

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

6.25.2023

Good morning baseball fans,

In this week's issue--Posnanski on **Joey Votto**, streaks, **Lou Gehrig's** run as RBI champ.

In Long Reads groundskeeping and two pieces on equipment—evolution of catcher's gear and the latest thing in bat grips.

Before you watch the Cards and the Cubs this morning (10:10 am eastern time start from London), pour a quick coffee and enjoy Tidbits.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE

I am one of 9 members of the 600 HR club.

I am the only player to hit 60 or more HRs in a season 3 times.

I did not lead the league in homers any of those 60 HR seasons.

I hit 292 homers he hit between 1998 and 2002, the most over any five-year span in history. Further, my 279 homers between 1997 and 2001 and 266 homers between 1999 and 2003 rank second and third, respectively.

I won MVP in 1998

Who am I?

There have been a dozen instances since 1950 that a franchise had back-to-back rookies of the year. Some are well known—**Orlando Cepeda and Willie McCovey** in 1958-59, **Darryl Strawberry and Dwight Gooden** in 1983-84, **Cory Seager and Cody Bellinger** in 2016-17.

The Oakland A's managed 3 in a row with **Jose Canseco, Mark McGwire and Walt Weiss** in 1986-87-88, The Dodgers had 4 straight with Rick Sutcliffe, Steve Howe, Fernando Valenzuela and Steve Sax in 1979-80-81-82.

The longest string was 5 straight by the Dodgers. Can you name them:

1992 righty first baseman played 12 years for the Dodgers.

1993 catcher, 12x All-Star, Hall of Fame.

1994 right-handed right fielder who after 7 seasons with the Dodgers played for the Blue Jays, Yankees, D'backs, Pirates, Angels, Braves. Son played in the 2015 World Series for the Royals.

1995 right-handed pitcher who won 123 games over 12 seasons, first Japanese major leaguer to permanently relocate to MLB, threw two no-hitters.

1996 left-handed outfielder, played in 2003 World Series for Marlins against Yankees, had 871 career hits for 8 teams.

They bounced around. Here are six players who played for at least 10 teams but had at least 5 years with at least one:

Lefty batting OF/1B/PH, 12 teams. A's 5 seasons. Expos 1992 to Nationals 2011. Played in the 2008 and 2009 World Series with Phillies.

Left-handed centerfielder, 11 teams. Indians 10 seasons. Astros 1991 to Indians 2007. Led AL in stolen bases five straight seasons. 5 Gold Gloves, 2428 career hits.

Right-handed starting pitcher, 11 teams. Indians 6 seasons. Indians 1997 to Rangers 2011. Won 2005 Cy Young with Angels, 244-188 with 2535 career strikeouts.

right-handed 1B/3B/C, 11 teams. Cards 7 seasons. Cards 1989 to Mets 2004. Played in the post-season 1996 Orioles, 1998-99 Rangers, 2000 Mets.

lefty pitcher, 11 teams. Phillies 6 seasons, Giants 5 seasons. 1986 Giants to 2006 D'backs. Pitched in 1993 World Series with Phillies, 1999 with Braves. Started 332 games, relieved in 128.

right-handed LF/3B, 10 teams. Dodgers 8 seasons. Dodgers 1959 to Royals 1976. 1962 & 1963 NL batting champion, 2121 career hits.

(answers at bottom)

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

Best idea of the week (from Joe Posnanski newsletter). Re-name the Ford Frick Award for contributions to broadcasting to the Vin Scully Award.

Frick was not a broadcaster—he was a sports writer before working his way up to NL league president and then the third Commissioner (9/20/1951-11/16/1965).

I tried Immaculategridbaseball.com this week. Clever game—I'm sure you could burn a ton of otherwise productive time but fun to try.

Yesterday's 9-1 Cubs win over the Cards in London drew MLB's largest crowd of the season, just under 55,000. Cardinals first baseman **Paul Goldschmidt** became the first player in MLB history to play a regular-season game in five different countries (USA, Australia, Canada, Mexico, England).

We're pretty familiar with the Nationals' presidential mascot race in Washington, but have you ever seen the King of England cross the finish line first during a Major League game? That's exactly what happened when King Henry VIII edged out Winston Churchill at London Stadium.

MLB is in the planning stages for a series in Paris in 2025.

Jim "Catfish" Hunter was the first pitcher since 1915 to win 200 games by his 31st birthday.

If not for the coverage of the Athletics and their proposed move to Las Vegas, the Royals' ineptitude this season would garner more attention. With its worst 73-game mark in franchise history, Kansas City (20-53) is on pace for 118 losses, which would blow away its previous high of 106 in 2005.

Lance Lynn has not been great this year. The White Sox starter has a 6.75 ERA, second worst in the majors. Yesterday though, he was incredible, fanning 16 Mariners, which ties the franchise record. Jack Harshman struck out 16 against the Red Sox in 1954. The White Sox lost the game 5-1 because that is the kind of season they are having.

Balls were flying Saturday in Colorado. The Angels scored 13 runs in the third inning of Saturday's game against the Rockies at Coors Field en-route to a 25-1 win. Here's what you need to know:

Los Angeles became the only MLB team in the modern era to score 20-plus runs over a two-inning span.

Colorado's sole run came off a homer by **Brenton Doyle** off the Angels' **Kolton Ingram** in the eighth inning.

The Angels improved to 42-36, second in the American League West, while the Rockies (30-49) sit at the bottom of the National League West.

The Angels set the club record for both runs and hits (28) in a game. The 24-run margin of victory was also the largest in franchise history and the third largest by any club since 1900.

The Angels scored 23 runs through their first four innings, which was the third-most in MLB history, behind only the Cubs (25) on Aug. 25, 1922, and the Pirates (24) on June 6, 1894. And their 21 runs across two consecutive innings is tied for the most in MLB history with those 1894 Pirates.

Notable performances included **Mickey Moniak and Hunter Renfroe**, who both went 5-for-5. Moniak hit three doubles and a homer to tie the franchise record with four extra-base hits in a game. Moniak fell a triple shy of the cycle.

Mike Trout started off the epic third-inning outburst with a solo blast on a 1-0 fastball from right-hander Chase Anderson to open the frame, before **Brandon Drury** followed with a shot of his own on a first-pitch cutter. **Matt Thaiss** then jumped all over a first-pitch curveball for a dinger to give the Angels back-to-back-to-back homers for the second time this season. The back-to-back homers were hit on three consecutive pitches. The four homers in the inning tied an Angels franchise record, matching a feat also carried out on May 28, 2000, in Kansas City. The inning also saw the Angels rack up 10 hits and three walks.

It is a streaky game

Reds win 12 straight—longest win streak for Cincinnati since 1957. It's the franchise's third-longest winning streak since 1901.

Marlins got to 11 games over .500. The Marlins completed a three-game sweep Sunday, defeating the Nationals, 4-2, to move 10 games over .500 for the first time in 12 years. Oh, and they had a 12 game winning streak in one run games.

And in San Francisco they are happy, winning 10 straight, most in 19 years.

The Royals just lost 10 games in a row. They trailed the Angels 8-2 in the 7th inning and managed to win to break the streak. They'd lost a tidy *178 games in a row* in which they trailed by six runs or more in the seventh or later. Since 1914 no team on a double-digit losing streak had stopped that losing streak by winning a game from 6 runs back.

Jordan Lyles finally escaped from the shadow of unwanted history -- the Royals had not won with him on the mound this season, an 0-for-15 streak that had set an MLB record in the Live Ball era (since 1920) -- and he did so resoundingly with Kansas City's 9-4 victory over Tampa Bay. The Royals also lead the majors with 28 blown leads.

Speaking of the Reds, It took top prospect **Elly De La Cruz** only 15 Major League games to accomplish something not done by a Reds hitter in 34 years -- hit for the cycle. It happened on Friday night in a wild 11-10 win over the Braves at Great American Ball Park when the 21-year-old notched a double, home run, single and triple in his first four at-bats, leading the Reds to their 12th straight win -- their longest win streak since 1957.

On Friday, he became the first player in baseball history to hit for the cycle, steal a base and drive in four-plus runs within the first six innings of a game. The guy made his MLB debut 19 days ago and already has 23 hits, eight steals and a .359 batting average.

Before a raucous sellout crowd of 43,086 fans at Great American Ball Park 39-year-old **Joey Votto** hit a game-tying solo home run and a go-ahead three-run homer.

Yankees beat Seattle Tuesday night. It marked the seventh time this season that **Gerrit Cole** has started immediately following a Bombers loss; the Yanks are 7-0 in those games, with Cole posting a 4-0 record and a 1.87 ERA.

George Kirby hates walks so much, it just might fuel him to make history.

The Mariners right-hander has 75 strikeouts and only six walks in 87 2/3 innings entering his 15th start of the season Sunday against the Orioles. That's 12 1/2 strikeouts for every free pass, the best in the Majors by a mile -- Kirby's nearly doubling up the next-closest qualified starter, Twins righty **Joe Ryan**, who's at 6.67. Kirby hasn't walked a batter in four games. He hasn't walked more than one in a game all season.

Highest single-season K:BB ratio, AL/NL history

George Kirby, 2023 -- 12.50

Phil Hughes, 2014 -- 11.63

Bret Saberhagen, 1994 -- 11.00

Cliff Lee, 2010 -- 10.28
Jim Whitney, 1884 -- 10.00

I'm guessing Steve Cohen is getting impatient. With more than 45 percent of the season, they have the exact same record as the Pirates, a rebuilding club that's coming off two straight 100-loss campaigns.

Diamondbacks 15 games over .500 and first place in the NL west. Reminder--they lost 110 games in 2021.

Brave righty **Spencer Strider** is only the second pitcher in MLB history to get 300 Ks in his first 35 starts. The other is **Dwight Gooden**. There is a fairly obvious difference, though. Gooden pitched 248 innings in those 35 starts — 302 Ks in 248 innings is amazing even now, but it was basically impossible when batters struck out so much less often. Strider, meanwhile, has pitched only 191 2/3 innings in his 35 starts — 301 Ks in 192 innings

Lou Gehrig was born in New York City. The “Iron Horse” played in a remarkable 2,130 consecutive games between 1925 and 1939, establishing an American League record by driving in at least 100 runs for 13 straight seasons (1926-38).

Albert Pujols and ARod hold the record with 14 seasons. Gehrig's 13 was matched by **Jimmie Foxx and Babe Ruth**.

