

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

7.9.2023

Good morning baseball fans,

Some recurring themes this week—**Shohei Ohtani**, Braves, chasing .400. Plus All-Star game facts and today's MLB Draft. And four trivia questions.

In longer reads two history pieces: **Hurricane Hazle** of the 1957 Braves, the Cape Cod League is growing future front office execs as well as players and analysis of pickoffs under the new rules.

A subscriber asked me this week “what’s with 50 pages, how am I supposed to read it all?” Every week I try to include some history, some analysis, trivia and anecdotes. The goal is within two cups of coffee for you to find a few things each week that get to “that’s interesting”. Just skip over what’s not your thing, enjoy the rest.

Homemade peach-blueberry cobbler and coffee here this morning. Kick back and enjoy.

THIS WEEK’S TRIVIA CHALLENGE

The same player ranks second in Toronto Blue Jays history for hits, doubles, and total bases.

He ranks second to **Tony Fernandez** in hits, and second to **Carlos Delgado** in both doubles and total bases.

Right-handed centerfielder who played 12 seasons in Toronto before wrapping his career with the Angels and Yankees.

He led the majors in hits and total bases in 2003. Name him.

Versatile 24 year player, had 1,300 RBI but never led the league in that category.

He had 100 or more hits in 23 seasons, 200 hits in 4.

Won rookie of the year and an MVP.

15,890 plate appearances -- MLB career leader.

16 time All-Star, played both infield and outfield. Name him.

In 1978 the Red Sox had seven players named to the AL All-Star team. Name them. If you get that, as a bonus try naming the eight Sox All-Stars in 1946

Ken Griffey Jr. led the American League in home runs four times from 1994-'99, who were the two other players to lead the league?

Indians left fielder who hit 312 HRs in 12 seasons, led the AL three times in RBI and TB.

Right-handed first baseman who led each league twice in HRs on his way to 583 career HRs.

(answers at bottom)

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

Wise words from Joe Sheehan—

Pre-season projections are a better predictor of future performance than a team's actual record is until August or so, which is one big reason I'm so conservative about jumping to conclusions in April, or even in June. Baseball teams can remain irrational for longer than you can remain patient.

With that said, we're on the other side of July 4 now, with all teams past the halfway point of their seasons. The trade deadline is less than four weeks away, which will force teams to define themselves by their record and their position in the standings, no matter what projections say. It's not early any more.

The Red Sox are .500, outside of 34 year old **James Paxton** their starting pitching is a mess (**Brayan Bello** — 5-5, 3.09 ERA, **Tanner Houck** 15-day IL, **Chris Sale** 60-day IL, **Corey Kluber** 15-day IL, **Garrett Whitlock** 15-day IL.

But they are 12-1 against the Yankees and the Blue Jays. The Red Sox are 2-13 in inter-league home games.

July 8 1962: With home runs in his first three at bats, 41-year-old **Stan Musial** of the Cardinals not only becomes the oldest player to hit three in a game but also ties the major-league record of four straight home runs, as the Cards whip the Mets, 15 – 1. His home run in the second game the day before won the game, 3 – 2. Musial's .924 OPS is the highest of any player 41 years or older in the history of the game. He retired after the 1963 season as one of the top 10 players to ever play the game of baseball.

It is amazing that the Dodgers keep finding pitchers to back-fill. **Noah Syndergaard, Shelby Miller, Dustin May, Ryan Pepiot, Walker Beuhler and Tyler Cyr** all hurt (and they *just* got **Julio Urías** back). But they are right behind the D'backs in the NL west.

Exactly one year ago, **Marcus Semien** was emerging from an abysmal start. His disappointing line of .238/.294/.383 (.677 OPS) was only that good because he picked it up in June. At the end of May 2022, it had been .199/.266/.274 (.540).

This year, **he's hitting .280/.345/.451 (.796 OPS)**, and is starting the All-Star game at second base.

The Marlins are 12th in the National League in runs scored. Their clear ace, **Sandy Alcantara** — the defending National League Cy Young winner — is 3-7 with a 4.93 ERA. They've been outscored this season. And yet they have the third-best record in the league. The Marlins, who in 30 years have never won a division title and who have three playoff appearances -- one in 2020 -- in that time, are off to the best 88-game start in franchise history.

21-5 in one-run games helps. The Marlins' .808 winning percentage in one-run games would be the best ever for a team playing at least 20 one-run games. A subscriber asked this week—should **Derek Jeter** get some credit for finding kids who now are part of the Marlins?

Class Move -- The Red Sox renovated the press box and broadcast booths at Fenway Park before this season. As part of that process, the team displayed some photos, plaques, and other memorabilia. That included copies of the Hall of Fame certificates given to the last four writers from the Boston chapter who won the BBWAA's Career Excellence Award: **Peter Gammons** (2005), **Larry Whiteside** (2008), **Dan Shaughnessy** (2016), and **Nick Cafardo** (2020).

Elly De La Cruz, who in 26 games is hitting .318/.356/.536 with four home runs, 11 steals and a hundred highlights. He had another on Wednesday, as he crushed a 455-foot HR. The Reds' record with De La Cruz in the lineup is 20-6.

The Cards are 8-18 in one run games. Turn that around and they would be right in the mix of the weak NL central.

Craig Kimbrell got what he wanted and is now closing for the surging Phillies. Manager **Rob Thomson** opened the season with a closer-by-committee but Kimbrell went into the weekend with a 1.13 ERA in his last 24 appearances with 10 saves in as many chances. Opponents hit .111 against him in that stretch and struck out 40 times in 81 at-bats. Kimbrel (407) and **Kenley Jansen** (409) are duking it out for seventh place on the career saves list. Kimbrel does lead the majors with 10 pitch-timer violations.

Corbin Carroll, who's hitting .292/.367/.563 with 20 doubles, 18 homers and 24 stolen bases continues to help keep the D'backs atop the NL west.

San Diego Padres are 43-47 with Juan Soto, Fernando Tatis Jr., Manny Machado and Xander Bogaerts in their lineup. The Padres are 0-7 in extra-inning games.

Since 1968 when the A's moved from Kansas City to Oakland, most playoff appearances:

Yankees 29

Braves 24

Dodgers 23

A's 21

Cardinals 21

July 17, 1941 **Joe DiMaggio's** consecutive games hitting streak ends at 56 against Cleveland. He then starts a 16 game streak. He had a hit in every game in July except the 17th.

Wade Boggs hit .400 over a 162-game stretch from early June 1985 to early June 1986 (257 for 641, .401).

You all are familiar with the awful 1962 Mets. 40-120.

1963 was not much better. The Mets went 51-111 and were shut out 30 times.

1961 Phillies 47-107 including a 23 game losing streak.

Orioles back-end of the bullpen -- **Yennier Cano** (1.32 ERA in 41 innings, 0 homers allowed) and **Félix Bautista** (79 strikeouts in 38 innings).

Closer Bautista, in 2023, may end up as the most unhittable pitcher in the history of baseball. (via Joe Sheehan newsletter)

The Whiff (highest K%, min. 30 IP)

	IP	K%
Aroldis Chapman 2014	54.0	52.5
Felix Bautista 2023	38.1	51.3
Craig Kimbrel 2012	62.2	50.2
Edwin Diaz 2022	62.0	50.2

The top 34 strikeout-rate seasons list is 32 relief years and **Jacob deGrom** in 2021 and 2022.)

Andrew McCutchen has 2,018 hits and 1,600 strikeouts.

Bill Madlock had 2,008 hits and 510 strikeouts.

Rickey Henderson had 3,055 hits, including 297 home runs.

Chris Davis had 1,160 hits, including 295 home runs.

The Los Angeles Dodgers won the National League pennant in 1959 while scoring 705 runs and allowing 670 runs. The third place San Francisco Giants scored 705 runs and allowed 613 runs.

The Minnesota Twins won the American League West in 1987 while scoring 786 runs and allowing 806 runs. The third place Oakland Athletics scored 806 runs and allowed 789 runs. The Twins went on to win the World Series, just as the Dodgers had in 1959.

Johnny Bench

10 gold gloves	1742 games	.267 avg	.342 OBP	.476 SLG	389 HRs
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Ivan Rodriguez

13 gold gloves	2427 games	.296 avg	.334 OBP	.464 SLG	311 HRs
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Hall of Famer with the most 5-hit games by a shortstop since integration in 1947--**Luis Aparicio** (6 games with 5 or more hits from 1962-70)

April AL rookie of the month: Rangers 3B **Josh Jung**. Your May AL rookie of the month: Josh Jung. In the history of this award (2001-23), only one other infielder has ever won this award in the first two months of his rookie season, **Albert Pujols** in April-May, 2001. Jung's offensive numbers are tracking to one of the best 3B rookie seasons ever—up there with **Al Rosen** in 1950 and Pujols.

In the NL **Corbin Carroll** of the D'backs (before he hurt his shoulder) was also putting up some historic rookie numbers. 17 HRs, 24 stolen bases. .926 OPS. Want to guess how many rookies have ever taken those numbers into any All-Star break in history? None.

Even if we lower the bar to 15 home runs, 15 steals and an .800 OPS, that adds only one other rookie to the club – **Julio Rodríguez** (16 HR, 21 SB, .814 OPS just last year).

Throw in the 40 extra base hits and the only comps are **Arod** in 1998 and **Fernando Tatis Jr.** in 2021.

Nice mid-season pick up

2017: OF **J.D. Martinez** (Tigers to D-backs)

Martinez's 2017 run with the D-backs is the gold standard for position player rental acquisitions. While Martinez only spent a little over two months with the D-backs, he finished ninth on the team in bWAR (2.4) and tallied more RBIs (65) than games played (62). Six of those RBIs came on Sept. 4 at Dodger Stadium, when Martinez became the 18th player to hit four home runs in a game.

Martinez won consecutive NL Player of the Week Awards and was also named the NL Player of the Month in September. After going hitless in the D-backs’ Wild Card Game win over the Rockies, Martinez hit .364 in the D-backs' NLDS loss to the Dodgers.

After the season, he signed a five-year, \$110 million contract with the Red Sox. None of the three Minor Leaguers who went to Detroit in the deal made a significant impact there.

Jarren Duran went 5-5 with four doubles yesterday. He's the 13th player in Red Sox history to have five hits, including four extra base hits, in a regular season game.

Player	H	XBH	Date	Opp
Jarren Duran	5	4	2023-07-02	TOR
Rafael Devers	6	4	2019-08-13	CLE
Jackie Bradley Jr.	5	5	2015-08-15	SEA
Dustin Pedroia	5	4	2010-06-24	COL
Victor Martinez	5	4	2010-06-01	OAK
John Valentin	5	4	1995-06-02	SEA
Scott Cooper	5	4	1994-04-12	KCR
Rick Miller	5	4	1981-05-11	TOR
Dwight Evans	5	4	1980-10-04	TOR
Fred Lynn	5	4	1975-06-18	DET
Carl Yastrzemski	5	4	1965-05-14	DET
Al Zarilla	5	4	1950-06-08	SLB
Babe Ruth	5	4	1918-05-09	WSH

SUPERSTITION

Wade Boggs, aka “The Chicken Man”

No matter where he was playing or when, Wade would eat chicken before every baseball game which is why he was given the nickname, "Chicken Man." He would also run wind sprints at exactly 7:17pm. Boggs would take exactly 150 ground balls during practice.

Larry Walker

Walker had a fixation on the number "3." All of his alarms were set to 33 minutes on the hour, he wore number 33 on his custom baseball uniform and was married on Nov 3, too!

Joe DiMaggio would always run from the outfield and touch second base before going into the dugout.

THINK THE ASTROS WOULD LIKE A DO-OVER?

José Abreu (three years, \$58.5 million), age 36.

Of the 151 players who have enough trips to qualify for the batting title this season, here's where Abreu ranked heading into Wednesday's games:

- 141st in OPS (.650) – last among regular first basemen.
- 143rd in park-adjusted OPS+ (80) – also last among regular first basemen.
- 141st in slugging (.356) – second-lowest among regular first basemen.
- 136th in on-base percentage (.294) – also second-lowest at his position.

