

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

8.27.2023

Good morning baseball fans,

Two months to go—first game of the World Series is scheduled for October 27. It has to be brutal to be an Angels fan—Trout back to the IL and Ohtani facing Tommy John surgery and a 5-16 start to August. Ugh.

Happy Birthday to my son-in-law Rob. He is a bigger Cardinals fan than I am a Yankees fan. Back at Christmas we were saying how good it would be to have a Cards-Yanks World Series. How'd that work out?

In this week's edition surges and collapses, **Luis Urías** is Mr. Grand Slam, Manny makes a Hall of Fame.

In Longer Reads: Where have all the errors gone (and is the pitch clock impacting official scorers?), what to throw with a 3 & 2 count, the Tall and the Short of it, roster games between the Giants and the Dodgers.

Grab a coffee and enjoy.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE

(answers at bottom)

Who Am I?

3,000 hit club

Most career hits as a DH

No other batter had a season with more hits in the season he turned 40.

MVP of 1993 World Series, hitting .458 with 1.457 OPS.

I also played in the 1982 World Series in which I batted .355.

7x All Star playing 2B and 3B

Knuckle-baller **Hoyt Wilhelm** set the career games pitched record in 1972, he retired with 1,070. He was passed by **Dennis Eckersley** in 1999. Four relief pitchers later passed Eckersley. Name them.

Lefty reliever, 24 seasons for 9 teams, 1252 games, 4 appearances/2 saves in 1986 World Series.

Lefty reliever, 19 seasons for 8 teams, 7 seasons for Yankees and for Braves, 1178 games, 3-0 in 20 World Series games.

Lefty reliever, 21 seasons with Reds/Mets/Astros, 1119 games, won a game in the 2000 World Series.

Right-handed reliever, 1115 games, 13x All Star, 5x World Series, 653 saves

Two double play combinations won Gold Gloves in the same season for the same team four times. Name the four infielders.

AL 1973-74-75-76. Shortstop also won Gold Glove with another 2B teammate twice (1969 and 1971), he won 8 total. The 2B hit 234 career HRs.

NL 1974-75-76-77. Includes a Hall of Famer, played together in back-to-back World Series 1975-76.

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

How 'bout those Mariners? 10 games back in July, 9-1 in their last 10 games, they wake up this morning tied for first place with Texas, a game ahead of the Astros.

Think the pitch clock is effective? We've seen just *five* nine-inning games all season that lasted three and a half hours or longer. At this point last season, there had been 199.

In the first batch of 100 games, there were 0.87 violations per game (combined total for both teams). In the most recent batch of 100 games, there were only 0.31 violations per game. So, about one violation every three games.

The month-by-month data indicates just how successfully players have adjusted:

- March/April: 0.74 violations per game.
- May: 0.58
- June: 0.42
- July: 0.38
- August: 0.31

In total, 957 violations of new rules had occurred. Of the pitch-clock infractions, 68.1 percent were by pitchers, 26.8 percent by hitters and 1.4 percent by catchers. The total also included batter-timeout violations (1.6 percent), pitcher disengagement violations (2 percent) and shift-restriction violations (0.2 percent — only two all season and none since June).

When I was a kid my bedroom had Sports Illustrated, Baseball Digest, Street & Smith's Baseball Preview, a Yankees year book and Sport Magazine. If you have deeper pockets than I, the assets of Sport Magazine are for sale. 150,000 physical images. Among them are 62,000 35mm color transparencies; more than 14,000 other transparency formats; more than 73,000 negatives and videos; more than 4,000 actual prints; and more than 12,000 articles. The magazine was published from 1946 to 1990.

The inaugural issue contained pieces from H.G. Salsinger, Tom Meany, Jack Sher, and — how's this for a Seal of Approval? — Grantland Rice.

A standard vintage issue would include:

- 10 or more feature articles
- The back-of-the-issue Sport Special, a deep profile of an individual
- Sport Visits to the home of a star
- Sport Quiz
- Sport Bookshelf
- Cartoons (always excellent)
- Sport Talk (notes, gossip, and Fan Club news, which was very big in the '50s and '60s)



Yankees, Mets, Padres and Cardinals might ALL miss the playoffs. Vegas had all of them above 70% chance of making the playoffs when the season kicked off. MLB's 2023 October postseason is likely to have its strangest look since the three-division alignment was adopted in 1995. No New York Yankees, no St. Louis Cardinals, and possibly no Boston Red Sox.

Baseball hasn't celebrated a postseason without at least one of those three teams in championship contention since before the playoffs were expanded from four teams to eight in 1995.

The last postseason that did not feature any of those three perennial contenders was 1993. Since the postseason was expanded in 1995, the Yankees have qualified 24 times (that's every year but 2008, 2013, 2014 and 2016). The Red Sox have made it 13 times, including 2008, 2013 and 2016, and the Cardinals have qualified 17 times, including in 2014.