Most consecutive seasons leading the league in RBIs since 1900:

Ty Cobb 1907-1908-1909

Rogers Hornsby 1920-1921-1922

Babe Ruth 1919-1920-1921

Joe Medwick 1936-1937-1938

George Foster 1976-1977-1978

Cecil Fielder 1990-1991-1992

Think the Yankees miss **Aaron Judge**? New York is 7-10 since June 4, the first contest that Judge missed after his crash into the fence at Dodger Stadium. Over that span the Yanks have averaged 3.25 runs per game, compared with 4.98 runs per game (and a 30-19 record) when Judge has been in the lineup.

New York's .195 batting average, .599 OPS and 39 runs scored since June 4 are all the lowest among Major League clubs.

Three Hall of Fame pitchers share the AL/NL record for the most strikeouts in a loss with 19--
Steve Carlton, Nolan Ryan and Randy Johnson.

Anthony Volpe (10 HRs, 15 stolen bases) is just the third Yankee rookie to reach 10/15. **Alfonso Soriano** in 2001 had 18 HRs and 43 stolen bases. **Tony Lazzeri** in 1926 had 18 HRs and 15 stolen bases.

The College World Series finals kicked off with a bang. No. 5 LSU beat No. 2 Florida 4-3 in 11 innings in Game 1 of the best-of-3 College World Series Championship Series. Ty Floyd struck out 17 Florida batters, and Josh Pearson snagged a game-saving 10th-inning catch to set up Cade Beloso for College World Series heroics. The 17 strikeouts tied the College World Series finals record for most by a pitcher in nine innings or fewer. Floyd's swinging third strike of Jac Caglianone was his 122nd pitch of the game.

The LSU first basemen delivered with a solo home run into the right-field stands in the 11th to secure a 4-3 Game 1 thriller over SEC rival Florida on Saturday.

Seven projected first round picks played in the final four:

- No. 1 - Dylan Crews, OF, LSU
- No. 2 - Paul Skenes, P, LSU
- No. 5 - Wyatt Langford, OF, Florida
- No. 7 - Rhett Lowder, P, Wake Forest
- No. 12 - Brayden Taylor, 3B, TCU
- No. 24 - Brock Wilken, 3B, Wake Forest
- No. 28 - Hurston Waldrep, P, Florida

At a nearby bar, though, LSU's fan base posted a generational performance.

Rocco's, an Omaha, Neb. establishment, recently started a contest to see which fan base of each MCWS participant could drink the most jello shots during the two-week competition. The reigning champion was Ole Miss, last year's national title winner, with 18,777 shots purchased.

On the competition's *fourth day*, LSU surpassed Ole Miss' total. An hour before first pitch, LSU fans — aided by Raising Cane's founder Todd Graves — pushed their total to 21,435.

Excellent trivia question --

Who is the only player to win the College World Series and go first in the Draft in the same year?

- A. **Rick Monday**
- B. **Bob Horner**
- C. **Phil Nevin**
- D. **Dansby Swanson**

The answer is Rick Monday

The first pick in the very first Draft in 1965, Monday also won the College World Series that June with Arizona State. Horner (1978), Nevin (1992) and Swanson (2015) came close, as they were all No. 1 overall selections whose teams lost in the CWS finals.

Over Father's Day weekend, America's national pastime set some notable attendance milestones.

Perhaps the best among them? MLB had 603,303 fans attend Sunday's 16 games, the highest attendance total on any Sunday since Sept. 28, 2008 (612,669) -- the final full day of that year's regular season.

Besides record-setting attendance marks, one more trait that June 18, 2023, and Sept. 28, 2008, had in common is that both days had 16 games, specifically due to a Red Sox-Yankees doubleheader occurring on each day. But as for some nuggets more specific to this past weekend, try the following:

MLB drew 1,588,440 fans from Friday-Sunday, an average of 35,299 per game across 45 games played. This was the largest total of fans in a weekend before July since June 16-18, 2017 (1,603,962 fans in 46 games).

In terms of average fans per game, this weekend's mark of 35,299 was MLB's highest in a weekend before July since June 24-26, 2016 (35,441 per game).

MLB averaged 37,706 fans per game across Sunday's action, the highest such number on a Sunday at any point of the regular season since June 15, 2014 (38,174 per game).

And, finally, MLB has had fan attendance totals north of 1.5 million people for two consecutive weekends -- its first time having back-to-back such weekends since August 2017.

Corbin Carroll of the D'backs is the favorite to win NL rookie of the year. Interesting twist from the latest CBA-- If a player wins rookie of the year or finishes in the top three for MVP, he also will net the team an extra draft pick under the prospect promotion initiative, a new element in the collective bargaining agreement.

The initiative, designed to curb service-time manipulation, honors teams that promote rookie-eligible players in time to get a full year of major-league service. Such players must enter the season with fewer than 60 days of major-league time (Carroll had 38) and be included on preseason top 100 prospect lists by two or more of Baseball America, ESPN and MLB.com.

A player's rookie of the year award or top three MVP or Cy Young finish in any pre-arbitration season gets the team the extra selection, but only once. An individual player such as Carroll cannot qualify his team for multiple picks.

The Mariners were the first team to benefit from the initiative after promoting **Julio Rodríguez** to their Opening Day roster last season. Rodríguez won AL rookie of the year, netting the Mariners the 29th overall pick and accompanying \$2.8 million slot bonus value in this year's draft.

Speaking of Rodríguez, he is the only player in MLB in the top 10% in all four:

Exit velocity

Sprint speed

Outs above average

Arm strength

On June 16, 1991, **Otis Nixon** became the first player in 89 years to steal six bases in an MLB game. The most recent player to tie Nixon's record--**Carl Crawford**, who did it on May 3, 2009.

Only four players have recorded six steals in a single game: Nixon, Crawford, **Eric Young Sr. and Eddie Collins**. Collins did it twice in a span of less than two weeks on Sept. 11 and 22, 1912. There have been 28 five-steal games by 25 different players, most recently **Billy Hamilton** in 2015.

Might be a good time for St. Louis to get it in gear. The Cards have endured just one losing season this century, in 2007, and have reached the playoffs in each of the past four years.

Yankees utilityman **Isiah Kiner-Falefa**'s ninth inning. Pitching in the top of the ninth inning in a 10-0 blowout against the Mariners, he struck out **Eugenio Suárez**. Then he hit a two-run homer in the bottom of the inning. He's the first Yankees pitcher to hit a home run **since Lindy McDaniel** in 1972 and the first Yankees pitcher with a strikeout and a home run in the same inning **since Mel Stottlemyre** in '71.

The Orioles have stolen five bases in a game 4 times this season. They had done that 6 times combined over the last 20 years.

The D'backs are first in stolen base success rate (86 percent) among teams that have attempted at least 65 steals.

And their opponents' stolen-base success rate is only 67 percent — at a time when the league average is 79.6 percent. No team in the big leagues has defended the stolen base better than the Diamondbacks.

Who leads the NL in stolen bases? That would be the Reds, with 78. That's 20 more than they stole all last season.

Braxton Garrett became the first left-hander in Marlins history to strike out 13 and walk none as the Marlins beat the Pirates 6-4 last night. The Marlins are now 43-33 — better than every NL team except the Braves and Diamondbacks.

As **Luis Arráez** of the Marlins chases .400 a note on today's environment--The MLB-wide batting average this year is .247. When **Ted Williams** did it, it was .262. When **George Brett** came close, it was .265. The steam of 100 mph relievers has an impact.

FIVE-HIT GAMES

Henry Aaron — 3 in his 23-year career

Miguel Cabrera — 2 in his 21-year career

Arraez — 3 in the last three weeks

Arraez has yet to strike out twice in a game this season and has never struck out three times in a game over five seasons in the majors. He leads the majors with 32 multi-hit games this season.

Brewers/Twins game today, the winning pitcher was Bailey Ober, the losing pitcher Colin Rea, and the save went to Griffin Jax. Is 10 letters the fewest combined for W/L/S surnames?

It's happened five other times since the dawn of the modern save rule in 1969. Of course, you need to know the combos.

DATE — WP/LP/SV

4/9/88 — Key/Lea/Ward

9/1/01 — Seay/Tam/Yan

7/9/03 — Lyon/Tam/Kim
4/17/17 — Lynn/Nova/Oh
9/20/21 — Baz/Ray/Enns

Zach Remillard's first day in the big leagues for the White Sox.

Fourth inning: Tim Anderson leaves with shoulder soreness, propelling the White Sox rookie into his first game ... after eight seasons in the minor leagues. Beautiful.

Ninth inning: Remillard whacks a game-tying single off **Paul Sewald**.

11th inning: Strokes a game-winning single off **Tayler Saucedo**.

So what's up with that? Here's what. How many other players in the modern era have had a game-tying hit and a go-ahead hit in the ninth inning or later of their big-league debut? Yep, that would be none, ever.

Tommy Kahnle pitching for the Yankees against the Red Sox became the first reliever in history to have an inning with three strikeouts—swinging, called strike three, third strike on pitch clock violation. (Houston's **Luis Garcia** had one as a starter on April 19.)

Games with a walk-off HR and at least one more HR

Mike Yastrzemski — 2
Carl Yastrzemski — 0

Last year, the Reds lost 100 games. This year, they're in the midst of a double-digit winning streak. You don't see that much. It's only happened four times since the 1890 Louisville Colonels did it *twice*:

1986 Indians
2003 Brewers
2022 Orioles
2023 Reds

In other words ... twice in 130 years ... and now ... *two years in a row*.

Those 1899 Cleveland Spiders never did this one!

One minute, the A's record for the year was (gasp) *12 and 50!* ... Next thing we knew, they were winning *seven games in a row* ... and doing it against *three teams that started those series in first place* (Pirates, Brewers, Rays).

From Jayson Stark--So I'm proclaiming this now: This is going to go down as the Strangest But Truest thing that will happen this year, if not this century.

Not to imply it had been a while since a team with as grim a winning percentage as these A's (.194) ripped off a win streak that long. But the last time it happened, there were only 44 states, there was no such thing as an "earned run," and Betty White hadn't been born yet.

That was 1895, according to the Elias Sports Bureau, when **Ducky Holmes'** Louisville Colonels pulled it off. But now, here's the even Stranger But Truer part.

Even with those seven wins in a row, the A's are *still* on pace to go 40-122. And that's mind-blowing.

I don't know what got into me, but I decided to look at the longest winning streak by all 57 teams in history that even lost as many as 106 games in a season. And exactly one of them somehow won seven games in a row. That was **Bobo Osborne's** 1963 Senators, who went 56-106 ... which makes them practically the 1998 Yankees compared to the 2023 A's.

A group of former professional scouts has brought a class-action lawsuit alleging violations of age discrimination laws by commissioner Rob Manfred and all 30 Major League Baseball clubs.