But there's more. His seven home runs are the second-fewest of any regular first baseman, even though he plays in one of the most homer-friendly parks for right-handed hitters. Speaking of which ...

He's hit only one home run in Houston all season – and none against American League teams.

And one more thing: He's 12 for 75 (a .160 average!) against the four teams in the AL West, including 2 for 19 against an A's team that's on pace to give up 1,000 runs.

GREAT MONTHS

Joe Posnanski newsletter

The Braves went 21-4 in June, that's .840 baseball, which makes it the best month in Braves baseball history, going back to their days in Boston and Milwaukee. **Ronald Acuña Jr.** had a month so blindingly awesome, you gotta wear shades to look at it. He hit .356/.429/.683 with nine homers, 14 steals, 26 runs and 22 RBIs.

Matt Olson hit 11 home runs in the month and now leads the National League in homers. **Ozzie Albies** slugged .557 and stole five bases without getting caught. The Braves started the month by winning seven of eight, then after a couple of losses they won eight in a row, then after a loss they have now won six in a row. They scored 10-plus runs six times and three of their four losses were by just one run.

1984 Tigers April 18-2. Won their first nine games, lost just twice in the month, and raced to their famous 35-5 start. Core of **Lou Whitaker, Alan Trammell and Kirk Gibson**. They were in first place every single day of the season.

1976 Phillies May 22-5. The pitching staff had a 2.39 ERA for the month — **Steve Carlton** went 5-1 with a 1.74 ERA. The lineup included **Bob Boone, Larry Bowa, Mike Schmidt, Dick Allen, Greg Luzinski, Garry Maddox**. Those Phillies went on to win 101 games and take the National League East, though they were swept by the titanic Big Red Machine in the playoffs.

1941 Yankees July 25-4. **Joe DiMaggio**'s hitting streak was in full bloom. Those Yankees went 25-4 in July, they began the month with a 12-game winning streak and later in the month had a nine-game winning streak. DiMaggio hit .442. **Phil Rizzuto**, hit .383. **Charlie Keller** mashed 10 home runs. The aging **Red Ruffing** won all four of his starts.

2002 A's August 24-4. **Billy Beane**'s "MoneyBall" team and its 20-game winning streak.

2017 Indians September 25-4. This is probably the best month any team has had since expansion. The month began with 15 straight wins — the last 15 wins of their epic 22-game winnings streak — and the Tribe was DESTROYING teams, they had FIVE shutouts during the streak. After a one-run loss, Cleveland won five straight.

Corey Kluber was absolutely ridiculous that month. He went 5-0 with an 0.84 ERA and a 50-to-3 strikeout-to-walk. Also, nobody could get **José Ramírez** out — he hit .407 and slugged .895. Francisco Lindor mashed eight homers. Reliever **Andrew Miller** didn't give up a run.

MORE BRAVES

The Braves again associated the number 61 with a home run record (more on that later) by hitting that many dingers in June — **four more than any other NL team has ever hit in a month**. (the Yankees hit 74 HRs I August 2019). The Braves also led the league in OBP (372) and tied for the fewest strikeouts (176),

They've also been incredibly healthy -- their core four of **Ronald Acuña Jr., Matt Olson, Ozzie Albies, and Austin Riley** have played in every single game. Those four, along with **Sean Murphy, Orlando Arcia, Spencer Strider, and Bryce Elder** will make up a quarter of the NL All-Star team.

Ronald Acuña Jr. created history yet again as he recorded his 40th steal for the Braves as they won their ninth consecutive game by a score of 4-2 against the Guardians at Progressive Field on Monday night.

Acuña's third-inning stolen base made him the first player in AL/NL history to record 40-plus stolen bases, hit 20-plus homers and record 50-plus RBIs before the All-Star break.

In fact, the only other players to record 40-plus stolen bases and record a double-digit homer total through their team's first 84 games were **Rickey Henderson** (1985, 1986 and 1990), **Eric Davis** (1986) and **Kenny Lofton** (1994).

The Braves have had three winning streaks of 8 or more

No other team has more than one such streak.

The Braves have hit at least three homers in 26 of 86 (30.2 percent) of their games this season. No other team entered Wednesday with more than 21 three-homer games. They have now homered in 23 straight games. This is MLB's longest streak of the season, besting the 22-game streak the Rays constructed to start the 2023 campaign.

Sean Murphy joined **Javy Lopez** (1999 and 2003) as the only catchers in Braves history to have 15-plus homers and 50-plus RBIs through the team's first 86 games.

The Braves have hit 166 homers, which is 30 more than any other MLB club. This puts them on pace to hit 312, which would best the MLB record of 307, set by the 2019 Twins.

Six Braves players have hit at least 15 homers this season. No other MLB club entered Wednesday with more than three players having reached this total. The Braves have a chance to join the 2019 Twins as the only teams in AL/NL history to have five players hit at least 30 homers. **Eddie Rosario**, who was one of those five Minnesota players, is one homer shy of becoming the seventh Atlanta player to reach 15 homers this season.

Then Friday night the Braves managed just two hits -- one of them a homer (of course) -- and that was enough to defeat the Rays, 2-1, on Friday night at Tropicana Field in a matchup of baseball's top two teams.

The Braves (59-28), who have won 26 of their past 30 games, needed just one jolt, a fourth-inning two-run homer from All-Star catcher Sean Murphy. It was the 24th consecutive game in which Atlanta homered, one off the Modern Era (since 1900) franchise record. The Braves have 167 homers, putting them on pace for 311, which would top the 2019 Twins (307) for the Major League record.

Ronald Acuña Jr.'s crazy 21-homer, 41-stolen base pre-All-Star-Game season in perspective, but here's the best way I can think to do it:

Most stolen bases with:

0+ home runs: Rickey Henderson, 1982, 130 SBs

10+ home runs: Rickey Henderson, 1982, 130 SBs

20+ home runs: Rickey Henderson, 1986, 87 SBs

30+ home runs: **Barry Bonds**, 1990, 52 SBs

40+ home runs: **Alex Rodriguez**, 1998, 46 SBs

50+ home runs: **Willie Mays**, 1955, 24 SBs

60+ home runs: **Sammy Sosa**, 1998, 18 SBs

70+ home runs: **Barry Bonds**, 2001, 13 SBs

MORE OHTANI

Shohei Ohtani is coming off a June in which he hit .394 and slugged .952. That .952 slugging percentage is the third-highest EVER RECORDED for the month of June. Check out this list:

1. **Babe Ruth**, June 1921, .979 SLG
2. Babe Ruth, June 1920, .960 SLG
3. Shohei Ohtani, June 2023, .952 SLG
4. **Lou Gehrig**, June 1936, .934 SLG
5. Lou Gehrig, June 1930, .919 SLG

Joe sheehan--Baseball has not been, and may never be, the same. For 2 1/2 years, one man has been both one of the best hitters in the sport, and one of the best pitchers. Babe Ruth, our standard for two-way excellence, never came close to that. The two-way greats of the Negro Leagues, **Double Duty Radcliffe and Bullet Rogan and Leon Day**, have a greater claim than Ruth on extended two-way greatness, though we're only piecing the numbers together now. None of those stars, however, played in the modern game. Ohtani is the best hitter in baseball this year against the nastiest cohort of pitchers who have ever lived, and one of the best pitchers against the strongest, best-trained hitters to ever dig into the box. He is one of one.

The numbers aren't enough. The numbers, honestly, don't matter. Ohtani sits on a different scale, one orthogonal to how we think of the performance of baseball players. His accomplishments confound WAR, render it as useless as RBI or shoe size or Win Shares. Ohtani's comps won't surround him in Seattle next week; they're not even on the pages of Baseball Reference, no matter how hard we click.

No, Ohtani's greatness cries out for broader comparisons. Maybe he's Michael Jordan, at his peak a devastating one-on-one scorer and a lockdown defender. Maybe he's Stevie Wonder, winning three straight Album of the Year Awards from 1974 to 1977 while making music at a level few have ever reached. Maybe the comp is Al Pacino banging out "The Godfather," "Serpico," "The Godfather II," and "Dog Day Afternoon" in four years in the early 1970s. The Beatles with every song in the top five in the spring of '64. You'd no more use WAR to describe Ohtani than you'd use beats per minute to describe "Can't Buy Me Love."

Ohtani tends to invite language that feels like hyperbole. The usual descriptions feel trite, pointless, for the two-way wonder, and so people stretch for tortured metaphors and wild descriptors. But much as this may sound like over-the-top, silly exaggeration, know that it is true:

This very well may have been the best month ever by an individual baseball player.

The numbers are so remarkable they feel almost difficult to grasp. In June, Ohtani posted a 286 OPS+ on a triple-slash of .394/.492/.952, and a 3.26 ERA in 30.1 innings pitched with 11.0 K/9. It should go without saying that no one has ever put up a stat line quite like that before. (Who could have?) But it's not simply that no one has done this because no one else has been in a position to try. It's more than that.

Look for players who posted a 285 OPS+ in a month with at least 100 plate appearances. There aren't many: It's been done just 28 times by 15 players in MLB's century and a half of history. Those players are...

Babe Ruth (six times, all of them after he stopped pitching to focus on hitting), Barry Bonds (five times), **Shoeless Joe Jackson** (three times), **Ty Cobb** (two times), **Ted Williams** (two times), **Jason Giambi**, **Hank Greenberg**, **Harry Heilmann**, **Todd Helton**, **Rogers Hornsby**, **Frank Howard**, **Roy Sievers**, **Frank Thomas** and **Carl Yastrzemski**. And now—of course—Ohtani.

Ohtani hit 15 home runs in June, which stands out even among this group of historically strong hitting performances. Indeed: The only players on the list whose incredible month included 15 or more home runs are **Barry Bonds**, **Babe Ruth**, Greenberg and Howard. It's quite a set! But Ohtani differentiated himself even more. He's tied for MLB's lead in triples with five, and in June, he recorded three of those. You could probably guess that neither Bonds nor Howard had a single triple in their historic slugging months; Ruth was the only one of the group to post three or more. But Ruth did not steal any bases. Ohtani? He stole four this month. No one with this many home runs in a month this hot ever stole this many bases.

In the same month Ohtani posted a 3.26 ERA this month with a strikeout rate of 11 per nine innings. He made five starts and averaged a little more than six innings in each (by the way).

Ohtani had a 1.444 OPS in June. To put that in a historical context, no player had done that (with a minimum of 125 plate appearances) since **Joe DiMaggio** had a 1.487 OPS in July of 1937.

Along with DiMaggio, only fellow Hall of Famers **Babe Ruth** (six times), **Lou Gehrig** (twice) and **Roger Hornsby** (twice) have had a higher OPS in a month than Ohtani. Those all came from 1920-37.

Ohtani has a 1.033 OPS at the plate and on the mound has held opponents to a .635 OPS.

MLB DRAFT IS TODAY

LSU superstars — outfielder Dylan Crews and right-hander Paul Skenes are likely to go 1-2 in today's MLB draft (in some order) to the Pirates and the Nationals. Some other teammates that went in the top 10:

2021: RHP **Jack Leiter** (No. 2) and RHP **Kumar Rocker** (No. 10) — Vanderbilt

Leiter is at AA for the Rangers, Rocker property of the Rangers, out with Tommy John surgery.

2017: OF **Pavin Smith** (No. 7) and OF **Adam Haseley** (No. 8) — Virginia

Smith is AAA for the D'backs, Haseley AAA for the White Sox.

2015: SS **Dansby Swanson** (No. 1) and RHP **Carson Fulmer** (No. 8) — Vanderbilt

Swanson is a two-time All-Star, a Gold Glove winner and World Series champion, now with the Cubs. Fulmer currently AAA for the Angels.

2011: RHP **Gerrit Cole** (No. 1) and RHP **Trevor Bauer** (No. 3) — UCLA

Cole tops the Yankees rotation. Bauer pitching in Japan after sex abuse accusations earned him a suspension from MLB.

2007: LHP **David Price** (No. 1) and RHP **Casey Weathers** (No. 8) — Vanderbilt

Price pitched well for the Rays, Red Sox and Dodgers. Weathers tried for almost 10 years to make it to the major leagues but command issues plagued him. He walked a ghastly 18 percent of batters. He ultimately never pitched above Double A.