Shohei Ohtani. A number of pitchers have come back from two Tommy John operations -- **Nathan Eovaldi, Jameson Taillon and Mike Clevinger** are included on that list, while **Jacob deGrom and Walker Buehler** are working their way back from No. 2 as we speak -- but to say confidently that Shohei Ohtani will return to his previous level on the mound requires some optimism. It will be interesting to see how this impacts his free agency.

Projections had the *floor* for Shohei Ohtani's free-agent deal at 10 years and \$500 million, a figure that may have been well short of the final figure. Regardless of whether he needs a second Tommy John procedure, some of the game's decision-makers believe the chances of him becoming the game's first \$500 million man are now remote.

Ohtani underwent Tommy John surgery on Oct. 1, 2018, then returned to his designated hitter duties in May 2019. Assuming the same type of timeline, another surgery would likely keep him from hitting for the first month or two of the 2024 season, though he could theoretically play more than half of next season as a DH for whatever club signs him.

Forgetting what he does on the mound -- which is a significant part of his legend and status as the game's biggest unicorn -- Ohtani's value as a hitter alone will make him a highly sought-after free agent. Since the start of the 2021 season, Ohtani has 124 home runs (an average of 41 per year), a .962 OPS and a 160 OPS+. He has led the AL in triples twice, has stolen 54 bases, and as of Thursday, leads the AL this year in home runs (44), runs (97), walks (78), slugging percentage (.664), OPS (1.069), OPS+ (183) and total bases (310).

Last winter, **Aaron Judge** landed a nine-year, \$360 million contract after winning his first AL MVP Award. The Yankees superstar was fresh off of a 62-homer season that saw him lead the league in homers, runs, RBI, walks, on-base percentage, slugging percentage, OPS+ and total bases, so there are some obvious comparisons.

Judge was entering his age-31 season in free agency, while Ohtani doesn't turn 30 until next July. Even with the uncertainty surrounding his future on the mound, multiple executives believe that Ohtani's bat should put him in position to match or exceed Judge's mega-deal.

"It's tough to sign a DH-only," an NL exec said.

Potential suitors will also undoubtedly consider Ohtani's popularity and the potential marketing opportunities that will come with his signing, though on-field performance is clearly the biggest factor when it comes to making a high-level financial commitment to a player of this caliber.

"The cultural impact is so huge," an NL exec said. "Whoever gets him is guaranteed to get eyes and tickets out of it."

Ohtani's free agency was certainly impacted Wednesday night. Just how much, however, remains to be seen.

The Rays exceeded last year's home run total (139) in just their 94th game of 2023. The Phillies 47 August HRs are the most for a month in Franchise history.

Last Sunday we highlighted **Julio Rodriguez'** crazy hot streak for the Mariners—17 hits in 4 games, 4 straight games with 4 hits, Throw in 5 steals and 2 HRs. He also reached base on 17 straight balls in play.

Play-by-play data is available back to 1914—17 straight has never been done. only one other player came within three of Julio. That was the Angels' **Tim Salmon**, who made it to 14 in a row between May 10 and May 14, 1994. He did that by going an incredible 14 for 16, with no times reached on an error and both outs on strikeouts.

What's the most by any active player? The "record" for an active player, meanwhile, was "only" 13 before last week, according to STATS. **Trea Turner**, then of the Nationals, spun off that streak from Aug. 28-31, 2020. Turner did it by going 13 for 16 – with all three outs on whiffs, and no times reached on an error.

STATS also found three other hitters in the last 50 seasons who had a streak of 13. It's quite a group: **Marcus Giles** (2003), sweet-swinging *pitcher* **Livan Hernandez** (2001) and a fellow named **Aaron Boone** (also in 2001).

The major-league batting average on balls in play is .297 this year. Which means, even if you factor in errors, the average hitter who put 17 balls in play would reach base *five times* — which is slightly less than 17.

But Julio Rodríguez reached *17 times out of 17*. In a sport we always refer to as “a game of failure.” Jayson Stark in The Athletic called it “one of the most spectacular offensive feats of all time.” Rodríguez is 22. The previous record holder was **Milt Stock**, who had 16 hits in four games for the Brooklyn Robins in 1925. Stock and Rodríguez are the only two players to ever have four or more hits in four consecutive games. Rodríguez reached 50 career HRs in his first 256 games—fastest in Mariner’s history.

Meanwhile, as Tom Verducci pointed out in Sports Illustrated, the Mariners have been red hot and making another playoff push based on great pitching. 14–3 run: 14 of the 17 games were started by pitchers the Mariners drafted and developed. Their staff leads the majors in Strike % (66%), First pitch strike % (64%), Most pitches ahead of count (32%) and Pitches in strike zone (51%).