The 17 plaintiffs, who are ages 55 to 71, cite examples that include younger scouts taking older scouts' jobs because the older scouts lacked the ability to adapt to new "Moneyball"-inspired

analytics scouting tools, post-pandemic rehiring patterns that favored younger scouts, and the existence of a “blacklist” that steered clubs away from older scouts.

Connor Wong of the Red Sox started a 2-6-3 double play against the Twins on Tuesday, jumping out from behind the plate to snare a ball tapped a few feet by **Max Kepler** and firing it to second base.

The first such play made by a Red Sox catcher since May 5, 1967, also against the Twins in Minnesota. They played at Metropolitan Stadium then.

Twins pitcher **Mudcat Grant** hit a ball in front of the plate. **Bob Tillman** threw to **Rico Petrocelli** and the relay went to **George Scott**.

The Red Sox went from 1901 until nearly halfway through this season without having any players named Hamilton on their roster. Then **David Hamilton** was called up on Wednesday and **Caleb Hamilton** on Thursday.

According to Baseball-Reference.com, David Hamilton was the 22,985th player in major league history. It’s amazing to think every player in history could fit in Fenway Park with plenty of room to spare.

Editor’s note—a subscriber loaned me this fun book. Interviews with 65 players from the 1940s and 1950s I pulled a few highlights...

We Played the Game

65 Players Remember Baseball’s Greatest Era

Edited by Danny Perry

1942-1948 **Johnny Sain** threw a complete game in all 64 of his wins.

Back from WWII, Sain pitched 265 innings, 24 complete games in 34 starts, 2.21 ERA with 20 wins. Sain won 20 games 4 times 1946-1950.

Sain spoke of pitching in front of 82,000 fans at Municipal Stadium in Cleveland, World Series record attendance.

Ewell Blackwell pitching for the 1947 Reds went 22-6, won 16 straight games to lead the NL in wins and strikeouts. H threw a no-hitter against the Braves on June 18. Then on June 22 in his next start he had a no-hitter in the 9th against the Dodgers but he bobbled a comebacker from **Eddie Stanky** so he didn't match **Johnny Vander Meer's** back t back no no's.

1949 **Bob Turley**, pitching for Aberdeen, SD went 25-3, struck out 200, batted .300 and completed every game he pitched in.

1948 St. Louis Browns won 60 games and drew very few fans. 7 games played in Cleveland drew more than the Browns drew all year.

1947 **Gus Zernial** playing for the Hollywood Stars of the Pacific Coast League went to bat 737 times in a 189 game season. He had 237 hits, 40 HRs, 50 doubles and drove in 159 runs.

1949 **Johnny Antonelli and Del Crandal**, both 19, became the youngest battery in history.

Ryne Duren, famous for throwing hard and being crazy wild. Signed by the St. Louis Browns after a scout saw him whiff 12 in a row in a high school game. The first professional game he saw he pitched in.

1950 Braves. **Warren Spahn** 21 wins/293 innings, **Vern Bickford** 19 wins/311 innings, **Johnny Sain** 20 wins/279 innings with 75 complete games between them.

1951 Giants. Lose opening day. Win game two, then lose 11 straight. Trailed Dodgers by 13 ½ games in August. Then they ran 16 wins in a row. It came down to the final day of the season. Giants beat the Braves in Boston 3-2. The Dodgers won in Philadelphia on a **Jackie Robinson** 14th inning HR and the regular season ended in a tie. Best of 3...Giants won game one 3-1, Dodgers won 10-0 and it all came down to game 3. Dodgers pulled ahead 4-1 in the 8th behind

Don Newcomb. Then reliever **Ralph Branca** gave up the 'shot heard round the world' to **Bobby Thomson** and the Giants win the pennant.

Dick Groat, Pirates shortstop, was an All-American basketball player at Duke who played a season in the NBA for the Ft. Wayne Pistons.

After winning his 7th straight HR title **Ralph Kiner** went to GM Branch Rickey for a raise. The response—"we finished last with you, we can finish last without you."

WHITE SOX SIGN BOY BATTLING CANCER TO HONORARY ONE DAY CONTRACT

Jake Burger, Brady Nelson's favorite player, hosts 14-year-old, family before game

The White Sox made four roster moves prior to Monday's series opener against the Rangers at Guaranteed Rate Field, but none of them had the impact of the honorary one-day contract they extended to 14-year-old Brady Nelson. His contract was signed in the presence of White Sox general manager Rick Hahn and manager **Pedro Grifol**.

Nelson, a native of Norwood Park, Ill., has been battling glioblastoma, an aggressive form of brain cancer, since his diagnosis in December 2020 and is scheduled for neurosurgery in the days following his experience Monday with the White Sox. The young man was hosted by **Jake Burger**, Brady's favorite player, who took Brady and his family -- his mom, Christina, his dad, Eric, his sister, Anna Belle, his brother Jack -- around the clubhouse to get pregame autographs and meet players.

Closer **Liam Hendriks**, who is in remission from stage 4 non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, also spent a significant amount of time chatting with Brady. He took batting practice and not only connected consistently against third-base coach Eddie Rodriguez throwing the pitches, but knocked a couple on the fly to the edge of the outfield grass just behind the infield dirt. Brady also did some infield work with **Zach Remillard** and Burger.

According to the release for this White Sox Ultimate Wish fulfillment as part of the Sox Serve week, Nelson is "a lifelong White Sox fan and second baseman who would often complete his regimen of radiation and chemotherapy in a baseball uniform, so as not to miss time getting to practices after treatment."

It was **Eloy Jiménez** who dedicated his first home run of the 2021 season to Brady in Kansas City, making good on a promise Jiménez made to Brady on April 10. Brady was battling cancer

and Jiménez was coming back from surgery to repair a torn left pectoral tendon, with Brady providing inspiration to the slugger.



JOE POSNANSKI ON JOEY VOTTO

Joey Votto is back, and at age 39 he looks better than ever, and it got me thinking about something. To get the idea started, here are five players between 66 and 68 bWAR:

- **Duke Snider**, 65.9 WAR
- **Willie Randolph**, 65.9 WAR
- **Dwight Evans**, 67.2 WAR
- **Ernie Banks**, 67.7 WAR
- **Graig Nettles**, 67.9 WAR

Now, look at those five players. Two are in the Hall of Fame. Three are not. The two who are in the Hall of Fame are legends. And the three who are not in the Hall of Fame have never been all that close to getting elected.

Dwight Evans probably has been closest of the three: In 2020, he was on the veterans committee ballot, and he got eight votes — just four short of induction. But then, bizarrely, he was left entirely off the 2022 ballot. Nettles topped out at 8% on the BBWAA ballot and has never appeared on a veterans ballot. Randolph got just five votes the one year he was on the ballot and has also never appeared on a veterans ballot.

What strikes me about this is that, intuitively, even if you believe in the Hall of Fame cases of Nettles, Evans and Randolph (and I do), you probably also appreciate that they are not Ernie Banks, and they are not Duke Snider. They're just not. Banks and Snider are, to use that Hall word, FAMOUS in ways that Evans, Nettles and Randolph are not.

Why are they more famous? I mean, Nettles, Randolph and Evans played for the Yankees and Red Sox, the two biggest teams in the sport. Nettles had one of the most famous defensive performances in World Series history and was named MVP of the 1981 ALCS. Randolph, like Nettles, was the Yankees' captain, and he started four All-Star Games. Evans won eight Gold Gloves and hit 385 home runs. Why are Banks and Snider more famous?

Well, I think it comes down to a lot of things. With Banks, it's easy — career WAR doesn't tell his story at all. He was a transcendent shortstop until age 30, a pioneer, a force of nature, a member of the 500-homer club when that was an exclusive thing, and one of the most beloved players who ever lived. I mean, he's Mr. Cub. It's a beautiful day for baseball. Let's play two.

With Snider, it's a little more complicated — he was not cheery and optimistic like Banks, and he had his spats with the fans (he once said Brooklyn fans did not deserve a pennant) and the press. But he had a playing style that inspired awe, and the nickname to match. He was Philip

Roth's hero. He was the third man in the song, "Talkin' Baseball (Willie, Mickey and the Duke). He was center stage for *The Boys of Summer*.

"Edwin Donald Snider was his name," Roger Kahn wrote in that classic book, "but Duke suited. His hair had started graying when he was twenty-five, but his body bespoke supple youth. As Duke moved in his long-striding way, one saw the quarterback, the basketball captain, the Olympian. *Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it*. 'If' was a perfect poem for the Duker."

My point is: However you feel about WAR, I have really come around to the idea that you can have two players whose VALUE AS PLAYERS is roughly equal, and one of them can be a surefire Hall of Famer while the other one is not. Was **Reggie Smith**, when you take defense and baserunning into consideration, as valuable a player as **Willie McCovey**? I could buy that argument. Which one am I putting in the Hall of Fame? Willie McCovey 10 out of 10 times.

What does this have to do with Joey Votto?

Well, Votto is roughly in the same WAR range as the five players I mentioned above. He has 64.7 WAR right now, but, as he himself will often tell me, he's not retired yet. On Monday he returned to the Reds' lineup, and he went two-for-three with a homer and the game-winning, two-run single. The Reds have now won nine games in a row, and they're in first place in the division, and with **Elly De La Cruz** up and Votto back, they're about as much fun to watch as any team in baseball.

And every time Votto's name comes up, someone, somewhere, is asking: Is he a Hall of Famer?

I have been insisting that he is a Hall of Famer for a long time now, but I've got a more complete thought on that. Yes, Votto is a Hall of Famer, because he's one of the greatest hitters we've ever seen. The man has led the league in on-base percentage SEVEN TIMES. I mean, **Rod Carew** famously won seven batting titles, Votto should be as famous for winning seven on-base titles. I mean, look at his company:

Most on-base percentage crowns:

1. **Ted Williams**, 12
2. **Babe Ruth and Barry Bonds**, 10

3. **Rogers Hornsby**, 9
4. **Ty Cobb and Joey Votto**, 7
5. **Stan Musial and Wade Boggs**, 6

Votto won the MVP award in 2010, he certainly could have won a second in 2017 (he lost by two points to **Giancarlo Stanton**), he won a Gold Glove and probably should have won one or two more, his career 145 OPS+ is tied with Albert Pujols.

I've made these arguments and more like them, and I'm sure I will continue to do so ... but there's something flat and impersonal about them. I argue about his on-base percentage, you argue back that his career batting average dropped below .300, I argue about his all-around game, you argue that he has "only" 2,095 career hits and 343 career homers, I argue about his genius as a hitter, you argue that his career is relatively short and he made only six All-Star teams, and round and round and round we go.