2004: RHP **Philip Humber** (No. 3), RHP **Jeff Niemann** (No. 4) and RHP **Wade Townsend** (No. 8) — Rice

Humber threw a perfect game for the White Sox against the Mariners, pitched for five teams in the majors from 2006-13. Niemann was a pivotal member of the Rays' rotation from 2009-12, although a leg injury limited him to eight starts in 2012. During that span, he went 40-26 and posted a 4.08 ERA with a 1.286 WHIP in 544 1/3 innings. Townsend never made the majors, pitching in just 221 1/3 innings over five years in the minor leagues.

Speaking of the Draft (notes from Tyler Kepner, NYT)

On Sunday in Seattle, for the fourth year in a row — enough for a full class of college prospects — Major League Baseball will hold a streamlined version of its amateur draft. From an event with unlimited rounds to one with 50 rounds, then 40, and now just 20, the draft is exclusive and efficient, in keeping with baseball's restructured minor league system.

But efficiency has a cost: the countless long-shot careers that may never be realized. Dozens of current major leaguers turned pro after being drafted in rounds that no longer exist.

Kevin Kiermaier, the center fielder of the Toronto Blue Jays was picked in the 31st round by the Tampa Bay Rays in 2010.

Four players who made the All-Star team last summer — **David Bednar, Nestor Cortes, Ty France and Joe Manti** — were also chosen after the 20th round. So were two members of the Houston Astros' World Series-clinching lineup last fall (**Chas McCormick and Martín Maldonado**) and several other longtime major leaguers, like **Jesse Chavez, Seth Lugo, Kevin Pillar and Rowdy Tellez**.

Two Hall of Famers (**Mike Piazza and John Smoltz**) were drafted in extinct rounds, as were several others with a case for Cooperstown, like **Mark Buehrle, Keith Hernandez, Andy Pettitte and Jorge Posada**.

Starting with the 2021 season, teams have been limited to 180 players under club control — there was no limit before — and four domestic farm teams, plus one or two “complex teams” that operate from the spring training base. Short-season Class A teams were eliminated,

Some teams that were cut are now part of M.L.B.'s pre-draft league, created for scouts to get one last look at prospects before making their picks. Other teams have joined so-called partner leagues — the American Association, the Atlantic League, the Frontier League and the Pioneer League — partially funded by M.L.B. but independent of any specific franchise.

Undrafted players, in theory, can join one of those teams in hopes of attracting interest from M.L.B. But removing them from the draft acknowledges the staggering odds against them.

“When a player signs a professional contract, you want that player to have some chance of one day becoming a major league player,” said Morgan Sword, M.L.B.'s executive vice president for baseball operations. “That’s why players become minor league players, because they want to one day become major league players. And we did have a lot of players in the system who had — what’s the right way to say it? — almost no chance of ever reaching the major leagues.”

Then again, to paraphrase Jim Carrey in “Dumb and Dumber,” there is a huge difference between almost no chance and no chance. A draft selection — whatever the round — certifies that a major league franchise sees something in a player, and often that is all the player wants.

“It was definitely nice to know that they picked me for a reason, and I could get to go show it off and play my game,” said **Zach McKinstry**, the Detroit Tigers' regular leadoff hitter, who was drafted by the Los Angeles Dodgers in the 33rd round in 2016.

In recent decades, though, college programs have become more sophisticated, with advanced facilities and instruction that offered an appealing alternative to the dusty outposts that once made up the low minors.

“The development time is less and less with the caps on the total number of players, so the guys you would pick late are probably going to go to college,” said Matt Arnold, the Milwaukee Brewers' general manager. “Signing and then going to Helena, or wherever, is going to be less appealing than a really nice A.C.C. or SEC school — and even those second-tier programs have a lot of things they can sell.”

Sword, M.L.B.'s executive vice president for baseball operations, said the costs of improvements across the minor leagues — in ballparks, travel, nutrition and salaries — far outweigh the savings from eliminating so many draft picks; "it's probably nine figures per year leaguewide," he said. Sword added that in 2021, more than 200 players jumped from partner leagues to the affiliated minors.

"The paths for those types of guys to the big leagues exist just as they always have," he said. "It's just that the path is different than it once was."

Is Skenes best Draft pitching prospect ever? Ranking the top 10

Jim Callis, mlb.com

Paul Skenes just completed one of the most memorable college pitching seasons ever.

Skenes led Louisiana State to a national championship and won Most Outstanding Player honors at the College World Series after earning Southeastern Conference pitcher of the year accolades. He topped NCAA Division I in strikeouts (209, eclipsing **Ben McDonald's** SEC and school records), strikeouts per nine innings (15.3) and WHIP (0.75) while ranking second in victories (12), ERA (1.69) and opponent average (.165).

Without a doubt, Skenes is the best pitching prospect in this year's Draft. The question is, is he the best ever since MLB introduced its Draft in 1965?

There have been several pitchers who laid claim to that title during the nearly six decades of the Draft, but Stephen Strasburg essentially retired the debate in 2009. Until now.

To that point, no Draft prospect ever had been hyped as much as **Stephen Strasburg** was 14 years ago, and he lived up to it. After striking out 23 in a single game against Utah and becoming the lone collegian to make the U.S. Olympic team in 2008, he destroyed college hitters in 2009. He pitched San Diego State to the NCAA regionals for the first time in 18 seasons, spun a no-hitter in his final home game and led D-I in ERA (1.32), strikeouts (195), strikeout rate (16.1, the fourth-highest mark ever) and hits per nine innings (5.4).

Strasburg owned the best fastball and curveball in his Draft class, while Skenes features the top heater and slider in his. Both of them reached 102 mph - Strasburg did so in an era where no one else could - and both flashed a plus changeup that they rarely needed while posting nearly as many wins as walks. The 6-foot-6, 235-pound Skenes is taller and more physical than the 6-foot-4, 220-pound Strasburg was.

We've spent the spring asking veteran scouts whether Skenes has seized Strasburg's throne. It's a close call and both have their proponents.

"I think Skenes has a better fastball and command and Strasburg has better secondary pitches," a special assistant said. "The big separator is Skenes has much cleaner arm action and less effort to his delivery."

"Skenes is absolutely on the short list but is he the best pitcher I've ever scouted? I don't know that I can quite say that," countered a vice president of player personnel. "His stuff is right there with Strasburg and he's a very good athlete for a big guy. But Strasburg is the best pitcher I've ever scouted because he pitched better."

"They're tough to compare in some ways," a vice president of scouting said. "I would lean Strasburg, who was throwing 100 mph when nobody was, and he could spot it up on the edges of the plate. I thought his fastball played a little better, too. It would be close, though."

It says here that Strasburg barely retains his title because his stuff was more extraordinary compared to his era and his control and command were a little finer. Skenes comes in second on our top 10 list below, which is based on the pitchers' talent at the time they were drafted.

We focused on including guys who were mentioned as the Draft's best-ever pitching prospect at the time, rather than just loading up our list with a bunch of recent arms with souped-up stuff. So with apologies to **Paul Wilson, Gerrit Cole, Dylan Bundy** and others, here is our ranking:

1. Stephen Strasburg, San Diego State (No. 1 overall, 2009, Nationals)

Repeated injuries may mean that Strasburg's career is over and will fall short of the Hall of Fame, but he also won 113 games and a World Series MVP award, made three All-Star teams and ranks seventh all-time in strikeout rate (10.5 per nine innings).

2. Paul Skenes, Louisiana State (2023)

As a sophomore at Air Force a year ago, Skenes was the only D-I player to reach doubles figures in both wins and home runs, and his considerable power potential would land him in the top three rounds if he were purely a position player.

3. Mark Prior, Southern California (No. 2 overall, 2001, Cubs)

Prior had superlative stuff, but his command and effortless delivery were what set him apart. He reached the Majors nine months after turning pro and finished third in National League Cy Young Award voting after pitching the Cubs to within a game of the World Series in 2003 - in what proved to be his only full and completely healthy big-league season. He led the Majors in strikeout rate (10.2 per nine innings) in 2005 but was done at that level after nine more starts the next year.

4. Ben McDonald, Louisiana State (No. 1 overall, 1989, Orioles)

McDonald was the obvious No. 1 pick in '89 after dominating for Olympic gold medal-winning Team USA the summer before, and he further cemented that status with a 45-inning scoreless streak as a junior. A former basketball player at LSU as well, he smashed the bonus record (\$350,000) and became the first drafted pitcher to land a big-league contract (worth a guaranteed \$824,000). He joined the Orioles after two Minor League starts and won 78 games in nine years while battling persistent shoulder problems.

5. Josh Beckett, Spring (Texas) HS (No. 2 overall, 1999, Marlins)

Twenty-four years after leaving high school, Beckett still reigns as the best prep pitcher ever. He threw in the mid-90s during an era when radar guns read significantly lower than they do now, featured an equally devastating curveball and impressed scouts with his off-the-charts competitive fire. A three-time All-Star, he was a key part of two championship teams, winning World Series MVP honors with the 2003 Marlins and American League Championship Series accolades with the 2007 Red Sox.

6. Todd Van Poppel, Martin (Texas) HS (No. 14 overall, 1990, Athletics)

Van Poppel had similar stuff to Beckett and was regarded as the top prospect in the '90 Draft, but signability concerns dropped him to the defending World Series champion A's at No. 14. It looked like a coup when Oakland signed him to an unprecedented \$1.2 million big league contract, but that proved to be his downfall because he had to be in the Majors for good by 1994, when he still lacked polish. He recorded a 5.58 ERA in 11 seasons, mostly as a reliever.

7. Brien Taylor, East Carteret (N.C.) HS, (No. 1 overall, 1991, Yankees)

Taylor topped out in Double-A after tearing his rotator cuff in an off-field fight, but scouts still regard him as the top high school left-hander in Draft history. He owned a mid-90s fastball and a snapdragon curveball - sort of imagine **Aroldis Chapman** if he were a North Carolina prepster three decades ago - and rocked the industry by landing a \$1.55 million bonus, nearly tripling the existing bonus record and topping Van Poppel's landmark contract.

8. David Clyde, Westchester (Texas) HS, (No. 1 overall, 1973, Rangers)

The only high school pitcher selected No. 1 in the first 26 Drafts, Clyde drew repeated Sandy Koufax comparisons after going 18-0 with a 0.18 ERA, a then-prep record 328 strikeouts in 148 innings and five shutouts in five Texas 5-A state playoff starts. The floundering Rangers signed him for \$65,000 and immediately sent him to the big leagues, which produced sellout crowds that saved the franchise. But getting rushed ruined his career. He won seven games in three seasons with Texas and was done in the Majors by age 24.

9. Floyd Bannister, Arizona State (No. 1 overall, 1976, Astros)

Bannister won back-to-back NCAA D-I strikeout titles at Arizona State, where he was part of a '76 team that produced a record 13 big leaguers and set a since-broken record with 65 wins, yet finished third at the College World Series. One of the biggest lock No. 1 choices in the early years of the Draft, he earned 134 victories in 15 years in the big leagues, made one All-Star team and led the AL in whiffs once and whiff rate twice.

10. Burt Hooton, Texas (No. 2 overall, June secondary 1971, Cubs)

Hooton tried to throw a knuckleball as a teenager and wound up pioneering a knuckle-curve instead, and he rode that weapon to a 35-3 record with a 1.14 ERA in three college seasons at Texas. The rules at the time steered him to the secondary phase of the June Draft, where he went second overall and signed for \$75,000 before making his pro debut in the Majors. He struck out 15 in his second big league start and twirled a shutout in his third that September, then tossed a no-hitter in his first start in 1972. While he didn't dominate to the same extent afterward, he won 151 games in 15 seasons and was MVP of the 1981 NL Championship Series en-route to a World Series title with the Dodgers.

CHASING .400

MLb.com

The Marlins' **Luis Arraez** has thrilled the baseball world throughout the first half with his spirited pursuit of the first .400 season in the AL or NL since Ted Williams in 1941. But even if Arraez falls short of that lofty goal, there is another type of history he can make. Arraez has an absurd 55-point lead over the Braves' **Ronald Acuña Jr.** (.388 to .333) after last Saturday's contest between their teams.

