here? How did it become both the quintessential piece of a ballplayer's uniform, as well as the go-to wardrobe accessory for stars, artists, and the common person? To answer that question, we need to go all the way back to the game's very first organized team.

(mid-1800's wool baseball cap)



I. ORIGINS

Though the New York Knickerbockers were baseball's first "official" team, forming in 1845, it would take them four more years before the team began to wear baseball hats. Presumably, at some point the team figured out they'd catch more fly balls if they didn't lose them in the sun. But rather than resembling what you see on the field today, the Knickerbockers wore "chip" or straw hats.

In fact, the whole look was pretty jaunty:

This information is a little suspect, though. The news originally came from the original Knickerbocker Club books, which are now missing. Instead, we get this insight second hand from "The Book of American Pastimes" written by Charles A. Peverelly in 1866.

"He has a bunch of different sections on different baseball clubs," Shieber said. "When he talked about the Knickerbocker clubs, that's the smoking gun. 'Oh, in 1849 they said that their uniforms were going to be blue, woolen pantaloons' -- which is just fun to say -- 'a white flannel shirt' and, this is important, 'chip' -- parentheses -- 'straw hats.' I don't know what really was said in the minutes, but I would be surprised if it's particularly different from that. I don't know why he'd be making things up."

Still, the specific choice may not have been all that important except to a) keep the sun out of the players' eyes and b) establish a team uniform -- something we still see today. After all, why do players need to wear a ballcap when in a dome?

"I think it was especially important during the early days of baseball, amateur baseball, when it was truly a club sport. It shows that you're a member of the club," Shieber said. "When I'm on the field, I can't show you my membership card, that doesn't work particularly well. But if I'm running around with this outfit on that we've agreed to, 'Oh, then that guy is on the club.'"

It wouldn't take long for the teams and sporting goods companies to realize that there was probably something that fit better on a baseball field than a barbershop-quartet-ready chip straw hat. So, a few years later, the first lid that resembled today's ballcaps was worn: Teams like the New York Mutuals and Brooklyn Excelsiors switched to a merino cap topped with a star-like pattern made by New York sporting goods company Peck & Snyder. This cap featured "the two main characteristics of the modern-day baseball cap: a crown and a bill (or visor)." It was called the No. 1 and cost about \$1.25 to \$2 to purchase.

Though A.G. Spalding bought out the company in 1894, Aron and Joe Sharpe recently brought the Peck and Snyder brand back to life, diving through the archives for inspiration for the modern caps and shirts.

"I always wanted a sporting brand, but I wanted a sporting brand that had a real rich heritage, and that we could do something quite special with," Aron, the managing director of the brand, told MLB.com in a Zoom call. "I spent a lot of time researching, and honestly, I don't remember how I came across it, but I saw that Peck and Snyder had a story. The more I got into it, the more it became a flavor for us. I didn't even realize at the time when we did it, but they made the original baseball cap."

The brand delved into the archives for their releases, looking to tie in its sporting history with modern times. They spent hours peeking through old Peck and Snyder catalogs and advertisements to create a product line that is heavily indebted to the original while making something for a modern audience.

Despite all their research, they're still not exactly sure how or why this style of ballcap became the pre-eminent style.

"If they were in a straw caps -- this is just a guesstimation -- but if they're using a bat and if you've got a straw hat with a rim all the way around, it probably got caught or it might have been blinding for the fielder or something to that effect," Aron said.

But while the Peck and Snyder No. 1 may have kicked off the baseball cap revolution, it looks more like a beret or a deflated soufflé sitting atop someone's head compared to today's lids. Those same Brooklyn Excelsiors then brought us much closer to today's baseball cap, with what

is now known as the "Brooklyn-style cap." The brim went longer and it had a deeper, button-topped crown.

"In the 1850s, especially by the late 1850s when you have a decent number of images, you're definitely seeing people wearing what you and I would think of as a baseball cap, which is a crown with a bill that comes out just one direction instead of all the way around," Shieber said. "This is not a particularly groundbreaking object. Really, something like that had been worn in horse racing by jockeys for many years. We call it a baseball cap because we're Americans and it's just been associated with baseball for a long time. But it's not like it was invented for baseball. The cap had been around a long time."

While there were other styles -- including the famed pillbox, which practically screams the 1800s -- it was this "Brooklyn" style that took off. By the end of the century, one cap had clearly won out, even though there were plenty of others around.

Perhaps shockingly, while we think of the pillbox as the standard historical baseball cap -- just go to any vintage baseball game in your area and you'll see that's certainly the case -- it actually had a very short period on baseball players' heads.