But Joey Votto's career is BIGGER than that. Who is more fun? Who has been better for the game? In the end, what separates Banks and, to a slightly lesser extent, the Duke, is style, and style does matter. It's sports. It's entertainment. It's passion. Joey Votto brings a joy to baseball that lifts the whole sport, and absolutely that should matter when it comes to the Hall of Fame. To me, he's not just a Hall of Famer, he's a slam-dunk, no-doubt, first-ballot guy.

This week's birthdays

Rick Sutcliffe	67
Marty Barrett	65
Andres Galarraga	62
Ian Kinsler	51
Jacob deGrom	35

From www.todayinbaseballhistory.com

On June 25 in Baseball History...

- **1899** - The St. Louis Perfectos played the New York Giants in game one of a doubleheader, then the Cleveland Spiders in game two, losing to two different teams on the same date.
- **1903** - Boston Beaneater **Wiley Piatt** becomes the only 20th-century pitcher to lose two complete games in one day, falling to Pittsburgh 1-0 and 5-3.
- **1968** - San Francisco rookie **Bobby Bonds** becomes the second player to debut with a grand slam as teammate **Ray Sadecki** blanks the Dodgers 9-0. Bonds does it on his third at-bat. The only other player to hit a grand slam in his first major-league game was **William Duggelby** of the Philadelphia Nationals in 1898.
- **1976** - Ranger **Toby Harrah** becomes the first shortstop in major-league history to go through an entire doubleheader without a fielding chance. At the plate, Harrah makes up for the inactivity, collecting six hits, including a grand slam in the opener and another round-tripper in the nightcap. The Rangers beat the White Sox in the first game 8-4, but lose the nightcap 14-9.
- **1986** - The Phillies give 41-year-old **Steve Carlton** his unconditional release and call up Bruce Ruffin to take his place in the starting rotation.
- **1988** - **Cal Ripken, Jr.** plays in his 1,000th consecutive game, a 10-3 loss to Boston. Ripken's streak is the sixth-longest in major-league history.
- **1989** - The Mets' defense does not record a single assist in a 5-1 win over Philadelphia, tying the major-league record set by the Indians in 1945. New York pitchers retire the Phillies on 13 strikeouts, 12 fly outs, and two ground balls to first base.
- **1995** - Rockies first baseman **Andres Galarraga** becomes the fourth player to homer in three consecutive innings in an 11-3 win over the Padres. Galarraga, who had seven RBI in the game, went deep in the sixth, seventh and eighth innings and was on deck when the Rockies were retired in the ninth.
- **1997** - The Brewers scarcely even sniff a hit before **Jose Valentin** cues **Mike Mussina's** first offering of the eighth inning off the end of the bat into short right field for a single in Baltimore's 9-1 win. It marks the second time in less than a month that the Orioles ace righthander flirts with a no-hitter deep into a game. Mussina retired the first 25 Cleveland hitters at Camden Yards on May 30 before **Sandy Alomar's** one-out single in the ninth.

LONGER READS

THE DIRTY (AND GRASSY) SECREST BEHIND THE HOME FIELD ADVANTAGE

In an era of expertly manicured fields and shared knowledge among groundskeepers, crews have an unexpected tool in their arsenal: the ban on infield shifts.

David Waldstein, The New York Times

Greg Elliott, the forward-thinking head groundskeeper for the San Francisco Giants, flies a drone over the pristine grass at Oracle Park five days a week. The device is equipped with an infrared camera that measures the stress levels and overall health of the turf. In the first two months of this season, Elliott had detected a notable difference from the previous two years.

The grass in shallow right field was not as chopped up and worn down as it had been. The same went for the rounded edge of the outfield grass that meets the infield dirt behind the shortstop and second base positions, where infielders' spikes had previously dug in as the players awaited ground balls.

The improvement in those areas is perhaps the most surprising result of Major League Baseball's significant rule changes for this season. The ban on defensive shifts means infielders are no longer allowed to linger in those locations, which, combined with the pitch clock, is helping to improve field conditions throughout baseball.

"They are not playing on the grass anymore," Elliott said, "and it's really making a positive difference."

Long before the rule changes, Elliott and others worked to improve the process of cultivating and maintaining M.L.B.'s fields — an undertaking that has shown results in baseball's 28 natural grass stadiums. The shimmering emerald grasses and crushed-brick top dressing on the infields had always been breathtaking, but because of technological advances, like Elliott's drone, parks have become shrines to modern grass and dirt cultivation.

There are targeted fertilizers, designer dirts and organic pesticides. Robotic mowers work side by side with veteran groundskeepers. Fields look lusher and greener and remain so for longer periods, lending not only beauty but fairer play and uniformity from park to park.

"The materials, the tools and the equipment are all so improved, and you have better fields over the last 25 years," Murray Cook, M.L.B.'s field coordinator, said. "Everybody has got really nice fields now."

The Old Chicanery

With their varied surfaces and dimensions, baseball fields require some of the most meticulous care of any sports surface. For decades, grounds crews customized their fields to enhance the attributes of the home team. If your club's pitchers induced ground balls, you might leave the grass higher to slow them down. Basepaths could be sloped toward fair territory if your team liked to bunt, or the other way if you had trouble fielding them. The pitching mounds varied, often based on the proclivities of the home team's pitcher for that day.

Jim Palmer, a Hall of Fame pitcher for the Baltimore Orioles from 1965 to 1984, still remembers fighting with the mound at the old Tiger Stadium in Detroit. Palmer would kick and dig at it with his spikes, but the dirt in front of the pitching rubber would resist like concrete, at least for the first few innings.

“You just hoped you were still in the game by the fourth inning, when it would loosen up,” Palmer said. “Some mounds had different slopes, some were too high or too low or too loose. You had to figure it out as you went along.”

Tom Burns, a former head groundskeeper for Cleveland and the Texas Rangers, has been in the industry since 1978. He recalled the days when a groundskeeper’s main tools were a wheelbarrow and a metal rake and when managers sometimes asked the crews to tailor the field to their own preferences. Perhaps the modifications worked, but much of the time it was just gamesmanship.

Gaylord Perry, a Hall of Fame pitcher, wanted the infield grass as high as corn. Burns, who won the coveted Harry C. Gill award from the Sports Field Management Association in 2009, said the Cleveland grounds crew knew Perry’s preferences from his years pitching there. So, after he joined other teams, they leveraged that knowledge to tweak the star.

Perry loved to relax in the dugout hours before he pitched, and once, before a game in Cleveland, he sat in the visitors’ dugout early in the afternoon, taking in the view. Soon enough, the Cleveland grounds crew rolled out the mowers, driving them back and forth across the infield right in front of a grumbling Perry.

“What he didn’t know is that we had turned off the blades,” said Burns, now a specialist with DuraEdge Products, a manufacturer of specialized infield dirt for more than half the 30 clubs.

Perry had some tricks of his own. If the opposing pitcher was doing well, Perry would wait until his turn on the mound and then dig away at the other pitcher’s landing spot, covering it up or creating a ridge, Burns said. Few pitchers worry about such tactics now.

“There are little nuances here and there,” said Nicole Sherry, the head groundskeeper for the Baltimore Orioles. “But as far as tricking the field to manipulate it for your team, that’s in the past. Everything is done for safety and playability of the game. The aesthetics of the field comes last.”

High-Tech Grass and Remote Lasers

Today’s grass height is usually determined by the requirements and health of the plant, depending on whether it is Kentucky bluegrass or Bermuda. The bluegrass at Camden Yards grows about the length of a fingernail overnight, Sherry said, so they cut it back every day to about 1¼ inches.

Sherry, who has a degree in agriculture from the University of Delaware and is a member of the Sports Field Management Association, has been the head groundskeeper at Camden Yards since 2006 and started working on the crew in 2001. During that time she has seen remarkable advancements in growing methods. Fields are now sodded with genetically designed grass and nurtured with improved fertilizers that zero in on problem areas while crews employ sensors to measure moisture and other variables.

All of it, combined with years of gained expertise and an understanding of the climate surrounding each park, helps produce those luscious carpets of vivid green grass seen all across baseball.

But Baltimore's grass, a shining gem in the middle of Charm City, has one persistent pollutant: the sunflower seeds and gum spit out in volume by players and umpires during games. In some parks, waste like that is vacuumed up after games. In Baltimore, Sherry's crew picks it up — pounds of it — by hand. More than a dozen crew members with rubber gloves scour the fields for over an hour after every game.

"If we left every sunflower seed out there, the field would look like it was covered in snow," she said as she flicked at the grass behind first base, revealing some rogue shells expelled by an umpire the night before.

There are other culprits, too. Many groundskeepers chafe at a recent trend in which visiting coaches wander the outfield grass with range finders before games. The devices are used to help position the outfielders, and the coaches sometimes scuff out marks in the grass with their heels, blemishing the near-perfect sod.

But it isn't just the grass. Grounds crews are equally meticulous with the infield dirt. Sherry said infields must be watered, almost to the point of saturation, before games and covered with just the right amount of top dressing. She also noted that they lose moisture quickly, especially during day games, when the clay fries in the summer sun.

"The ball is coming off those bats way faster than it did in 2001," she said. "The infielders want the dirt muddy in the first inning, so if the ball is coming off the bat at 100 miles per hour, they feel more at ease in the field."

The amount of water poured on the dirt areas, especially in front of home plate, is one of the tools that grounds crews can still use to craft a favorable playing surface. Soaking the area in front of the plate theoretically slows the pace of the ball on its first bounce. Years ago, some crews watered the area into a swampy bayou. But most of the differences that exist today are negligible by comparison.

"A lot of fields have little differences, and sometimes you don't know until you see the ball go there," said Anthony Santander, an Orioles outfielder. "But the home teams, they know."

Sherry said pitching mounds required the most attention on any field, and get the most scrutiny. M.L.B. measures every mound in baseball, including in the bullpens, using laser technology called lidar, an acronym for light detection and ranging. Before the season, every field is mapped with lasers, and the information is used for a variety of purposes, including pitch tracking, home run distances and physical dimensions of the park.

From field offices in Colorado, M.L.B. can detect if the mound is a half-inch higher or lower than the 10 inches prescribed by the rule book.

“We want teams to have confidence, when they go on the road, the game environment has been evaluated,” Clay Nunnally, a baseball scientist at M.L.B., said. “What we found from using pretty sophisticated measurements is that the groundskeepers are incredibly good at laying out the field.”

More Events, More Stress

The rules on positioning, combined with the pitch clock speeding things up, have been good for the fields.