After all, context matters. Arraez regularly faces high-90s fastballs, wipeout breaking pitches and waves of fresh relief pitchers. MLB hitters as a group are batting .248 -- 140 points below Arraez. Back in 1941, in a far different environment and before integration or expansion, batters hit .261.

Largest BA leads, MLB, pre-break

1. 62 pts. -- 1977 **Rod Carew** (.394) vs. **Bob Bailor/Ted Simmons** (.332)
2. 52 pts. -- 1939 **Joe DiMaggio** (.435) vs. **Morrie Arnovich** (.383)

3. 39 pts. -- 1935 **Arky Vaughan** (.398) vs. **Bob Johnson** (.359)
4. 38 pts. -- 1983 Rod Carew (.402) vs. **George Brett** (.364)
5. 36 pts. -- 1955 **Al Kaline** (.371) vs. **Roy Campanella** (.335)

Largest BA leads, AL/NL, pre-break

1. 77 pts. -- 1939 Joe DiMaggio (.435) vs. **Jimmie Foxx** (.358)
2. 65 pts. -- 1993 **John Olerud** (.395) vs. **David Segui** (.330)
3. 62 pts. -- 1977 Rod Carew (.394) vs. Bob Bailor (.332)
4. 52 pts. -- 1948 Stan Musial (.403) vs. **Richie Ashburn** (.351)
5. 51 pts. -- 1974 Rod Carew (.382) vs. **Carl Yastrzemski** (.331)

Maintaining that kind of lead over the field through a full season has proven more difficult. While every leader listed above did at minimum win his league's batting title, no player has ever ended the season leading MLB by more than 50 points.

Largest BA leads, MLB, reg. season

- 1-T. 50 pts. -- 1977 Rod Carew (.388) vs. **Dave Parker** (.338)
- 1-T. 50 pts. -- 1901 **Nap Lajoie** (.426) vs. **Jesse Burkett** (.376)
3. 47 pts. -- 1941 Ted Williams (.406) vs. **Cecil Travis** (.359)
4. 46 pts. -- 1924 Rogers Hornsby (.424) vs. Babe Ruth (.378)
5. 38 pts. -- 1980 George Brett (.390) vs. **Cecil Cooper** (.352)

Largest BA leads, AL/NL, reg. season

1. 86 pts. -- 1901 Nap Lajoie (.426) vs. **Mike Donlin** (.340)
2. 52 pts. -- 1977 Rod Carew (.388) vs. **Lyman Bostock** (.336)
3. 49 pts. -- 1924 Rogers Hornsby (.424) vs. **Zack Wheat** (.375)
4. 48 pts. -- 1974 Rod Carew (.364) vs. **Jorge Orta** (.316)
- 5-T. 47 pts. -- 1941 Ted Williams (.406) vs. **Cecil Travis** (.359)
- 5-T. 47 pts. -- 1922 **Rogers Hornsby** (.401) vs. **Ray Grimes** (.354)
- 5-T. 47 pts. -- 1921 Rogers Hornsby (.397) vs. **Austin McHenry** (.350)

Clearly, the conditions haven't been right for this kind of dominance in a long time, and despite the similarities between Arraez and, say, Carew, we can't really compare the leagues all of these guys were playing in to the one we're watching today. Being a .400 hitter -- a milestone Arraez is obviously flirting with -- is less conceivable now than it ever has been. Despite how impressive his raw average is, the gulf between himself and Acuña does more to represent just how much of an outlier Arraez is, even against some of the best hitters baseball has ever seen.

Batting .396 during the First Half puts Luis Arraez in Elite Company

Tom Stone, NowTakingtheField@substack.com

Since 1941 when **Ted Williams** hit .406 for the season, who else has hit .380 or higher during the first half?
And what is the record for the biggest gap between first and second place for BA in a season?

Luis Arraez continues to hit at a high level. Not with much power of course—that isn't his game, and so he has only three HR at the half-way point in the 2023 season. But he is batting .396 after the Miami Marlins have played 81 games, a full 80-points higher than his AL-leading .316 average last year with the Minnesota Twins.

To put this great start into historical context, two questions came to mind. First, where does that batting average rank amongst other great first half-performances? Dating back to 1901, there have been 22 players with 3.1 plate appearances per team game (the minimum required to qualify for a batting average title) to hit .400 or higher in the first half of the season. Ted Williams in 1941 was one such player, as he was hitting .405 in the first half of the season in which he ended up batting .406 in the end—the last time anyone has hit .400 or higher for an entire season.

Of the 22 player-seasons, 19 of them came before Williams' 1941 first half. **Rogers Hornsby** did it three times—and two other times was hitting .399 at the half-way mark. Ty Cobb also hit .400+ three times in the first half, including by far the record of .446 in 1911 (second is **George Sisler's** .426 in 1922).

The only two times since 1941 that a player has been hitting .400 or higher at the end of the first half were **Stan Musial** in 1948 with a .403 average and **Rod Carew** in 1983 with a .402 mark. Here are all the AL and NL players, since 1941, who have hit .380 or higher during the first half—followed by what they ended up batting by the end of that season (* indicates they ended up leading their particular league in batting average that year):

- .403/.376 Stan Musial - 1948*
- .402/.339 Rod Carew - 1983
- .398/.366 **Larry Walker** - 1997
- .396/.352 **Tommy Holmes** - 1945
- .395/.363 **John Olerud** - 1993*
- .394/.388 Rod Carew - 1977*
- .394/.372 **Tony Gwynn** - 1997*
- .391/.370 **Andres Galarraga** - 1993*
- .389/.372 **Nomar Garciaparra** - 2000*
- .388/.369 Ted Williams - 1948*
- .384/.355 **Darin Erstad** - 2000
- .383/.394 Tony Gwynn - 1994*
- .383/.372 **Todd Helton** - 2000*
- .383/.353 **Frank Thomas** - 1994
- .382/.364 Rod Carew - 1974*
- .382/.359 **Paul O'Neill** - 1994*

- .382/.379 Larry Walker - 1999*

Some interesting names here, with Rod Carew's three seasons being the most on this list. His epic 1977 campaign saw him hit very consistently throughout the year, with a .394 average in the first half and a .388 average overall. In 1983, at age 37, he wasn't able to sustain his fast start of .402 in the first half, as he then hit only .280 in the second half to end with a .339 mark.

The distance between Arraez and everyone else

Another interesting aspect of what Arraez is doing this year is just how much higher his batting average is than anyone else across MLB. As of the time of this writing, the second highest average of .331 belongs to **Ronald Acuña Jr.** of the Atlanta Braves. That is 65 points behind Arraez' .396 mark. Yes, **Corey Seager** of the Rangers is hitting .345, but injury has limited him to only 49 games and 224 plate appearances, so he doesn't qualify for the leaderboards yet. And even if he did, there would still be a 51 point difference between him and Arraez.

So this big gap between Arraez and the rest of the field made me wonder... what have been the biggest MLB batting average gaps? Going back to 1901, I found 24 seasons where the highest overall average was at least 20 points higher than anyone else (from either league). The most recent came in 2010, when **Josh Hamilton** hit .359 and **Carlos Gonzalez** hit .336—a 23 point gap. There appears to be a tie for the largest gap—Carew's previously mentioned 1977 season, and then way back in 1901 when **Nap Lajoie** hit .426 for the Philadelphia Athletics (while also leading the new AL in just about everything, including runs, hits, doubles, HR, TB, RBI, BA, OBP, SLG, OPS, and OPS+).

Here are the nine seasons that my research found ended with a gap of 30 points or more between the top two qualifying batting averages:

- 1977 - 50 points: Rod Carew .388, **Dave Parker** .338
- 1901 - 50 points: Nap Lajoie .426, **Jesse Burkett** .376
- 1941 - 47 points: Ted Williams .406, **Cecil Travis** .359
- 1924 - 46 points: Rogers Hornsby .424, Babe Ruth .378
- 1980 - 38 points: George Brett .390, **Cecil Cooper** .352
- 1970 - 37 points: **Rico Carty** .366, **Alex Johnson** .329
- 1935 - 32 points: **Arky Vaughan** .385, **Joe Medwick** .353
- 1917 - 30 points: **Ty Cobb** .383, George Sisler .353
- 1909 - 30 points: Ty Cobb .377, **Eddie Collins** .347

It is exciting to track Arraez this year, and it will be interesting to see where his batting average ends up—and if he leads MLB, will it be by more than 50 points, setting a new modern-era record?

Hitting .300 these days isn't just better than average

By Barry Svrluga, The Washington Post

The .400 hitter in baseball died with **Ted Williams**, no matter what Miami Marlins infielder **Luis Arraez** is hitting, which is .389. What's more surprising and alarming: The .300 hitter is sick, and while he might not die off completely, he's worthy of protection and observation.

What Arraez is doing – rapping out 118 hits in his first 79 games – is impressive and worthy of attention and not just because he was above .400 as recently as June 25. It's because this is not the direction baseball is heading. Hitting has always been hard. In the 2020s, it's as hard as it has been in a half-century – maybe longer.

After Sunday, 153 players had enough plate appearances to qualify for the major league lead in batting average. Ten of them were hitting .300 or better. If that holds – and we still have more than half the season to play, so it's a sizable “if” – it will be the smallest group of .300 hitters since just six reached that mark in 1968, the infamous Year of the Pitcher.

This isn't a blip. It's a trend. Last year, just 11 players hit .300 or better. From 2010 to 2019, baseball averaged 22.1 .300 hitters per season and never had fewer than 16. In the previous decade, the sport averaged 39.7 .300 hitters, never fewer than 33 and as many as 53 in 2000.

Now, batting average long has been outdated as an effective tool to evaluate a player's offensive contributions because it considers only a very narrow aspect of a player's game: how often he reaches base via a hit. It doesn't take into account how regularly he walks or how much power he provides. On-base-plus-slugging percentage is the most accessible number that absorbs both the ability to get on base and the ability to hit for extra bases. It's much more useful.

Still, I would argue that most fans – and most players and most writers – still have a more intuitive understanding of what a .300 hitter is than, say, what carrying an .850 OPS means. The number carries history and romance. So in that way, it's still relevant.

But if there are fewer .300 hitters all the time, then hitting .300 doesn't mean the same as it did 10 or 20 or 40 years ago. The mind needs to adjust.

There are a zillion reasons for this, none more important than the axis around which all of baseball revolves: velocity. Since 2007 and the inception of PitchF/x technology – which quantified the speed and break of pitches – average fastball velocity has risen every season (with the exception of a small downtick in the pandemic-shortened 2020 campaign). An average fastball in 2007: 91.1 mph. An average fastball this year: 93.9 mph. That's an astounding difference.

Throw in the fact that hitters see the same pitchers less frequently because starters are throwing fewer innings than ever before and that – until this season – many teams employed defensive shifts that positioned fielders in the area a specific hitter was most likely to hit the ball, and the average major league hitter now doesn't look, statistically, anything like he did over the previous generation.

The collective .243 average of hitters across baseball last season was the lowest since 1968, after which MLB lowered the mound to a standard height of 10 inches and adjusted the strike zone. The sweeping rule changes this past offseason – most importantly the institution of a pitch clock and the banning of extreme defensive

shifts – have helped tick that up to .248 as the season reaches its midpoint. Still, that number, if it holds, would tie for the fourth-lowest collective average in the past half-century.

So if it's more difficult for all of MLB to hit, then it's more difficult for individual players to do the same. Since Williams hit .406 in 1941, just four players have posted a higher average than .380 over a whole season: Williams (.388 in 1957), **Tony Gwynn** (.394 in strike-shortened 1994), **George Brett** (.390 in 1980) and **Rod Carew** (.388 in 1977). What Arraez is doing now – and a significant reason it's highly likely he will finish the year with a lower average than any of the above players – is more of a statistical outlier relative to the majors than what any of the other guys did. The MLB averages: .258 in 1957, .270 in 1994, .265 in 1980 and .264 in 1977.