"It wasn't until the late 1880s, really, where the pillbox becomes popular," Shieber said. "I mean, we're dabbling in it before that, but its height of popularity was in the late 1880s. But it doesn't really last that long, surprisingly. From a modern standpoint, you say 'old timey baseball' and everyone thinks of a certain kind of mustache or a beard."

(Oddly enough, the Philadelphia Athletics wore pillbox caps during their height of success in the early 1900s. This helped re-popularize the cap, but could also be considered a type of uniform throwback. Oddly enough, teams were wearing nostalgic baseball uniforms in the 1880s and '90s, already harkening back to an earlier time.)

While these early models had the look and feel of a modern ballcap, they were still lacking that all-important logo on the front. That would come in 1894 when the Boston Baseball Club -- now the Atlanta Braves -- became the first team to wear letterforms when they donned a monogram-style look on their caps. Three more teams would join in on the fun the next year.

It would take another seven years before a mascot first appeared on a Major League hat, when the Detroit Tigers proudly displayed a red tiger on a dark ballcap in 1901. The tiger -- which looks a little like a child's drawing of the animal -- would be replaced by the letter "D" in 1903, with the now-iconic Olde English-style letterform showing up a year later.

While the Tigers are often credited as the first to pull off the mascot lid, that's maybe not *entirely* accurate.

"I would say the 1901 Tigers are the first *Major League* team to place an image of its team nickname on its cap. Now, that's very specific language," Shieber said. "Actually, in October of

1894, when Baltimore faced the Giants in the Temple Cup series -- which was a form of a world championship -- Baltimore wore special caps just for that and had an orange wing on the front. That's a logo. It's a graphic identity of some sort."

As for why so few teams still don't have mascots on their caps, it comes down to two things: Tradition and work.

"I would say simplicity, because back then a lot of this stuff would have been done by hand," New Era brand historian and archivist Jim Wannemacher said. "To do an animal or a mascot, that would call for more detail in the embroidery. Stitch count was a big thing back in the day, and it still is."

Even today, to make something like the Marlins throwback logo with the fish swirling around still takes a lot of work and involves a lot of stitching -- something that was incredibly time consuming and difficult at the time.

"I would venture a guess that a lot of the early stuff, too, wasn't embroidered, but it was felt cutouts that were glued on or sewn on to the front of the hats," Wannemacher said. "Look at some of the early stuff. They didn't even have anything on the front, it was the color of the hat, the piping, you know, those kind of things that really called out who they were."

By this point, the cap had won out across baseball. Sure, there were still changes and modifications to come: In the early 1900s, the Brooklyn cap fell out of favor for the Philadelphia cap, which featured a stitched brim that was supposed to last longer. The eight-panel cap would morph into the six-panel cap you see today. Brims would grow even longer in the 1920s and '30s, and soon, latex and rubber were even being included in the construction of the hats.

Of course, just as players today modify their own gear, ballplayers did the same in the past. Brooks Robinson was known for the very short bill on his helmet, and Shieber remembers former Red Sox uniform supplier Tim McAuliffe sharing how many Red Sox players had extremely specific wishes for their caps.

"He mentioned that most of the bills are three inches, but **Ted Williams** liked three-and-an-eighth, and **Johnny Pesky** liked two and three-quarters," Shieber said. "I don't even know if I can tell the difference between three-and-a-half and three, but you know who could? Ted Williams, I'm sure."

All this set the stage for the company that is still synonymous with big league ballcaps: New Era.



II. A New Era

Founded in 1920 by Ehrhardt Koch, a German immigrant living in Buffalo, N.Y., New Era started as your classic haberdasher, making all manner of caps. The company is still in the Koch family, with Ehrhardt's great grandson, Chris, who took over the company in 1993.

"We were making a lot of different kinds of hats," Wannemacher said. "Some old, the Paperboy kind of hats, the Gatsby hats and stuff. But you've got to remember, there were probably 10 other companies in Buffalo doing the same thing. And in New York City, there were probably 30 little haberdasheries that were making hats. And actually, every city where there was a baseball team had the same type of thing. So, there was a lot of competition."

As revenues started to fall in the 1930s, Harold Koch -- Ehrhardt's son -- knew he needed to find a new revenue source. He noticed how popular baseball and its caps were becoming, so he set his sights on that market.

"He developed a cap based on the Brooklyn-style cap, which he felt was probably closest to what we were doing, most popular from what he could see across the market and fit in nicely with our manufacturing process," Wannemacher said. "They were actually savvy enough back then to understand that if you want to sell a baseball cap, you should probably get it on a baseball player's head."

With Cleveland being the closest big league team to the store, Koch took a train down to Cleveland and tried to woo the team. It worked: When he left, he had sold New Era's first big league cap to the Indians, debuting a red-and-navy model in 1934.