“Shorter games mean less wear and tear on the field,” Cook said, “so from an operation standpoint, it’s a plus.”

But some of that benefit is countered by teams seeking more profits by using the fields on off days to host concerts, monster truck exhibitions or soccer games. (The M.L.S. team New York City F.C. is splitting its home games between Yankee Stadium and Citi Field this year.)

All of it means a lot more work for the grounds crews. A normal soccer game entails players sliding, lunging and kicking out divots; the mound has to be taken down and reassembled; and grass must be placed over dirt areas. For concerts, boards are set atop the grass for hours at a time.

One day it’s a Bad Bunny concert at Yankee Stadium, the next day it’s a bad hop.

And groundskeepers shudder at the thought of motocross.

“The field used to be hallowed ground,” Burns said. “Now it’s another commodity for sale, another revenue stream.”

But groundskeepers are learning how to accommodate multiple events, and innovations in field maintenance help to counter the stresses.

In San Francisco, Elliott is at the forefront of baseball’s agricultural tech boom. In addition to the drone, he uses robotic mowers and Artificial Athlete, a device developed by Raw Stadia, a British company specializing in turf management for English soccer teams. Elliott places the

portable tool in 15 spots on the field, where it releases a Clegg impact hammer to test various properties of the surfaces, like density, shock absorption, spring rate and recovery time. The data can be combined with information on individual athletes to enhance performance and health.

Elliott also brews his own microbial slurries, which are injected into the irrigation system and then sprayed on the grass. The specific microscopic organisms, including nitrogen fixers, enhance plant growth and health.

“It’s preventative medicine,” he said, “like eating vegetables.”

Elliott shares all his information with colleagues around the league, and once a year they gather to share notes and compare best practices. Where there was once gamesmanship, there is now communal knowledge that helps ensure every M.L.B. field is a suitable stage for the games played on them.

“The players are the best athletes in the world,” Sherry said, “and we are all the best groundskeepers in the world.”

TOM VERDUCCI OF SPORTS ILLUSTRATED MAKES THE CASE FOR CORBIN CARROLL’S AWESOME ROOKIE SEASON BEING ONE OF THE BEST EVER

He plays for a first-place team and leads the league in slugging, OPS, OPS+ and win probability added, so it’s about time you consider him an MVP front-runner. No, it’s not **Ronald Acuña Jr.** of the Braves. It is **Corbin Carroll** of the Diamondbacks, the phenomenal rookie who has closed what was a huge gap between Acuña and the field in the MVP race.

Here is the tell-tale sign of true talent: The more pitchers see Carroll (and the more teams game-plan to stop him) the more they cannot figure him out. Carroll, an extra-base machine, is posting a monster June (.349/.414/.794) while creating his usual havoc on the bases with his elite speed.

At this rate—and especially as Arizona creates daylight in front of a Dodgers team in transition that will win closer to 90 games than its usual 100—Carroll has a fighting chance to join Fred Lynn (1974) and Ichiro Suzuki (2001) as the only players to win the Rookie of the Year and Most Valuable Player awards in the same season. He and the D-Backs are that good.

Carroll played in his 100th career game Saturday. Few players in the history of the game have made a 100-game impact with a combination of power and speed like Carroll. Start with this:

The complete list of players with at least 19 homers and 21 stolen bases in their first 100 games:

First 100 Games, at least 19 HR, 21 SB

HR SB TB OPS

Corbin Carroll, 2022–23 19 21 195 .937

Ellis Burks, 1987 19 21 197 .802

A little too arbitrary for you? Fine. Let's consider the best 100-game OPS since 1900 among players with the nice, round number of 20 stolen bases:

Year, obs

1. **Nap Lajoie** 1901 1.135
2. **Fernando Tatís Jr.** 2019–20 1.010
3. **Kal Daniels** 1986–87 .971
- Ed Delahanty** 1901 .971
5. **Kiki Cuyler** 1921–24 .963
6. **Benny Kauff** 1912–14 .961
- John McGraw** 1901–02 .961
8. **Corbin Carroll** 2022–23 .937

Through first 100 games, highest OPS with 20 or more stolen bases

Nap Lajoie and John McGraw? Dudes born in 1874 and 1873? Whoa. We're talking rare. That list puts Carroll among the three best 100-game starts in the past 100 years, at least among players with decent speed.

Too esoteric for you? O.K., try this. Simple. **Mike Trout** is the gold standard for great phenoms of this generation. Compare Carroll to Trout at the 100-game mark:

	HR	RBI	SB	AVG	OBP	SLG	OPS
Mike Trout	15	52	27	.302	.360	.497	.858
Corbin Carroll	19	52	21	.293	.372	.565	.937

Through first 100 games

Um, Carroll is off to a better 100-game start than the Millville Meteor. Let that sink in.

Now let's consider the entire universe of rookies who posted a .900 OPS with 40 steals. Don't worry. It's a short list:

	Year	ops	sb
Mitchell Page	1977	.926	42
Mike Trout	2012	.963	49
Corbin Carroll	2023	.975*	43*
*Projected			

Rookies with .900 OPS, 40 SB

What makes Carroll so special? He is a humble grinder who Arizona manager **Torey Lovullo** says shows up every day looking to get better. His skills are extraordinary. Carroll and **Matt Vierling** of the Tigers are the only qualified players who rank in the 80th percentile or better in max exit velocity, whiff rate and speed.

He is a 22-year-old throwback who hits with a below-average launch angle (11.2 degrees) and uses the whole field. (His hits by field: 30 to the pull side, 25 up the middle and 20 to the opposite field.) His swing is so technically sound with the way he swings on a level path through the zone that he is the rare young player who crushes high fastballs. In fact, Carroll slugs all kinds of fastballs better than everyone in baseball except Aaron Judge:

1. **Aaron Judge**, Yankees .851
2. Corbin Carroll, D-Backs .811
3. **Jorge Soler**, Marlins .728
4. **J.D. Martinez**, Dodgers .676

Highest SLG vs. Fastballs, 2023 (4-seamers and sinkers)

So, let's take the 100-game inventory of Carroll. He has a combination of power and speed like few players in the past century, he is off to a better start than Trout, he slugs fastballs like Judge and he is the player most responsible for his team sitting in first place, just as was **Fred Lynn** and **Ichiro Suzuki**. The Red Sox improved by 11 wins in Lynn's double-award season and the Mariners by 25 wins in Ichiro's "Hello, world" season. With Carroll, the D-Backs, winners of just

74 games last season, should slot somewhere in between in terms of win improvement. It's time for the Dodgers and the rest of us to take Carroll and the D-Backs very seriously.

THE EVOLUTION OF CATCHER'S EQUIPMENT

This article was written by Chuck Rosciam

This article was published in Summer 2010 Baseball Research Journal

Catchers have always put their bodies on the line. But early efforts to protect themselves met with a lot of flak.

*We used no mattress on our hands,
No cage upon our face;
We stood right up and caught the ball,
With courage and with grace.*
— Harry Ellard, "The Reds of Sixty-Nine" (1880s)

The field position denoted on your scorecard as 2 has never been an easy job. Errant balls, foul tips, and flying bats are all a source of pain for catchers. Collisions at the plate occur with regularity, some more painful than others. The backstops from baseball's first fifty years endured daily physical punishment, all without the luxury of today's protective equipment. Virtues such as strength, stamina, and courage in collisions were in high demand.

No protection short of a bunker could have spared twenty-three-year-old **Ray Fosse** the career-impacting injury he sustained in the 1970 All-Star Game. Catcher-turned-announcer **Tim McCarver** says he still suffers from nerve damage in his neck caused by back-to-back plate collisions a quarter of a century ago. Today, catchers often put their bodies literally on the line, most often the one on the third-base side.



Catchers are expected to take their lumps without grumbling. But the early efforts of catchers to protect themselves met with a lot of flak. A typical reaction came from the crowd at the Polo Grounds when the New York Giants opened the 1907 season against the Philadelphia Phillies. As the Giants took the field, star catcher and Hall of Famer **Roger Bresnahan** looked more like a goaltender than a backstop when he squatted behind the plate in a pair of thickly upholstered shin guards.

It was the first time a catcher had dared to don the protective gear in open view, and the crowd's reaction came as quickly as a foul tip and just as nasty. "Spectators howled with delight when a foul tip in the fifth inning rapped the protectors sharply," reported the New York Times. Bresnahan, more concerned about his livelihood than remarks about his manliness, ignored the insults from fans and foes.

Bresnahan's shin guards were the final pieces of the catcher's major armor, following the glove, mask, and chest protector.

This armor kit was lovingly dubbed "the tools of ignorance" by **Herold "Muddy" Ruel**, a backstop and a lawyer who caught for greats like **Walter Johnson** with the Washington Nationals in the 1920s. Ruel probably would have stayed a lawyer if he'd caught in the late 1860s when catchers had no equipment.

New York Mutuals catcher **Nat Hicks** was the first backstop to start creeping closer to batters, in the 1870s. Before Hicks, catchers stood far behind the hitters, fielding pitches on the bounce. Hicks paid for his fearlessness with repeated and sometimes severe damage to his face and a near-loss of his right eye in 1873.



Most backstops began crowding the plate in the early 1880s, especially when a rules change dictated that the final strike, including foul tips, had to be caught on a fly for a putout. Pitchers had begun throwing overhand by 1884, when, after a rule change in the National League, all restrictions on the pitcher's delivery were removed and he could throw underhand, sidearm, or completely overhand, as he wished. Also, the consensus is that the mound was created in 1893 or shortly thereafter. Up until that year the pitcher's position was known as the pitcher's box. In 1893 the pitcher's rear foot was moved farther from home plate to its current distance of 60 feet, 6 inches. Moving closer to the batter enabled catchers to better frame the pitches, field bunts, and throw out base-stealers.

In 1901 the National League instituted a regulation that a "catcher must stand within the lines of his position whenever the pitcher delivers the ball and within ten feet of the home base." The American League adopted this rule the following year. Current rules state that the "catcher shall station himself directly back of the plate . . . with both feet within the lines of the catcher's box until the ball leaves the pitcher's hand" (Rule 4.03[a]). The catcher's box measures 43 inches across and 8 feet long from the plate backward.

MASKED MEN



The first piece of protection for catchers, a rubber mouth protector, dates to the 1870s, purloined perhaps from the sport of bareknuckle boxing. George Wright, brother of Red Stockings founder Harry Wright, preceded the mask with this “mouth protector.” His invention was a fifty-cent rubber mouth guard, similar to the mouthpiece a boxer wears. This innovation, according to newspapers of the time, surely cut down on the talkativeness of catchers.