So, then, the gaps between those .400 flirts and the average hitters in the majors that year: 130 points for Williams, 125 for Brett and 124 for Gwynn and Carew. The gap between Arraez and MLB's collective .248 entering Saturday was 141 points.

That's a lot of numbers, and this is exceptionally nerdy stuff. But the fallout of it all is that how we process information about a game we think we know so well has to change. What, for instance, would you say an average major leaguer hits? My brain kind of lands on .260 or .265. In today's game, that's above average. A guy who hits .248, not long ago, might have had a tough time staying in the lineup. Now he's average.

Thus, in the current environment, an appreciation for those who can hit .300. After Sunday, they were: Arraez, Atlanta's Ronald Acuña Jr. (.336), Tampa Bay's **Yandy Díaz** (.318), Toronto's **Bo Bichette** (.317), Philadelphia's **Nick Castellanos** (.316), **Freddie Freeman** of the Los Angeles Dodgers (.315), Baltimore's **Austin Hays** (.312), **Shohei Ohtani** of the Los Angeles Angels (.306), Boston's **Masataka Yoshida** (.305) and the Cleveland Guardians' **Josh Naylor** (.301). Batting average might be a one-dimensional stat. But the game is continuing to change, so the standards by which we evaluate players has to follow.

INTERESTING KEN ROSENTHAL ALL-STAR GAME OBSERVATION

Aaron Judge and Yordan Alvarez, arguably the two top sluggers in the American League, are likely to miss the game with injuries.

Thus, the players who signed the seven biggest contracts last offseason — Judge (\$360 million), **Manny Machado** (\$350M), **Rafael Devers** (\$331M), **Trea Turner** (\$300M), **Xander Bogaerts** (\$280M), **Carlos Correa** (\$200M) and **Jacob deGrom** (\$185M) — all might be absent from the festivities at T-Mobile Park. Of that group, Judge and deGrom are the only ones hurt. The others are simply not performing at All-Star levels.

Oh, but that's not all. Three other \$300 million players — **Francisco Lindor**, **Bryce Harper** and **Giancarlo Stanton** — also are unlikely to be All-Stars. Ditto for the pitchers with the two highest average salaries in the game's history at \$43.33 million, **Max Scherzer** and **Justin Verlander**. This has to have owners thinking.

MORE ALL-STAR GAME FACTS

Sarah Lang, mlb.com

The Braves lead the way with eight All-Stars -- **Bryce Elder, Spencer Strider, Sean Murphy, Ozzie Albies, Orlando Arcia, Matt Olson, Austin Riley and Ronald Acuña Jr.** That's their most in a season in franchise history, surpassing 2003 and 1997, when they had seven.

Only six teams have had more than eight All-Stars in a year, all of those were AL clubs. The Braves' eight All-Stars tie the 2008 Cubs, 1960 Pirates, 1956 Reds and 1943 Cardinals for the most All-Stars for an NL club in a season.

Six of those Braves are position players, tied for the third-most by a team in a year, behind only the 1976 Reds and 1939 Yankees, each with seven. Before these Braves, the last team with at least six were the 2008 Red Sox. Before that? Not since the 1978 Red Sox.

This is **Clayton Kershaw's** 10th All-Star selection, tying **Pee Wee Reese** for most in Dodgers history. Kershaw's 10th season on an All-Star roster ties **Steve Carlton, Randy Johnson and Tom Glavine** for fifth-most among pitchers, behind only **Warren Spahn** (14), Mariano Rivera (13), **Tom Seaver** (12) and **Roger Clemens** (11).

For the third year in a row, **Shohei Ohtani** is in as both a hitter -- voted the AL's starting DH -- and a pitcher. In 2021, he was the first player to be on the All-Star team as a hitter and pitcher, and now he's done it three times.

Mike Trout was voted in as a starter (prior to his broken wrist). It's his 11th All-Star selection overall, and he's 31 years old. He's one of eight players to make at least 11 All-Star teams by his age-31 season, joining **Johnny Bench** (12), **Al Kaline** (12), **Mickey Mantle** (12), **Ken Griffey Jr.** (11), **Alex Rodriguez** (11), **Rod Carew** (11) and **Henry Aaron** (11).

Josh Jung and Corbin Carroll will be the second duo of rookies to start the same All-Star Game, joining **Kosuke Fukudome and Geovany Soto** in 2008. Those two were Cubs teammates, meaning this will be the first time that each All-Star squad has a rookie starter. These rookies don't come around too often -- the last rookie to start an ASG at any position was Aaron Judge in 2017.

Freddie Freeman will be the third Dodgers first baseman to start an All-Star Game, joining **Steve Garvey** (seven times) and **Gil Hodges** (1951). He's one of three Dodgers starters, with **Mookie Betts and J.D. Martinez**. This will be the first time the Dodgers have three or more non-pitcher starters since 1980, when they had four in Garvey, **Davey Lopes, Bill Russell and Reggie Smith**.

Arizona rookie outfielder Corbin Carroll, a Seattle native elected to start, is the youngest All-Star at 22. Dodgers designated hitter J.D. Martinez is the oldest at 35.

Twenty-six players are first-time All-Stars.

Ten Players Played All 15 Innings in the 1967 MLB All Star Game

American League

Bill Freehan, Tigers, C

Brooks Robinson, Orioles, 3B

Tony Oliva, Twins, CF

Harmon Killebrew, Twins, 1B

Tony Conigliaro, Red Sox, RF

Carl Yastrzemski, Red Sox, LF

National League

Roberto Clemente, Pirates, RF

Hank Aaron, Braves, started in CF and finished in LF

Orlando Cepeda, Giants, 1B

Gene Alley, Pirates, SS

By comparison, in the 2022 All Star Game, the AL used 32 players and the NL used 30 – and not a single player played the whole nine innings.

Ted Williams went the distance in the 1946 All Star game – played in front of the hometown fans at Fenway and – thanks to that full-game experience – wrote his way into the ASG records books. Williams came into the game hitting .347, with 23 home runs, 82 runs scored and 71 RBI in 79 regular-season games. Compared to the day he was about to have that would look like a slump. Here's how Williams' day went.

In the first inning, batting third and facing the Cubs' **Claude Passeau**, Williams drew a walk and then scored on a home run by Yankees' RF **Charlie Keller**.

In the bottom of the fourth, leading off against new NL hurler **Kirby Higbe** of the Dodgers, Williams homered to give the AL a 3-0 lead.

In the bottom of the fifth, with Higbe still in the game, Teddy Ballgame came up again – this time with one out the Senators' CF **Stan Spence** on third and the Browns' SS **Vern Stephens** on second. This time, Williams delivered a run-scoring single.

In the bottom of the seventh, facing the Reds' **Ewell Blackwell** with none on and two out, Williams singled again.

Finally, in the bottom of the eighth – facing the Pirates' **Rip Sewell** and his Ephus pitch – with Stephens and Browns' P **Jack Kramer** on base, William capped off his day with a three-run homer.

The AL squad prevailed by a 12-0 score – and Williams' final tally was: four-for-four, plus a walk, two home runs, four runs scored and five runs driven in. In the process, Williams set or tied the following All Star Game single-game records:

- Runs Scored (four – Williams still stands alone);
- Total bases (ten – Williams stands alone);
- Runs Batted in (five – later, 1954, tied by the Indians’ **Al Rosen**);
- Base Hits (four – tying the Cardinals’ **Ducky Medwick**, 1937, and later matched by the Red Sox’ **Carl Yastrzemski**, 1970);
- Home Runs (two – tying Pirates’ **Arky Vaughn**, who did it in 1942; later tied by the Indians’ **Al Rosen** in 1954; Giants’ **Willie McCovey** in 1969; and Expos’ **Gary Carter** in 1981).

Willie Mays All Star Game Career Record

Games Played	24	tied with Henry Aaron and Stan Musial
At Bats	75	
Plate Appearances	82	
Runs Scored	20	
Hits	23	
Total Bases	40	tied with Stan Musial
Triples	3	tied with Brooks Robinson
Stolen Bases	6	

A STORY I DIDN'T KNOW

On July 6, 1992, MLB commissioner Fay Vincent ruled that four National League teams would be switching divisions, prompting an ultimately successful legal challenge from the Cubs and leading to today’s three-division structure in the AL and NL?

With the Rockies and Marlins set to join the NL in 1993, Vincent proposed division realignment that would send the Braves and Reds from the West to the East and the Cubs and Cardinals from the East to the West.

The league didn’t really *have* to rejigger the divisions. Both had six teams in 1992, and the Rockies and Marlins would add one team to each division, but Vincent believed that the Braves would be a natural rival for the Marlins if placed in the same division, hence the flip-flop.

Realignment wasn’t a controversial idea—except to one team: the Cubs. Chicago balked at the idea of being moved to the West division because it believed the increased number of late games on the West Coast would lead to smaller television audiences. The fact that the Tribune Co. owned both the Cubs and WGN, the network that broadcast their games, made it a particularly thorny proposition.

The Cubs filed a lawsuit in federal court to prevent the realignment plan and were successful. A judge issued a preliminary injunction July 23, ruling that Vincent “exceeded his authority in ordering the transfer.” An appeal was supposed to be heard Sept. 30, but the two sides agreed to drop the suit and keep the existing division alignment for the 1993 season.

With the restructured two-division setup dead, MLB turned its attention to realigning around three divisions in each league. The new system was approved in September 1993, with the Rangers’ casting the lone dissenting vote. You can’t please everyone.

This Week’s Birthdays

Mike Andrews	80
Goose Gossage	72
Frank Tanana	70
Willie Randolph	69
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Ol' Satchel Unpacks His Bags



Leroy (Satchel) Paige, fabulous veteran of Negro baseball, dons Cleveland uniform and grips baseball for inspection by Bill Veeck, president of club, after signing contract yesterday to pitch for Indians. Paige scorned majors for many years, but agreed to join Cleveland when Bobby Feller recommended him recently to Veeck.

75 years ago this week, Satchel Paige left the Kansas City Monarchs and signed to play for the Cleveland Indians.

"I know this ain't Kansas City," Satchel said. "But I'll be out there with a ball in my hand, and the fella at the plate will have a bat in his ... I'm starting my major league career with one thing in my favor: I won't be afraid of anybody. I've been around too long for that."

Paige claimed to be 40 years old when he signed the contract. Our best bet now is he was 41. There will always be those who guess he was a lot older than that.

“I ain’t as fast as I used to be,” he admitted to reporters. “But I’m a better pitcher. I used to overpower ‘em. Now, I out-cute ‘em.”

He was the seventh Black player signed after integration — **Jackie Robinson, Larry Doby, Hank Thompson, Willard Brown, Dan Bankhead and Roy Campanella** were first — but he was the first black STAR signed. That is to say, he was the first African-American player signed who was already famous for playing baseball*.

“In the last two decades,” the Associated Press reported on the day of the signing, “Satchel has made most of the major leaguers admit he is one of the all-time great hurlers.”

**Jackie Robinson was well-known for his football, basketball and track exploits, as well as for winning his court martial case in the Army.*

Satchel Paige made his American League debut two days later, on July 9, pitching two scoreless innings of middle-relief against the St. Louis Browns. His first strikeout was against an outfielder named Whitey Platt. Hey, I don’t make this stuff up.

Satch didn’t make his first start for Cleveland until Aug. 3 against Washington. More than 72,000 fans attended, and Paige won the game — pitching seven innings and allowing three runs. On Aug. 13 and 20, Paige threw back-to-back shutouts against the White Sox, drawing more than 50,000 fans in Chicago and more than 78,000 back in Cleveland. He was a phenomenon quite unlike any in baseball history before him.

LONGER READS

FRANCHISE MODE IN REAL LIFE: HOW ONE CAPE COD LEAGUE TEAM IS TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION FOR THE FRONT OFFICE

By Greg McKenna Globe

BARNSTABLE — Cole Velis has to take a call. The Hyannis Harbor Hawks need a first baseman and their general manager, Nick Johnson, is on the phone.

“Do you like him?” Johnson asks of a Power Five player the Cape Cod League team is considering signing.

“Let’s do it,” Velis responds. He cites the player’s .900-plus OPS on fastballs over 92 mile per hour and a low strikeout rate on pitches inside the zone — two indicators the player should make a successful transition to a wooden bat. Beyond the numbers, Velis loves a midseason adjustment he saw on video.