"That's where we got our foot in the door with baseball in Cleveland," Wannemacher said. "Then subsequently, every year after that, we would pick up a team or two here and there. The story goes that once we got a team, we never lost it. A lot of it had to do with quality and being able to manufacture this stuff. They developed a system here, kind of Henry Ford-style on how to produce the hats en-masse, which helped us out a lot."

Those with sharp eyes may notice something, though: This Cleveland cap looks awfully floppy and doesn't have the distinctive crown that players wear today. That's because the 59Fifty -- the cap worn by all Major League ballplayers -- was nearly 20 years away from being developed.

Koch had noticed that caps often looked flat upon a ballplayer's head, with the logo laying back and almost looking up to the sky. He wanted to combat that, so he constructed a crown to maintain the shape of the cap and give team logos a perfect, forehead-sized billboard to be displayed from.

"Harold didn't design this to be an iconic product. He designed it through practicality and a love of design," Maidment said. "Let's design something beautiful, and it *becomes* iconic. This was all about how the logos have got to be upright, we've got to be able to see them."

Thinking of a player's forehead as the advertising space for the logo inspired Koch to build the cap with buckram in the front, so that it would remain structured no matter whose head it was on.

"In the early days, it was meshed horsehair that they would actually just sew in to the hat," Wannemacher said. "Now it's a space-age polymer or whatever we use, sort of a real stiff piece that's glued into the front of the cap after the embroidery is done. That was meant to really showcase the team's logo on the front of the hat."

While the 59Fifty would officially debut for a handful of teams in 1954, it actually was first seen on a St. Louis Browns cap in 1947.

Perhaps most surprising is just how similar today's 59Fifty caps are compared to the early models. Despite huge advances in manufacturing techniques, materials, and even fashion trends, the silhouette remains virtually unchanged nearly 80 years later.

"If you were to take a pattern from back then and compare it to a pattern today, they're almost identical," Wannemacher said. "There may be some variances because we have contoured it a little bit. Back in the '90s and '80s, they had what was called a mushroom front, which has a real high front."

Other than that small adjustment to the cap, there are two more moments that really changed the look of the caps on the field. The first came in 1993, when New Era became the official cap supplier for all of Major League Baseball. That was also when the MLB Logo -- or "The Batterman" -- was added to the back of the caps to mark them as the only official on-field cap for MLB.

"Having that [logo] was key to the authenticity," Maidment said. "Absolutely no question as I can't imagine it not being there. There's a whole collecting culture that debate on a daily basis whether it should be embroidered high like it is sometimes or flat embroidery. That's how much it means that there's very passionate debates about raised embroidery, flat embroidery. I love it."

The next came in 2007 when New Era swapped out wool for the current polyester blend they use today, turning the cap into an actual piece of performance fabric. That also saw the end of the green and gray underbill, which was replaced with black. Studies had proven black was actually the best at keeping the sun out of a ballplayer's eyes.

THIS WEEK'S TRVIA CHALLENGE ANSWERS

Name the five active pitchers who have struck out 300 or more batters in a season:

Astros 2019 **Gerrit Cole** (326 in 2019)
Boston 2017 **Chris Sale** (308 in '17)
Dodgers 2015 **Clayton Kershaw** (301 in '15)
Nationals 2018 **Max Scherzer** (300 in '18)
Astros 2019 **Justin Verlander**(300 in '19)

I am in the Hall of Fame.

I won a Cy Young in 1962, with a league leading 25 wins.

I led the majors in games started 1962-63-64-65, innings pitched 62 & 64

I pitched in 5 World Series including 3 winners, my first when I was 19 years old.

I won 209 games, 2.95 ERA with 2486 strikeouts in 3432 innings pitched.

Who am I?

Don Drysdale

Clayton Kershaw passed **Jim Bunning** this week for 21st on the all-time strikeouts list with 2863. Your challenge—how many of the 20 pitchers ahead of Kershaw can you name? Don't over think this—long career, lots of strikeouts, logical names. You'll get a dozen before you know it.

3 are active, only 2 retired before 1970, 3 are lefties.

Nolan Ryan	5714
Randy Johnson	4875
Roger Clemens	4672
Steve Carlton	4136
Bert Blyleven	3701
Tom Seaver	3640
Don Sutton	3574
Gaylord Perry	3534
Walter Johnson	3508
Greg Maddux	3371
Phil Niekro	3342
Max Scherzer	3213
Justin Verlander	3210
Ferguson Jenkins	3192
Pedro Martinez	3154
Bob Gibson	3117
Curt Schilling	3116
CC Sabathia	3093
John Smoltz	3084
Zack Greinke	2909

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