Masks were more obviously a protective device. Probably the first one was invented by an Ivy League man, Fred Thayer, who in 1876 adapted a fencing mask for Alexander Tying, then with the Harvard Nine. At first, Thayer’s better mouse trap was derisively called a rat trap. But the catcher’s mask caught on quickly among pros and amateurs alike and was in wide use by the 1880s. Besides affording protection, it helped fielding from the very first game. Harvard’s Tying made only two errors in that April 12, 1877, match, exceptionally low even for a pro catcher in those days.



Thayer's patented mask (patent 200,358) went into the Spalding catalog for the 1878 season, and adaptations followed quickly. Its simple forehead and chin rests were embellished with padding—made from “imported dog skin,” according to one Spalding catalog— to insulate the steel-mesh frame from the catcher's face.

Better visibility was always a goal in catcher's masks. Inventor George Barnard patented his “open view” mask in 1888 (patent 376,278) that afforded both protection and vision. These wire-basket cages worn by the 1890s backstops like **Roger Bresnahan and Marty Bergen** gave way to the greatly improved peripheral vision of the so-called Open Vision and Wide Sight masks by the 1911 season. A. J. Reach created this mask (patent 1,012,223) for the purpose of removing the vertical bar for better visibility without sacrificing structural strength.

The “platform mask,” a one-piece aluminum casting with horizontal crossbars instead of soldered mesh, was patented by umpire James E. Johnstone in 1921 (patent 1,449,183). Mesh still evolved, though, getting springy, shock-absorbing action and ball-deflecting shapes in the 1920s. One such mask designed by H. Goldsmith in 1923 (patent 1,475,991) had a padded “oval surround” with two cross bars. Other mask materials have come along, but carbon-steel wire mesh remains the material of choice to this day. Catchers prefer the welded-wire guard because it has better air movement and fewer massive bars that could obstruct visibility. Carbon-steel wire is used because it's flexible but strong. The goal is to get some deformation in the mesh to reduce some of the shock but still retain structural integrity.



Sometimes one change in a piece of equipment necessitated changes in other catchers' equipment. For example, with two-handed catching, using the pillow style mitt, the catcher's hands followed the ball into his body. In the process, the catcher was tucking in his chin so his throat wasn't exposed. Catchers today, with the hinged-mitt, one-hand the ball farther away from their bodies, and they're frequently looking up, so the throat's more exposed. This is the reason why today's catchers wear masks with throat protectors, popularized by Dodger catcher

Steve Yeager. In 1976 Yeager was kneeling in the on-deck circle when a bat shattered and a sharp piece slammed into his throat. To protect him from further injury, the Dodgers came up with the billygoat device hanging from his mask. However, throat protectors go back as early as 1888, as demonstrated by a Spalding advertisement for the Spalding's Trade Marked Catcher's Mask No. 30 with a patented neck protection. In 1903 the Victor Sporting Goods Company offered throat protection in its model 314N with a neck extension piece. The latest-version mask has the throat protector integrated with the wire face cage.



The end of the twentieth century has seen the mask evolve into something resembling what Darth Vader wears. Its genesis sprung from hockey's goalie mask, and it was introduced by catcher **Charlie O'Brien**. It is made of new high-tech polycarbon, and O'Brien's mask was designed by Jerry Van Valden of Toronto-based Catch You Later Headgear. The helmet protects the top, sides, and back of the head, yet the cage-like opening in the front is bigger than that of a normal mask. It increases a catcher's peripheral vision and deflects the ball rather than hitting the catcher flush as does the previous mask. At 50 ounces, the helmet is about 10 ounces heavier than a normal mask/helmet combination. Several major-league catchers have begun wearing it, and soon it may be a standard piece of equipment.

MITTENS FOR THE HANDS

Mitts were a taken-for-granted part of catching. An early documented use of a glove by a player occurred on June 28, 1870, and that was by a catcher. A sportswriter for the Cincinnati Commercial cabled his office, "[**Doug**] **Allison** caught today in a pair of buckskin mittens, to protect his hands." It was printed in the next day's newspaper in a recap of the game between the Cincinnati Red Stockings and the Washington Nationals. Also, a report appeared in the

Detroit Free Press on August 14, 1867, of a catcher named **Ben Delaverage** playing for the Victory Club of Troy using a catcher's glove. In the late 1870s gloves came into common use. At first players had to skulk onto the field. But star pitcher–turned–first baseman **Albert Spalding** made it a manly thing in 1877, boldly donning a black glove that was fingerless but padded. Ever the entrepreneur, Spalding envisioned big sales for his mail-order sporting-goods business. Catchers were among his best customers. Inventor A. C. Butts patented a fingerless glove in 1883 (patent 290,664), and G. H. Rawlings added padding in 1885 (patent 325,968).



Historians quibble over whether **Harry Decker, Joe Gunson, Ted Kennedy, or Jack McCloskey** first used the padded catcher's mitt in the late 1880s. By one account, the Kansas City Cowboys' Gunson dreamed up the mitt, but he was too busy catching in Al Spalding's world baseball tour to take advantage of the idea. So, ex-catcher Decker filed a patent on his mitt design in 1889 (patent 408,650). The "Decker Safety Catcher's Mitt" was a contraption that was basically a glove stitched to the back of a round pad that covered the palm of the hand. These gloves were literally flat pillows that got their pockets broken in on the job at the expense of the catcher's palm. Decker modified his mitt in 1891 to a more comfortable design (patent 447,233) with the addition of leather lacing on the back of the hand to hold the mitt in place.

It was not until 1895 that stipulations concerning the use of gloves were included in the rules: Those limited the size of gloves to ten ounces and fourteen inches circumference for all players except catchers and first basemen, who were permitted to use any size glove. The early gloves, lacking webbing and lacing, merely provided protection for the hands. Nineteenth-century players often wore gloves on both hands. For the throwing hand, they would simply snip the glove at the fingers for dexterity.



In 1899, J. F. Draper came up with the round, pillow style mitt (patent 627,687) that, with several minor modifications, remained the same tool that catchers wore up until the 1920s. R. H. Young in 1920 modified this standard pillow-mitt to disperse a billow of air to form a cushion when the ball was caught (patent 1,362,280).

Mitts were pretty small, flat, and shapeless throughout the dead ball era until a Rawlings employee, Harry “Bud” Latina, who designed dozens of mitts/gloves, created a better mitt. This hand/fingers design made the mitt loose enough to permit it to be dropped quickly or thrown off but not accidentally by using finger loops (patent 1,562,176). This became the standard for more than forty years. Additionally, it had a real change in the depth of the mitt so the ball would really stick, even though the catcher still had to use two hands. The catching technique with the pillow mitt was to stop the ball with the relatively stiff mitt, then secure it with one’s bare hand. This was accomplished by holding the bare hand behind the mitt and quickly moving it to the caught ball. But if the catcher had to move his mitt to catch a ball and failed to move both hands in unison, the bare hand could easily be exposed and subject to harm. Jammed and broken fingers were very common injuries during the pillow-mitt era.



Modern mitts have evolved to match today’s style of baseball. Catchers now have to one-hand or backhand the ball, which means that they have to work much lower because now the

pitching is lower (at or below the batter's knees). However, when a catcher is that low, he can't hold two hands out in front or even one with the fingers pointing up and parallel to the body.

In the 1950s, catcher **Gus Niarhos** cut an opening in the back of his mitt so he could squeeze the two sides together a little bit, like a fielder's glove. This led to catcher's mitts with breaks in them and long oval pockets. Previously, mitts had a pocket but no breaks, and the backstop caught two-handed so the ball wouldn't pop out. One-handed catching became possible with the hinged mitt, popularized by **Johnny Bench** and **Randy Hundley** in the late 1960s. With these, a spring-action hinge snaps the mitt closed on contact with the ball.

The ancestry of the flex-hinge catcher's mitt goes back to the first baseman's mitts of the 1950s. Logically, one might suppose that former first basemen (like **J. C. Martin**), converted to catchers in large numbers in the early 1960s, would have been the ones to introduce the mitt. But in fact, the flex-hinge catcher's mitt was introduced by Hundley in 1966 and Bench in 1968; neither of them had ever played first base.

New and sometimes quirky innovations in mitts have arisen since the 1960s. For example, in 1975, Al Campanis, former general manager of the Dodgers, introduced an orange fluorescent stripe around the perimeter of the mitt to help pitchers concentrate on their targets (patent 3,898,696). This caught on, but not every development met with acceptance. Most catchers didn't think much of another innovation in mitts, the oversized "Big Bertha" designed by Baltimore Orioles manager **Paul Richards** in the late 1950s. Supposedly it was to help his receivers handle the maddening knuckleball of **Hoyt Wilhelm**. Such baskets grew to a 45-inch circumference before being regulated to 38 inches in 1965. The surface area might help one knock down the ball, but it hindered one's view and cut down on hand mobility. One other drawback of the "Big Bertha" was that even if one caught the ball in that glove, it was hard to find it in time to catch base-stealers.



Some current catchers are keenly interested in the latest wrinkle in mitts, a "digital leather" glove made by Franklin. The innovation is already found in Franklin's current line of fielders'

gloves and will make its debut in catchers' mitts soon. The facing leather is etched with a pattern of grooves and diamonds whose purpose is twofold. First, the pattern absorbs the shock of impact. Then, its contours grab the ball and stop its spinning action. Both attributes might turn some hardhands into soft ones. Webbing, air or gel cushions, and other elements of glove design have dealt with the velocity of batted and pitched balls, but only lately have manufacturers turned their attention to the spin factor. The rotation on a baseball can be quite high, 1800 rpm or more on a curveball, for example. Franklin likens its digital leather to the road-gripping pattern of a tire. That leaves the near-spinless knuckleball to contend with, a problem sure to be compounded as more hurlers follow knuckler **Tim Wakefield** and other "goofy" tossers.

BODY ARMOR FOR THOSE WAYWARD 95-MPH FASTBALLS



Women got into the act of making catching a safer profession. Legend has it that the wife of Detroit Wolverines catcher **Charles Bennett** devised a chest pad to protect her husband during games. He wore the creation outside his jersey in 1883. While some accounts say that catchers experimented with chest protectors earlier in the decade, these image-conscious receivers tried hiding the devices beneath their uniforms to avoid razzing. Left-handed throwing catcher **Jack Clements** in 1884 was quoted as saying that he wore a "sheepskin," as chest protectors were first called, beneath his uniform to avoid being called a sissy.