Johnson calls back, however, with unfortunate news: The player has experienced a setback recovering from a late-season injury. Velis, perched atop the kitchen counter, shares the update with four of his roommates, who are sitting on their laptops in the living room of their West Yarmouth rental.

They shift their attention away from the London series game between the Cardinals and Cubs and dive into a list of names, searching for a prospect who fits the low-strikeout, athletic profile Hyannis is seeking.

“It’s like playing franchise mode in real life,” Velis says, referencing the popular video game feature that allows players to customize teams.

While the Cape League is still a slice of Americana, baseball’s analytics revolution is gradually being embraced by the nation’s premier collegiate summer league. Johnson wants the Hawks ahead of the curve.

The result? A team of 13 baseball operations interns led by assistant coach Johnny Davis, a pitcher at Assumption University and former intern who is proud to lead “the largest analytics team ever assembled on the Cape.”

Like Davis, Velis also has collegiate playing experience. The rising sophomore is a pitcher at Babson, while fellow intern Jack Steele was a former starter at UMass Amherst. The others are mostly student managers and analysts for their college programs.

When Johnson took over in September 2021, Hyannis was coming off nine- and eight-win seasons in 2019 and 2021. Most Cape League rosters are built by field managers, but Johnson wanted to do things differently.

If Johnson was going to put in 30-40 hours per week on top of his day job of running a reality TV studio, he wanted the final call on roster moves. Compared with field managers of other teams, however, he lacked connections with college coaches. Johnson knew analytics would help him confirm the college coaches’ assessments, which often inflated their players’ attributes, and find overlooked talent at the mid-major and junior college levels.

He just needed people who, unlike himself, hadn’t struggled in Algebra II.

The Cape League prides itself on featuring the “Stars of Tomorrow” — 27 percent of current big leaguers once played on the Cape — and its broadcasting internships are highly coveted. Why not, Johnson thought, also develop the next generation of front office personnel?

“If you can get 40 to 50 of the best student managers, student analysts in the country out to Cape Cod, giving the best players the best information, I just think it’d be such a great look for the league,” says Mazdak Darvari, an associate in the Red Sox front office and one of the Hawks’ four inaugural baseball operations interns last summer. (He recruited Velis, his former teammate at Lexington High School, to Hyannis.)

Thanks to a league partnership, every Cape team receives advanced hit- and pitch-tracking data from TrackMan units, which cost about \$25,000.

“Find me other high school fields in America with TrackMan units,” says Max Fecske, an assistant coach for the Orleans Firebirds who oversees the team’s three baseball ops interns. “It’s beautiful. It’s an unbelievable opportunity for people who want to do that for a living in the future.”

All teams have equal access to the data.

“What I don’t think a lot of people have is the people that can take that data and put it into layman’s form that a coach can use and players can digest,” Johnson says.

Hyannis has Davis. The Marstons Mills native grew up playing on the Hawks’ home field, McKeon Park, during recess while attending middle school at St. Francis Xavier.

Davis was throwing a bullpen session during summer ball after his freshman year at Assumption when he felt his arm pop. While missing his sophomore season rehabbing from Tommy John surgery, former Cape League president Judy Scarafile connected him with Johnson, who took a call thinking his baseball ops team was already full.

“Within two minutes, I was like, ‘Well, this kid is a savant,’ ” Johnson recalls.

He and Hyannis’s interns also use “super-genius” to refer to Davis, who signed a temporary playing contract with the Harbor Hawks before deciding to spend his summer focusing on his long-term baseball future. There was plenty of attention from major league front offices and other firms, but Davis returned to Hyannis to lead an operation that directly impacts roster building, game strategy, and player development.

He’s especially fond of Stuff+ models. With machine learning — an artificial intelligence technique — they predict how often a pitch will generate a swing and a miss using variables such as velocity and spin, horizontal and vertical break, and metrics about the pitch’s release.

Davis says Hyannis coach Eric Beattie, who also started with the Harbor Hawks in 2022, now has questions for him about Stuff+, which Beattie hadn’t even heard of the year before. Beattie, a former pitcher in the Red Sox organization, says Davis’s work empowers player development.

“Any time you can provide facts, it takes the opinion and the thought out of it,” he says.

The arrival of Davis, Darvari, and two other baseball ops interns last season coincided with a turnaround in Hyannis’s fortunes. The Hawks nearly went worst to first during the regular season, beating in-town rival Cotuit in the playoff quarterfinals before falling to eventual champion Bourne in the semis.

Many fans told Johnson and assistant GM Zach Chase there had been a noticeable increase in energy at the park. This year, Johnson says donations during June, typically the slowest month for attendance, approximately doubled.

An obstacle for teams looking to copy Hyannis and Orleans is that internships with Cape League clubs are typically unpaid. Chris Thoms, a data scientist at Google and the league’s head statistician and supervisor of scorers, is thinking of equity concerns while trying to establish an analytics internship at the league level.

The son of Chatham's former GM, Thoms says he's talking to several groups, including diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives at Major League Baseball, about funding candidates who wouldn't otherwise be able to afford the opportunity.

Johnson has found summer employment at local businesses for several interns over the years, but it makes for an exhausting schedule. Velis's roommate, Calvin Hoffman, often works at Bagels & Beyond in the morning before heading to the field early in the afternoon and working late into the evening.

For Hyannis's interns, the experience is worth it because of the trust and responsibility endowed by Johnson and Chase.

During the middle innings of a game vs. Wareham, Johnson joins interns Jacob Hahn and Mikey Lucario — rising juniors at Rice and Oklahoma, respectively — to discuss a difficult impending roster decision.

"It's not going to be worthwhile for them if they don't know we're listening," says Chase, a broadcast associate at MLB Network, "or if they don't know that they can have our ear if they truly see a guy they like or if they fully believe that someone or a certain situation can help our team."

Jack Gustafson, a rising sophomore at Kansas, doesn't help build the roster for Orleans, but he codes and adds qualitative observations to create detailed scouting reports.

"Coach Fecske just shot me straight and was like, 'Hey, you're going to be taking on a bigger role than you were probably thinking you'd get yourself into,'" said Gustafson, the son of the Colorado Rockies' senior director of scouting operations.

In Hyannis, interns also embark on projects specific to their interests, from traditional scouting to biomechanics.

Brea Lassek, the team's sideline reporter, wants to differentiate her portfolio with explainer videos on advanced metrics. Before the Hawks' game, the rising senior at Northwestern picks Velis's brain about the spin rate of pitches.

Geno Cousino, a rising sophomore at Michigan, spends spare time working on his model for calculating quality at-bats, but he's also busy serving as the team's scout liaison.

Meanwhile, Velis is in the dugout, sifting through a giant binder of scouting reports. It's typically Davis's role, but he's filling in as first base coach with Beattie away at his son's baseball tournament.

With Hyannis trailing, 2-1, in the bottom of the seventh, those due up for Hyannis huddle around Velis, peering at the report on the opposing pitcher. It pays off for the leadoff man, Virginia Tech catcher Brody Donay, who rips a double in the gap.

Facing an 0-2 count with two outs, Tennessee's Bradke Lohry hits a fly ball to center that should be a routine out. Instead, Wareham's center fielder never sees it in brutal fog — the last action before the game is called.

Hyannis gets an unlikely tie thanks to some classic Cape weather — and hours of numbers-crunching from its intern army.

ANOTHER THOUGHTFUL ANALYSIS FROM G. SCOTT THOMAS AT BASEBALL'S BEST AND WORST

bestworst@substack

The power of money is more broadly evident when we review the past 10 seasons (2013 through 2022).

I divided the 30 big-league teams into three groups, based on the sizes of their metropolitan areas. The 10 clubs in Group 1 — the very largest metros — came away with 58 of the decade's 148 playoff spots, the equivalent of 39.2 percent. The corresponding playoff figures were considerably lower for Group 2 (medium-sized markets) and Group 3 (the smallest metros).

The biggest franchises did even better in the subsequent postseason rounds, with Group 1 taking 11 of the 20 league titles (55 percent) and five of the period's 10 world titles (50 percent).

Scroll down to see a detailed breakdown of baseball's ongoing financial and demographic disparities. You'll find, among other things, that big-market clubs spend almost twice as much as their counterparts in small metros. The average 2023 payroll for Group 1 is \$205.6 million per team, based on estimates from Baseball Reference, compared to the Group 3 average of \$116.9 million.

Is it any surprise that Group 1 consequently took roughly twice as many league titles in the 2013-2022 period as Group 3 did? (The big markets won 11 American and National League championships, while the small markets got five.)

Group 1 (large markets)

- Teams: Chicago Cubs, Chicago White Sox, Houston Astros, Los Angeles Angels, Los Angeles Dodgers, New York Mets, New York Yankees, Philadelphia Phillies, Texas Rangers, and Washington Nationals.
- Average metropolitan population (2022): 11,176,300
- Compared to Group 2 (medium) average population: 125% larger
- Compared to Group 3 (small) average population: 336% larger
- Collective regular-season record (2013-2022): 7,816-7,365 (.515)
- Average team record (162 games): 83-79
- Playoff qualifiers (10 seasons): 58 (39.2% of total)
- League titles (10 seasons): 11 (55.0% of total)
- World titles (10 seasons): 5 (50.0% of total)
- Collective payroll (2023): \$2.06 billion
- Average team payroll: \$205.6 million
- Teams over \$200 million: 5 of 10

Group 2 (medium markets)

- Teams: Arizona Diamondbacks, Atlanta Braves, Boston Red Sox, Detroit Tigers, Miami Marlins, Minnesota Twins, Oakland Athletics, San Francisco Giants, Seattle Mariners, and Toronto Blue Jays.
- Average metropolitan population (2022): 4,971,300
- Compared to Group 1 (large) average population: 56% smaller
- Compared to Group 3 (small) average population: 94% larger
- Collective regular-season record (2013-2022): 7,451-7,720 (.491)
- Average team record (162 games): 80-82
- Playoff qualifiers (10 seasons): 44 (29.7% of total)
- League titles (10 seasons): 4 (20.0% of total)
- World titles (10 seasons): 4 (40.0% of total)
- Collective payroll (2023): \$1.36 billion
- Average team payroll: \$135.5 million
- Teams over \$200 million: 1 of 10

Group 3 (small markets)

- Teams: Baltimore Orioles, Cincinnati Reds, Cleveland Guardians, Colorado Rockies, Kansas City Royals, Milwaukee Brewers, Pittsburgh Pirates, St. Louis Cardinals, San Diego Padres, and Tampa Bay Rays.
- Average metropolitan population (2022): 2,563,600
- Compared to Group 1 (large) average population: 77% smaller
- Compared to Group 2 (medium) average population: 48% smaller
- Collective regular-season record (2013-2022): 7,497-7,679 (.494)
- Average team record (162 games): 80-82
- Playoff qualifiers (10 seasons): 46 (31.1% of total)
- League titles (10 seasons): 5 (25.0% of total)
- World titles (10 seasons): 1 (10.0% of total)
- Collective payroll (2023): \$1.17 billion
- Average team payroll: \$116.9 million
- Teams over \$200 million: 1 of 10

JOE POSNANSKI ON HURRICANE HAZLE

Commented [P1]:

Beginning in 1953 — the year that the Boston Braves moved to Milwaukee — the team began to threaten greatness. That year, a 21-year-old **Eddie Mathews** led the National League with 47 home runs. **Warren Spahn**, still just 32 years old, won 23 games with a league-leading ERA and might have won the Cy Young Award had it existed.

Milwaukee won 92 games that year, and even though they didn't exactly threaten the Boys of Summer Dodgers — they finished second, a rather distant 13 games back — the Braves did announce their presence. They had mostly been a non-factor in their years in Boston. Other than their rather shocking pennant in 1948*, they had not finished even as high as second since Deadball.