James “Deacon” White, a nine-year catcher in the 1870s who switched to third base for nine more years, supposedly created the first chest protector in the early 1880s. His design included a canvas-covered rubber bladder pumped full of air. Padding eventually replaced the air tubes.

Today’s chest protectors, although ribbed with light but shock-absorbing polyfoam, have come full circle from the original fur-stuffed sheepskin “breast protectors” worn under the uniform until 1884. Along the way, catchers and umpires got inflatable vests. “Gray’s Patent Body Protector” (patent 295,543) with its rubber-bladder ribs sold for \$10 in 1891, twice the price of stuffed canvas or leather. Gray’s Protector didn’t cover the shoulders, a prime target for foul tips. John Gamble in his 1903 design added inflatable pads that covered the shoulders (patent 745,007).



Although umpires stuck to inflatable protectors until modern times, catchers quickly went for the maneuverability that lightweight stuffing like kapok afforded. Kapok is a lightweight material used in life jackets. Today, chest protectors are filled with foam. Stuffed protectors enabled backstops to crouch and to run to back up bases. F. W. Glahe in 1963 came up with a very flexible chest protector (patent 3,076,197) that greatly improved mobility.



One of the last modifications to the chest protector was the addition of removable shoulder flaps. M. Neuhalfen in 1991 patented his design (patent 5,020,156) that guarded against those nasty foul tips flying into the upper arms. With the advent of ballistic materials, velcro, breathable cloth, and polyfoam padding, catchers today are wearing the most protection possible with the minimum weight. The 2008 version of the chest protector weighs less than half the chest protector that was available in the 1920s through the 1940s.

ANTI-SPIKE PROTECTORS: THE SHIN GUARDS



Among the tools of ignorance, the designs of masks and mitts have evolved the most, in response to the way baseball is played. By contrast, chest protectors and shin guards haven't changed as much. As early as 1890, catchers began wrapping their bare lower legs with newspapers or leather, which was then hidden beneath their uniforms. This evolved into more elaborate pads, all under their pants, but it took tough-as-nails Roger Bresnahan to have the nerve to admit publicly that his legs hurt from all of the wild pitches, foul balls, thrown bats, and piercing spikes. The curiosities that Bresnahan wore more than a century ago actually were a modified version of the leg guards worn by cricket players. Rods of light cane encased in padded fabric covered the shins, and padding protected the knees.



Over time, padded leather covered the kneecaps, insteps, and ankles. Hard, heavy fiberboard guards appeared in Rawlings ads in 1916. In the 1920s and 1930s, fiberboard supplanted cane. Various inventors played around with the fiberboard design, including D. Levinson in his 1918 idea (patent 1,253,260). William Barrett in 1927 patented the prototypical catcher's leg guards (patent 1,624,129) that uses essentially the design seen today.

The hinged shin guard was developed by the Dodgers in the late 1950s, one of three notable catcher inventions they created. (The billygoat throat protector and the hinged mitt were the other two.) By the 1960s, light but tough molded plastics replaced fiber. How tough? Announcer and former catcher Tim McCarver survived two collisions in which the spikes of ex-Met **Tommy Agee** became embedded in the guards.



In 1995, W. F. Hunt Jr. patented leg guards with adjustable lower thigh pieces to facilitate lower crouches and increased protection (patent 5,452,475). G. J. Collins followed up with his multiple-piece thigh and knee guards in 2004 (patent 6,687,912). The next generation might well include complete, flexible, and lightweight leggings made from Kevlar and worn throughout the game and not just when the catcher is behind the plate.

Catching has never appeared to be an easy or cushy job. Even with protective accessories, the position seems to lead the league in injuries yearly. That's why safety and productivity have been the goals of a variety of catching inventions throughout the history of the game.



Baseball, though it sometimes seems the most tradition-bound of sports, has always shown that all-American penchant for tinkering and innovation. This quest for the better mouse trap has been amply applied to catchers' gear. The evolution of the equipment corresponds to actual changes in the tactics and rules of the game. The tinkering continues. Already a new "digital" catcher's mitt, designed to soften the ball's impact and reduce errors, has made its debut.

Today the well-protected warrior behind home plate has taken advantage of modern technology, especially that developed for law enforcement. Body armor, for the catcher in the twenty-first century, might well be identical to the lightweight Kevlar vests worn under police officers' shirts today. After all, if a thin, almost shirt-like vest can stop a bullet, it certainly can stop a wayward 95 mph fastball. So perhaps chest and leg protection will come full circle and the catchers of tomorrow will be wearing their armor beneath their uniforms just as the players in the 1880s did.

CHUCK ROSCIAM, a retired navy captain with 43 years of active service and an amateur catcher for more than forty years, is the creator of www.baseballcatchers.com. His baseball writing has appeared in "The Baseball Research Journal" and "The National Pastime".

BIKE PARTS, A CRASH AND A JOURNEYMAN CATCHER: HOW LIZARD SKINS CONQUERED THE BASEBALL WORLD

Cody Stavenhagen, The Athletic

It was the early '90s on the campus of Brigham-Young University in Provo, Utah and, "parking," Brian Fruit says," was just an absolute nightmare."

Fruit was a student, and one summer he worked an odd job, saved some cash and bought a mountain bike. He traversed the BYU campus on two wheels rather than four. Soon he met other riders who took him out for adventures in the red rocks of Moab.

In his senior year, Fruit found a local company going out of business and saw a chance to buy and sell some bike parts. He spent six weeks selling spare parts out of the back of his 1989 Chevrolet Camaro IROC-Z. He drove around the area and delivered parts to different stores. One person introduced him to another, and soon Fruit and an acquaintance named Lance Larson came up with an idea for a partnership: Larson would make bike products. Fruit would sell them.

The project started with a six-foot table in the spare bedroom of a small house. They were making neoprene chainstay protectors, used to shield a bike's paint and aluminum. In the early days, they raced to a FedEx store to ship off a 12th-page ad in a biking magazine. They barely made the deadline, and the beginnings were meager: \$350 in sales the first month.

Somehow, thanks to a series of fortuitous breaks, some smart business and a product so simple it's amazing no one had thought of it before, that part-time project led to a fateful innovation in an entirely different sport almost 20 years later.

By this point, the company was known as Lizard Skins — Larson's brother thought of the name for a class project — and it was well established in the cycling world. Fruit bought Larson out and became the sole CEO in 2001. The company's handlebar grips, a polymer-based tape first made to wrap around the long handlebars on road bikes, eventually became its most popular product. Now Fruit and company general manager Brad Barker were discussing expanding into other realms. Namely, baseball.

"I saw an opportunity," Barker said. "We could use our existing handlebar tape and launch it into different sports."

Such a decision did not come without risks. For more than 100 years, you did not see synthetic grips on wood bats. For generations, players relied only on pine tar and other sticky goop. Even batting gloves didn't start becoming common until at least the 1960s. A bat grip was unheard of.

Then a journeyman MLB catcher tried one of their grips, and things changed rapidly. Now Lizard Skins is everywhere, one of the biggest and brightest equipment companies in baseball.

“Eventually,” Fruit said, “we realized, ‘Oh, we have something here.’”

Watch a baseball game today, and you are likely to see it. Pay close attention. Many players come to bat with a Lizard Skins bat grip wrapped around the handle of their trade’s most important tool.

The grip is soft and cushy. They tend to be colorful. There are yellows, oranges, camouflage and other designs. And for nearly a decade now, this product has been everywhere. It is now licensed by Major League Baseball and endorsed by players such as **David Ortiz, Mike Trout and Mookie Betts**.

So how did this happen?

Tracing the journey of Lizard Skins takes us to — of all places — the 2011 Tour de France.

That’s where a Dutch rider named Johnny Hoogerland was an early leader of the mountain stage. The riders were being followed by a production crew in a car, and just as the mountain road course began to curve around a tree, the driver lost focus, swerving to avoid the tree at the last second. The car clipped a rider named Juan Flecha, whose fall caused a domino effect. The collision sent Hoogerland off the road and into a barbed-wire fence at about 40 mph, ripping a post out of the ground.

Hoogerland rose from the fall with a tattered jersey and blood dripping down his legs. He needed 33 stitches.

The accident was played over and over on broadcasts. Hoogerland was interviewed and became a beloved figure in the cycling world for the grace with which he handled the accident, one that derailed his chances of winning the Tour. He lost 17 minutes but finished that stage of the race. “You can be mad,” Hoogerland said that day, “but I don’t think they did it on purpose.”

It just so happened Hoogerland’s bike was equipped with Lizard Skins handlebar tape. And the more Hoogerland was on camera, the more exposure the bike got. Soon Fruit was getting flooded with emails. The handlebar tape sold out in the Netherlands. Then it started selling like wildfire in Belgium and France. Soon Lizard Skins had the No. 1 aftermarket handlebar tape in the world.

“All due to a big crash,” Fruit said, “and the way the guy handled himself after.”

There were other grip tapes out there, but Fruit’s business set itself apart with a decision they had made years earlier. In search of a better product, Fruit and his team discovered a new, polymer-based material when most competitors were still using synthetic cork. The polymer had a slicker look and a more durable feel. The problem: it was nearly twice as expensive to

manufacture. They sold the grips at a higher price point — about \$35 a pop — and growth came slowly. At least until Hoogerman's crash.

Suddenly, Fruit and his team's belief — that if customers would just *touch* the grip, they would fall in love with it — began to prove true.

Fruit was already getting wind of people using the grip tape for other purposes. He had a friend named Mark Wilson who would buy the tape in bulk and take it to his sons' travel baseball tournaments. Wilson would set up a folding chair and a canopy and wrap people's bats with Lizard Skins tape for a small charge, enough to help cover gas and tournament entry fees.

Barker, Lizard Skins' general manager, also started using the tape himself on baseball bats and hockey sticks. The idea grew.

So the company made the product and designed the packaging. They took it to the 2012 American Baseball Coaches Association Trade Show, where they won Best New Product. They sold the bat wraps to some sporting goods stores and garnered a decent amount of repeat customers. But they still didn't quite envision what it would become.

"Our bicycle business was booming at that time," Barker said. "Baseball was still somewhat of an afterthought."

Enter **John Buck**.

At the same time Lizard Skins was breaking into baseball, the local pro — who had played for the Royals, Blue Jays and Marlins and spent his off seasons in Utah — was beginning to market a few business ideas of his own. Buck and his brother-in-law Justin Jenson had started pitching the Glove Guardian, a carrying case for baseball gloves. Buck was looking for a way into the 2013 ABCA trade show when he got connected with Lizard Skins.

By this point, the company had grown out of that spare bedroom into a factory. In 2013, the company had a setup with three small buildings and a basement housing some of their inventory. Buck came by for a visit.