**That was the "Spahn and Sain and pray for rain" year.*

In 1954, a 20-year-old Henry Aaron arrived, and **Joe Adcock** — a big first baseman acquired from Cincinnati in a trade — hit .308 with 23 home runs. **Lew Burdette**, the pride of Nitro, W.Va., won 15 games for the second year in a row by wielding what **Whitey Ford** would call the best spitter in baseball. The Braves finished 11 games behind the ascendant **Willie Mays** Giants.

In 1955, the Braves finished second again, behind the Dodgers, and in 1956, with Aaron, Adcock and Mathews combining for 101 home runs and Spahn winning 20 for the seventh time in his career, they finished second yet again, but this time by only one game. In the last 10 days of the season, they lost two heartbreaking, walk-off games — one to Pittsburgh on a **Roberto Clemente** single, the other to St. Louis when **Rip Repulski** doubled in **Stan Musial** — that could have made the difference.

Everybody in Milwaukee was pointing to 1957 as Milwaukee's year. Finally.

For the first half of the season — and a few weeks into the second — the Braves battled with the Reds, Cardinals, Dodgers and even Philadelphia for the National League pennant. Going into Sunday, Aug. 4, the standings looked like this:

Tm W-L W-L% GB

STL 62-40 .608 --

MLN 61-42 .592 1.5

BRO 59-43 .578 3.0

CIN 57-45 .559 5.0

PHI 56-48 .538 7.0

That day, Aug. 4, the Braves started in rightfield a 26-year-old rookie just called up from Wichita — his name was **Bob Hazle**. Everybody called him Hurricane. He got the nickname in 1954, while playing in Venezuela. That was the year that the real Hurricane Hazel hit the Carolina Coast.



Hazle (right), along with Wes Covington and Aaron, brought some punch to the Braves' outfield in '57. (Getty Images)

Hazle grew up in South Carolina and preferred football, but he saw baseball as his ticket out. He signed with the Cincinnati Reds as a power lefty bat and briefly made it up to the big leagues in 1955. Then he was shipped off to Milwaukee in a deal for former Negro Leagues star **George Crowe**, who hit 31 home runs for the Reds in '57. The Cincinnati papers would write almost daily about what a steal it was getting Crowe for "a lifetime third-stringer."

Before the 1957 season, Hazle considered quitting baseball more than once. In 1956, he badly wrenched his knee, and the pain wouldn't go away. He went to an orthopedic surgeon, who didn't have any ideas except complete rest. So, Hazle rested. He also sold real estate ... and was doing well enough that he considered just retiring from baseball. The Braves left him unprotected so any team could have drafted him. None did.

He went back to play one more time — and then got in a slump that he could not get out of. He was hitting just .230 after two months. He again thought about quitting. "I was low," he told reporters.

But he decided to keep trying, and he got hot in Wichita, and then Braves outfielder **Bill Bruton** got hurt and Hazle was called up to the big leagues to fill in. He pinch-hit in a game and then it looked like he would be sent back down. But on Aug. 4, he got the start.

That first day, Hurricane Hazle got two hits, including a double, as the Braves outscored the Dodgers 9-7 and moved within a game of first place.

The next day, Hazle hit another double, driving in what would be the game-winning run against the Reds. With that, the Braves moved into a tie for first with St. Louis.

Three days later, on Aug. 9, Hazle got the start again. This time he went 4-for-5 with a home run as the Braves stomped the rival Cardinals, 13-2.

A day later, another start, the Hurricane went 3-for-4 with three RBIs and the Braves beat the Cards, 9-0.

Something crazy was happening. Nobody, not even Braves manager **Fred Haney**, could quite believe it.

“Bob Hazle, the rookie from Wichita the Braves recently unveiled, has been smashing the ball to all fields,” the United Press reporter wrote. “But Haney said he could hardly expect him to continue at his present pace.”

““He’s helped us a lot, though,”” Haney said.”

On Aug. 14, against Cincinnati, the Hurricane got another three hits and another double. The Braves beat the Reds 13-3. A day later, he got ANOTHER three hits, including a home run, as the Braves won, 8-1. At this point, Bob Hazle had played in 10 games for Milwaukee. And the Braves won all 10 of them.

He was hitting .545.

And this is what the standings looked like on Aug.15.

Tm W-L W-L% GB

MLN 71-42 .628 --

STL 63-50 .558 8.0

BRO 63-51 .553 8.5

CIN 61-52 .540 10.0

PHI 59-54 .522 12.0

“I suppose he’ll cool off,” **Red Schoendienst** said. “But right now this kid is **Stan Musial, Mickey Mantle and Ted Williams** all wrapped in one.”

Hurricane Hazle kept on hitting — two hits and a homer against the Cardinals, three hits and a double against Brooklyn, three hits and two homers against Philadelphia. In his first 20 games for Milwaukee that season, Hazle hit .525/.574/.885 with seven doubles, five homers, 21 RBIs and 16 runs scored.

“The kid can really rip the old ball,” Hazle’s teammate and mentor, **Andy Pafko** said. “Next to Henry Aaron, he’s got the strongest wrists I’ve ever seen. And he doesn’t swing at too many bad balls, either. That’s rare for a youngster.”

The Braves were never really threatened the rest of the way ... and Bob Hazle kept on having his moments. He had four hits — three of them doubles — in a game against the Cubs at Wrigley Field. Four days later, he homered against the Cubs. A few days later, he had four more hits and a homer at Wrigley Field.

Hazle finished the season hitting .403/.477/.649 in 155 plate appearances. Even though he played in only 41 games, he got Rookie of the Year votes. The Braves went to the World Series to face the Yankees. They were underdogs, naturally; everyone was an underdog to the Yankees. But in Game 7, Lew Burdette had his sinkerball sinking, he pitched a seven-hit shutout and, yes, Hurricane Bob Hazle played his part. In the third inning, he singled and came around to score on Eddie Mathews’ double. That kicked off a four-run rally.

Hazle had come into that at-bat 0 for his last 10.

“My hit came at a fine time, didn’t it?” he asked after the game. “I got back to the bench and saw that my hit started a rally. Boy, I’ve never felt any better in my life than I do right now.”

He got a three-quarter World Series share — \$6,693.27.

It’s actually pretty staggering that the Braves didn’t give Hazle a full World Series share. “He’s the guy who won the 1957 pennant for us,” Eddie Mathews would say. But, you know, generosity hasn’t always flowed in baseball history. The Braves also stiffed Hazle on a bonus and then gave him just a \$1,200 raise for 1958. He got hit in the head by a pitch during spring training, he hit just .179 in 20 games, and **Bill Bruton** got healthy, and the Braves sold Hazle to the Tigers for \$50,000.

“Hazle’s a good player, he’s all right,” Haney said. “But with our hitting strength, Hazle had to go.”

“Naturally, I’m disappointed,” Hazle said. “That’s all I want to say about it.”

Hazle didn’t want to report to Detroit. His wife was expecting and he once again thought that maybe he was done with baseball. But he did get 63 plate appearances with the Tigers, hitting .241, and then he played a couple more years in the minor leagues, but he could never get the magic back. “My confidence,” he would say, “was shot.”

“The way it ended,” he told writer David Lamb, “left a bad taste in my mouth.”

Hazle retired in South Carolina, where he raised a family and kept in touch with his old teammates and competitors in the game. When asked about the bittersweet nature of his career, he shrugged. “Look at it this way,” he said. “I’ll always have 1957.”

PICKOFFS ARE STILL VERY MUCH ON

Leo Morgenstern, FanGraphs

No one can deny that baseball’s new rules are having the intended effects. BAPIP is up, game times are down, and stolen bases are back. Attendance is growing too, and while we can’t give the rule changes all the credit for that one, they’ve certainly done their part. Even better, the new rules aren’t leading to the adverse side effects some of us feared. The pitch clock isn’t causing widespread injury, pitch timer violations have been steadily decreasing as players adapt, and bigger bases haven’t led to any reports of **Ty Cobb** rolling over in his grave.

As efficacious as all the new rules have been, one stands above the rest. In my humble opinion, the disengagement limit has proven to be the gold standard of rule changes. Let me explain.

I like the pitch clock. *Imaginary audience applauds*. I like the shift restrictions. *Imaginary audience begins to turn on me*. I even like the automatic runner on second in extra innings. *Imaginary audience starts throwing rotten fruit*. But as much as I appreciate those new rules, I understand they all came at the expense of something else, something fans once cherished. The pitch timer offends purists who believe baseball shouldn’t have a clock. The shift restrictions limit smart defensive positioning in service of hitters who can’t adjust. The automatic runner warps each team’s priorities in the 10th inning onward. But the disengagement limit? It’s been a roaring success, and it hasn’t cost us anything at all.

When the new rules were first announced, Patrick Dubuque and Craig Goldstein of *Baseball Prospectus* wrote that “Limiting the number of pickoff throws is, practically speaking, the most revolutionary of all the rule changes going into effect next season.” Their logic was sound, and at the time, I wholeheartedly agreed. Yet as it turns out, the only thing this rule has truly limited is downtime. The disengagement restrictions have increased the pace of pace play without sacrificing anything I hold dear. Pickoff attempts are in shorter supply, but pickoffs themselves are on the rise.

In May, Mike Axisa of CBS Sports wrote about some “under-the-radar” effects of the rule changes, and the first thing he touched upon was successful pickoffs. He noticed that while pitchers were attempting “way fewer pickoffs per game,” their success rate was “up considerably.” It’s not surprising that pickoff success rate has increased, and Axisa acknowledged as much; under the new rules, “Every pickoff throw has to count.”

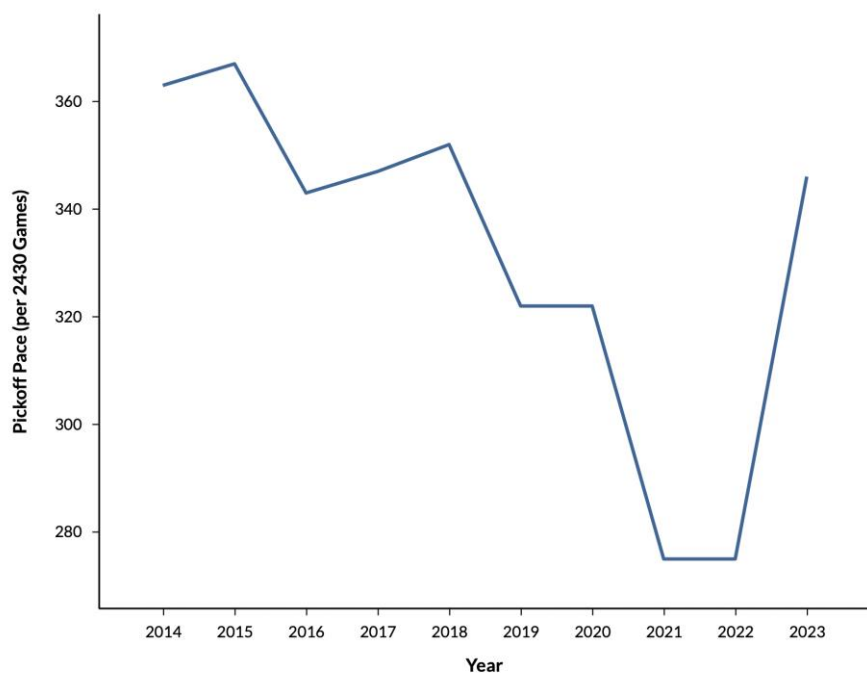
However, it’s more than just the success rate that’s increasing. Pickoffs are more prevalent this year, point-blank. Moreover, while the rising success rate makes perfect sense, the surge in raw numbers seems counterintuitive. If pitchers have fewer disengagements to work with, you might expect to see fewer overall pickoffs. But that hasn’t been the case.