Barker and others showed Buck around, and they were surprised to learn Buck had already been asking himself a familiar question: Why does no one in baseball put a synthetic grip on a wood bat?

"John was like, 'You guys have a great product, I think this is something that could really work,'" Barker said.

A few days later, Buck arranged for Barker to meet him at his backyard batting cage.

"I remember it clear as day," Barker says now.

Barker brought along some bat grips. Buck wrapped them around his bat and started taking swings. His review: The grip felt great. It just needed to be thinner.

Barker and Fruit conferred and decided to take the chance.

They called up their manufacturer and got to work. They tinkered and finally developed the product into exactly what they wanted. This is one area Fruit says is important: As a small, private company, he was not beholden to any balance sheet or shareholders. As they were launching into baseball, the company experimented using a dozen different molds to make their grips. Lines going one way, dots going another, hexagons, big bumps, small ridges, all sorts of different patterns.

“None of those actually went to production,” Fruit said. “Probably cost us a chunk of money, but we learned from all those products. We just really cared about every little detail.”

Buck, already thinking about marketing, had another idea early on. He wanted the grips to come in different colors and have different designs. That played into something that had already been a foundation of the Lizard Skins business, dating to their chainstay protectors. Back then, Fruit and Larsen had them made in eight different colors. The company’s biggest retailer at the time wanted to order them in only two colors. Fruit insisted they order all eight — more options for the customer.

“They brought them all in, and it turned out to be a bestseller,” Fruit said.

Buck went to spring training with the Mets in 2013 using his bat grip. Always a boisterous character, he started embracing nicknames around the clubhouse — **David Wright** became Captain America, **Matt Harvey** was famously the Dark Knight — and started telling his teammates about the bat grips. Wright eventually became the company’s first sponsored athlete, and they made him a red, white and blue grip to fit his new moniker.

Buck didn’t care if the vibrant patterns went against the black-and-white traditions of the game; players wanted color. It didn’t hurt that the wraps also offer grip properties and a small amount of sting protection.

“It’s baseball. We know better than everybody,” Buck said jokingly. “If the last thing we can hold onto is our pine tar, damn it, we’re gonna do it.”

When other players came to bat with Buck crouched behind the plate, he would often look to see what, if anything, they had on their bat handles. Most players were either using pine tar, sticky spray or simple athletic tape.

“I’d say, ‘Hey dude, what do you got with that pre-wrap, bro?’” Buck said. “‘Let me send you something.’ That’s kind of how we got it cooked.”

Buck — who had taken up cycling that offseason and reported to spring in excellent condition — began that season on an absolute rampage at the plate. He finished April with nine home runs and 25 RBIs. At one point early in the season, the Mets' TV broadcast did a segment talking with Buck about his colorful bat grips. Buck, whose relationship with Lizard Skins was more personal than a business proposition at that point, did the interview and reported back to the guys at Lizard Skins: *You might want to watch the game tonight*. A few days later, Buck was up to bat when SNY started talking about Lizard Skins, and they showed a clip of the product.

"That really put us in the limelight," Barker said.

As the summer went on and more players started joining the trend, Lizard Skins began targeting players, mostly those who used athletic tape on their bats. They overnighted a package to the Red Sox clubhouse for David Ortiz. Legend has it Ortiz wrapped his own bat that day and was using the grip that night.

By that fall's World Series, an estimated seven of nine Red Sox starters were using Lizard Skins.

"I knew the influence that we had," Buck said. "Getting it into the player's hands, that was the secret sauce. That's why it took off and why it was weirdly successful. It was the power of the players."

In that fall classic, Ortiz was using a neon green bat grip. Ads on the national TV broadcast were also displayed behind home plate via a green screen. So whenever Ortiz stepped out of the box, you could see the ad projected onto his bat. It made it look as if the bat wrap were changing colors.

"Instantly we had people reaching out," Barker said. "*Hey, I want that grip that changes color that Ortiz was using in the World Series.*"

By 2015, Lizard Skins had more than 150 MLB players using their product. Stars like Wright, Ortiz, Trout, Betts and **Hunter Pence** became official sponsors. Fruit often came home to his wife watching a baseball game on TV. *Look, she would say, this guy is using the grip!*

On eight different occasions, an MLB player graced the cover of Sports Illustrated holding a bat wrapped with a Lizard Skins grip.

"Every time," Fruit said, "it was a complete surprise to us."

The growth of their colorful grips just happened to coincide with other changes in the game. A new generation of players such as **Ronald Acuña Jr.** have brought their own flair and personality to the sport. You see more celebrations, more bat flips, colorful spikes and, yes, vibrant bat grips.

“You can’t influence them to use it,” Fruit said. “They either like it or they don’t. We would never have enough budget to get Mike Trout to use the product. Mike’s got to like the product. If he likes it, you can work with him to be able to use his name and image. ... I think that brings legitimacy to the product. It’s not ‘Hey, we’re XYZ big company, use our product.’ We never had that kind of budget. We didn’t have any budget.”

Eventually, teams began ordering the product in bulk. In 2016, the company reached a deal to become MLB’s official bat grip provider. Lizard Skins now makes themed grips for special events such as Jackie Robinson Day. It sells grips with Trout’s name and No. 27 inscribed on the tape.

The business grew and grew some more. Again, the company needed more space. They moved into an 8,000-square-foot facility. They were there for less than two years. They upped their warehouse and office space to 18,000 square feet. In 2016 they built a new building, up to 24,000 square feet.

Fruit joked: He had never even dreamed of owning one forklift. Now they had multiple.

Brian Fruit is speaking now from a bike shop in Salt Lake. He sold his stake in Lizard Skins in October of 2021, when the company was bought by Marucci Sports, one of the leading bat manufacturers in baseball. Fruit was ready to move on, but he reinvested a portion of the sale into Marucci and maintains a small stake. He visited the factory again not long ago. Lizard Skins has also ventured into softball, hockey, lacrosse, pickleball and — during the COVID-19 pandemic — console gaming.

As Fruit looks back on the past 30 years, it’s still hard to fathom how all this came to be. He credits a long list of people: Ryan Huntington, the company’s sales manager, design manager Derrick Jackman and too many others to name. He takes pride in all the small choices along the way.

In the early days of getting into baseball, they pulled up retailer lists from the websites of other companies such as Rawlings. They made grassroots phone calls to ship their products and often called back to check in.

If Fruit himself was at a store and saw one of his products with damaged packing, he’d get in touch with a manager, tell them he was taking the defect and would send them a new one.

“We just really cared about every little detail,” Fruit said.

Even Fruit, though, recognizes the incredible circumstances that helped propel this business into another stratosphere: Right place, right product, right time.

“It’s funny how things happen,” Fruit said. “Johnny’s crash, it was a ‘Forrest Gump’ moment. Big Papi using the tape, a ‘Forrest Gump’ moment. John Buck getting that commercial inside of an actual game ... We didn’t pay for any of this. We didn’t have the connections to set any of them

up. But it did happen, and I think a lot of people were rooting for us because we were hard workers and we were decent human beings to all the people around us.”

When he and Larson first started making those chain protectors in their spare bedroom, there were never any grand plans. Just a way to make some money, to get by.

“We never tried to do a hit-and-run,” Fruit said. “Everything we ever tried to do was building blocks. Repeat customers, good, quality business.”

The business expanded, faster than they ever could have imagined.

“We’d always joke we were just stacking nickels,” Fruit said. “We got pretty good at stacking nickels, I’m not gonna lie.”



THIS WEEK’S TRIVIA CHALLENGE ANSWERS

I am one of 9 members of the 600 HR club.

I am the only player to hit 60 or more HRs in a season 3 times.

I did not lead the league in homers any of those 60 HR seasons.

I hit 292 homers he hit between 1998 and 2002, the most over any five-year span in history. Further, my 279 homers between 1997 and 2001 and 266 homers between 1999 and 2003 rank second and third, respectively.

I won MVP in 1998

Who am I?

SAMMY SOSA

There have been a dozen instances since 1950 that a franchise had back-to-back rookies of the year. Some are well known—Orlando Cepeda and Willie McCovey in 1958-59, Darryl Strawberry and Dwight Gooden in 1983-84, Cory Seager and Cody Bellinger in 2016-17.

The Oakland A's managed 3 in a row with Jose Canseco, Mark McGwire and Walt Weiss in 1986-87-88, The Dodgers had 4 straight with Rick Sutcliffe, Steve Howe, Fernando Valenzuela and Stee Sax in 1979-80-81-82.

The longest string was 5 straight by the Dodgers. Can you name them:

1992 righty first baseman played 12 years for the Dodgers. **Eric Karros**

1993 catcher, 12x All-Star, Hall of Fame. **Mike Piazza**

1994 right-handed right fielder who after 7 seasons with the Dodgers played for the Blue Jays, Yankees, D'backs, Pirates, Angels, Braves. Son played in the 2015 World Series for the Royals.
Raul Mondesi

1995 right-handed pitcher who won 123 games over 12 seasons, first Japanese major leaguer to permanently relocate to MLB, threw two no-hitters. **Hideo Nomo**

1996 left-handed outfielder, played in 2003 World Series for Marlins against Yankees, had 871 career hits for 8 teams. **Todd Hollandsworth**

They bounced around. Here are six players who played for at least 10 teams but had at least 5 years with at least one:

Matt Stairs, Lefty batting OF/1B/PH, 12 teams. A's 5 seasons. Expos 1992 to Nationals 2011. Played in the 2008 and 2009 World Series with Phillies.

Kenny Lofton, Left-handed centerfielder, 11 teams. Indians 10 seasons. Astros 1991 to Indians 2007. Led AL in stolen bases five straight seasons. 5 Gold Gloves, 2428 career hits.

Bartolo Colon, Right-handed starting pitcher, 11 teams. Indians 6 seasons. Indians 1997 to Rangers 2011. Won 2005 Cy Young with Angels, 244-188 with 2535 career strikeouts.

Todd Zeile, right-handed 1B/3B/C, 11 teams. Cards 7 seasons. Cards 1989 to Mets 2004. Played in the post-season 1996 Orioles, 1998-99 Rangers, 2000 Mets.

Terry Mulholland, lefty pitcher, 11 teams. Phillies 6 seasons, Giants 5 seasons. 1986 Giants to 2006 D'backs. Pitched in 1993 World Series with Phillies, 1999 with Braves. Started 332 games, relieved in 128.

Tommy Davis, right-handed LF/3B, 10 teams. Dodgers 8 seasons. Dodgers 1959 to Royals 1976. 1962 & 1963 NL batting champion, 2121 career hits.

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