As the All-Star break approaches, 185 runners have been picked off so far this season, putting the league on pace for 346 pickoffs by the end of the year. In each of the last two seasons, only 275 runners were picked off. That means pickoffs are up by more than 25%; they've risen about as much as the Diamondbacks' winning percentage. The last time the majors topped 346 pickoffs in a season was in 2018:

A Decade of Pickoffs

via Baseball Reference

FANGRAPHS



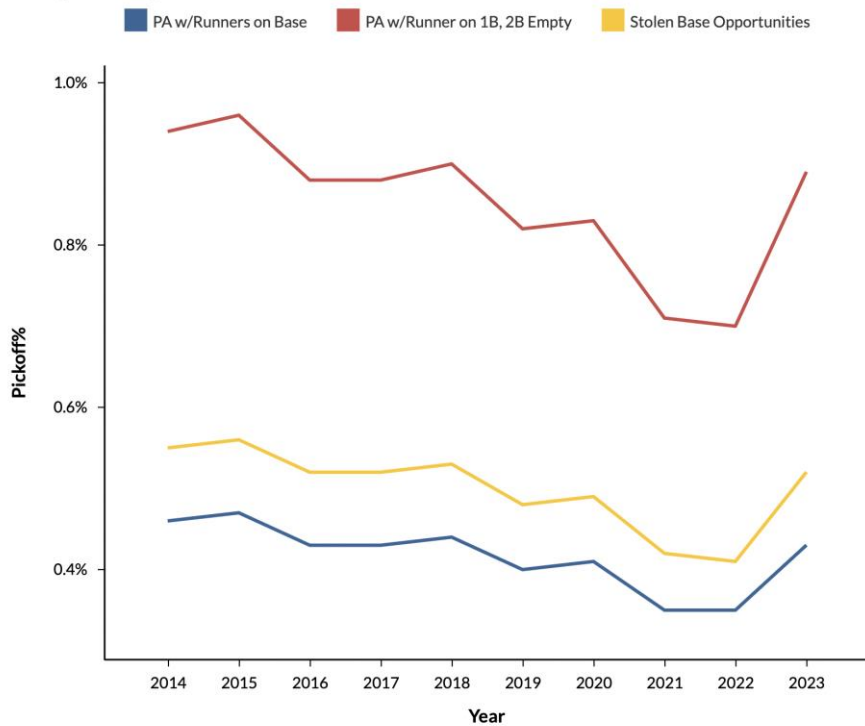
When dealing with raw figures instead of rate stats, it's always critical to find and consider the denominator. For instance, a fan who didn't pay attention to the number of teams in the league or games in the season might be utterly perplexed as to why home run numbers skyrocketed in 1993 before plummeting again in 1994. In the case of pickoffs, it's possible they aren't really happening any more often, but instead, the number of opportunities has increased. It's not a bad theory; after all, league-wide on-base percentage is up eight ticks over last season.

Unfortunately, there isn't a perfect way to measure pickoff opportunities. Technically, every pitch with a runner on base is a pickoff opportunity, but not all base states are equally likely to lead to a pickoff. In addition, the possibility of a pickoff depends heavily on the skill set of the runner in question. Nevertheless, a few different figures can stand in for pickoff opportunities in a pinch, and I've identified three: plate appearances with runners on base, plate appearances with a runner on first but not second, and stolen base opportunities (per Baseball Reference). With any of those numbers as the denominator, the pickoff rate is still way up in 2023:

A Decade of Pickoffs

As a percentage of...

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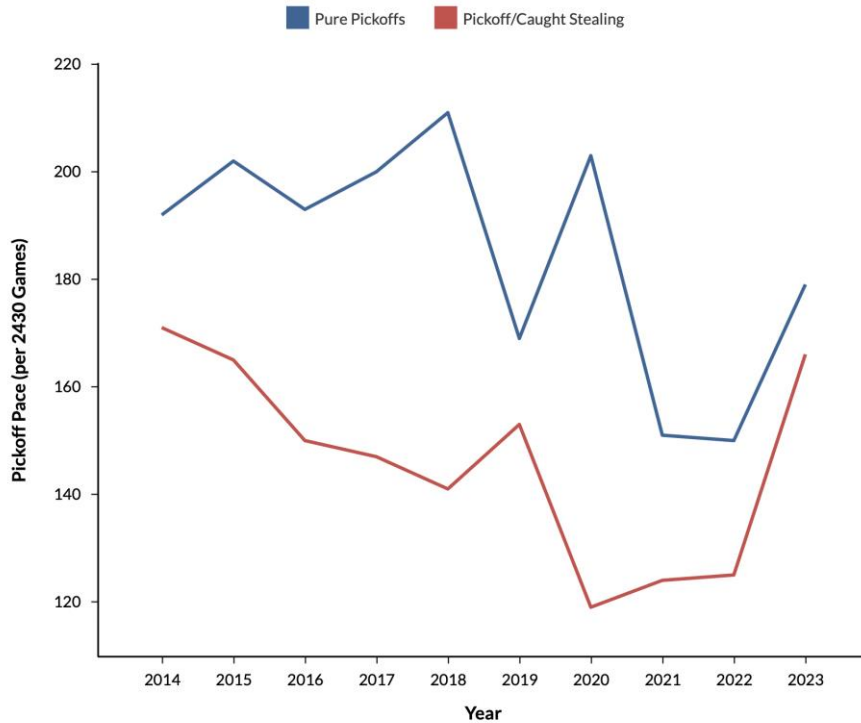
So pickoffs are up this year, no two ways about it. (As for why the pickoff rate dropped so suddenly in the few years before this season? That's an excellent question, but one for another day.) Be that as it may, not all pickoffs are created equal, so perhaps not all types are increasing at the same rate. A pickoff is a play where the pitcher or catcher throws to another fielder, and that fielder tags out a runner as he tries to return to his original base. If the runner makes any effort to advance to the next base, however, the play would also be classified as a caught stealing. It's the double whammy of lousy baserunning; the runner has been picked off and caught stealing at the same time.

In 2023, pickoff/caught stealing plays have made up nearly half the pickoffs we've seen, which is the highest rate in 11 years. This shouldn't be too surprising, since caught stealing numbers are up across the board. More movement on the basepaths means more runners getting caught. Yet while pickoff/caught stealing numbers can partially explain why the pickoff rate is so high right now, there's more to the story. As the blue line on the following graph shows, pure and straightforward pickoffs are also on the up and up:

A Decade of Pickoffs/Caught Stealing

via Baseball Reference

FANGRAPHS

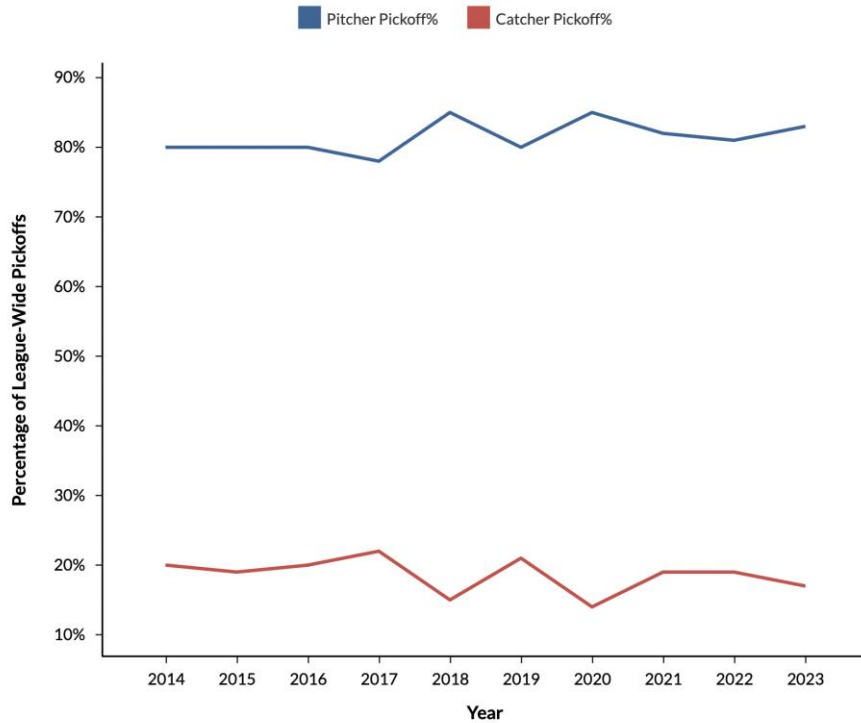


Another way to categorize pickoffs is to separate pitcher-generated pickoffs and catcher-generated pickoffs, also known as back-picks. That difference is more meaningful this year than ever before; while pitchers are limited in the number of pickoffs they can attempt, catchers are free to throw as they please. It would make sense if catchers accounted for a higher percentage of pickoffs... but that doesn't seem to be the case. By and large, the rates of pitcher and catcher pickoffs have remained steady over the last 10 years, and indeed, the percentage of pickoffs started by pitchers is actually slightly higher this season than in either of the previous two years:

A Decade of Pitcher and Catcher Pickoffs

via Baseball Reference

FANGRAPHS



One more variable to consider: Is there an outlier skewing the numbers? If a single team has been good enough at picking runners off (or so terrible at avoiding pickoffs themselves), it might create the false illusion of a league-wide trend. Indeed, the A's are on pace to be picked off 24 times, which would be the most for any team since the 2013 Astros. However, they don't account for an abnormally high percentage of the league's total pickoffs; the worst team typically accounts for about 6-7% of the total, and Oakland falls within that range. Meanwhile, the Yankees have been pickoff merchants this year; they're on pace to pick off 32 runners. That's impressive, but New York's pickoff prowess (and **Jose Trevino's** back-pick mastery) still isn't nearly extreme enough to explain the league-wide uptick this year, especially since the utter ineptitude of the St. Louis Cardinals (zero pickoffs) balances out what the Yankees have accomplished.

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, I'll repeat myself one more time: Pickoffs are up this year. They're up in raw number, up as a percentage, and up in all their forms. So why is this happening in the first season under the disengagements limit? The simplest explanation is that pitchers are making better throws. It's a difficult theory to prove without stuff and location data for pickoff attempts, but it passes the logic test. The principle of least effort is the simple psychological hypothesis that human beings will choose the course of action most likely to preserve our mental and physical energy. It's a basic survival strategy: Only put in maximum effort when you need to. Prior to this season, the stakes of any individual pickoff attempt were low; therefore, maximum effort was largely unnecessary. Now that the stakes are higher, pitchers are likely to exert more mental and physical energy with each throw.

In addition, the disengagement limit might be incentivizing runners to take bigger leads. These leads, in turn, have resulted in more pickoffs, but that's a tradeoff the runners are willing to make in exchange for more stolen bases and extra-base opportunities. Either that, or runners are simply overestimating the advantage provided by the new rules, and they'd be wise to shorten their leads. From a fan's perspective, that would be the worst possible outcome: fewer pickoffs *and* fewer steals. Until that happens, however, if indeed it ever does, the disengagement rule is working as well as it possibly could. The game is faster and more exciting, and nothing had to be sacrificed to make that happen. Sounds like an excellent addition to the major league rulebook, if you ask me.

All stats through July 6.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE ANSWERS

The same player ranks second in Toronto Blue Jays history for hits, doubles, and total bases.

He ranks second to **Tony Fernandez** in hits, and second to **Carlos Delgado** in both doubles and total bases.

Right-handed centerfielder who played 12 seasons in Toronto before wrapping his career with the Angels and Yankees.

He led the majors in hits and total bases in 2003.

VERNON WELLS

Versatile 24 year player, had 1,300 RBI but never led the league in that category.

He had 100 or more hits in 23 seasons, 200 hits in 4.

Won rookie of the year and an MVP.

15,890 plate appearances -- MLB career leader.

16 time All-Star, played both infield and outfield

PETE ROSE

In 1978 the Red Sox had seven players named to the AL All-Star team. Name them. If you get that, as a bonus try naming the eight Sox All-Stars in 1946

1978 — **Rick Burleson, Dwight Evans, Carlton Fisk, Fred Lynn, Jim Rice, Jerry Remy, Carl Yastrzemski;**

Bonus--1946 — **Ted Williams, Johnny Pesky, Dom DiMaggio, Bobby Doerr, Boo Ferriss, Mickey Harris, Hal Wagner, Rudy York.**

Ken Griffey Jr. led the American League in home runs four times from 1994-'99, who were the two other players to lead the league?

Indians left fielder who hit 312 HRs in 12 seasons, led the AL three times in RBI and TB.

Right-handed first baseman who led each league twice in HRs on his way to 583 career HRs.

ALBERT BELLE, CLE (50 in '95)

MARK MCGWIRE, OAK (52 in '96)

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