What makes the six Seattle starters so hard to hit:

Luis Castillo (acquired in 2022 trade): The Slinger

He has the toughest four-seam fastball to hit: .159 (min. 750 fastballs). Why? No one in baseball throws that hard (96.3) from that low of a release point (5.2 feet off the ground).

Logan Gilbert (2018 first round): The Long Arm

He releases the ball 7.4 feet in front of the rubber—the most extension in MLB among starters (min. 1,500 pitches). That means his fastball needs to fly about a foot less than the average fastball.

George Kirby (2019 first round): The Strike Machine

He has impeccable fastball command for a guy who throws 62% fastballs and is so young. We’ve never seen a starter this young with this kind of a strikeout-to-walk rate:

Kirby he is the leader in strikeout to walk ratio at 9.5-1 ahead of **Ben Sheets** (8.25-1 in 2004), **Shane Bieber** (6.48-1 in 2019) and **Walter Johnson** (6.29-1 in 1913).

Emerson Hancock (2020 first round): The Funky Fastball

Hancock is 6’4”. His release point is 5.4. It’s a funky pitch because his four-seamer pops out from the side of his hand, rather than the traditional way of throwing it with a flat wrist

completely behind the ball. The Mariners have identified pitching outliers whose stuff plays up. If you mapped out their release points, they stay out of that dangerous area of average:

Here's why Seattle is a dangerous team now and in a postseason scenario: It gets hitters out *in the strike zone* with some combination of velocity, command and deception—if not all three. It's been an intentional buildup by Seattle as it embraced technology to understand pitch-mapping and strategizing. At a time when fastballs have reached an all-time low, the Mariners are proving a well-located fastball—especially with velocity and thrown from abnormal angles—is still the best pitch in baseball. They lead the majors lowest opponent batting average (.241) and slugging (.396) and are

At the trade deadline the Angels went for the wrong White Sox pitcher:

Angels got **Lucas Giolito**, 8.45 ERA in 4 starts.

Dodgers got **Lance Lynn**, 3-0, 1.44 ERA

While pitching for Boston, **Babe Ruth** put together a sting of 29 $\frac{2}{3}$ straight innings where he gave up no HR in the postseason: 1916 World Series: game 2 through 1918 World Series game 4. **Whitey Ford** threw 33 $\frac{2}{3}$ straight scoreless innings in the World Series of 1960, 1961 & 1962, silencing the Pirates, Red & Giants.

The White Sox were 49-76 when it went down, fresh off a 14-2 loss to Seattle. They are one of the four worst teams in baseball, with a legitimate chance to lose 100 games, in the middle of what was supposed to be a so-called competitive window with a massive (for the Sox) payroll. Since 2006, they've had just five winning seasons, made the playoffs 3 times since then, won a total of 3 post-season games.

So 87 year-old owner Jerry Reinsdorf pulled the trigger--exit Executive VP Ken Williams (over 30 years with the team) and GM Ken Hahn (over 20 years). Williams originally joined the White Sox organization as a scout in 1992 before working his way up the ranks. He served as director of minor league operations from 1995-96 and vice president of player development from 1997-2000 before being named as GM.

Reinsdorf bought the Sox with a group of investors for \$19 million in 1981. The team would sell for around \$2 billion today.

Since 2019 (when he reached the majors) the Mets **Pete Alonso** leads MLB with 185 home runs and 475 RBI. Atlanta's **Matt Olson** is next in both categories, at 166 and 455.

Fun piece in The New York Times this week on ballpark amenities:

Cadillac Club speakeasy at CitiField (the secret password is 'Lets Go Mets'). Great view of the field—membership will run you \$25K a season.

Golf Simulators with a view of the field at Milwaukee's American Family Field cost \$80 an hour.

Globe Life Field, home of the Rangers, has introduced automated concession stand checkouts—cameras track what you buy and bill your credit card.

In Phoenix, just beyond the right field wall at D'backs games is a 385 square foot swimming pool. The 35-person suite (cost is between \$6,700 and \$8,200 per game) was sold out well before the season

Billy Hamilton 11 years ago this week swiped three bags for Double-A Pensacola in the first three innings of an Aug. 21 matchup against Montgomery -- his 144th, 145th and 146th steals of the season -- thus breaking **Vince Coleman's** single-season Minor League record from 1983. Hamilton finished the season with 155 thefts between Pensacola and Class A Advanced Bakersfield and continues to hold the record to this day. Take a moment and think about that—155 stolen bases in a single season.

Speaking of stolen bases, this week in 1982 **Ricky Henderson** passed **Lou Brock** for the all-time stolen base lead (938). Henderson retired with 1406. (a different—his career ended in 1901) **Billy Hamilton** (914), **Ty Cobb** (897) and **Tim Lincecum** (808) round out the top five career leaders.

For what it's worth, the **Dodgers** have the highest minor league winning pct. Los Angeles affiliates have gone 370-249 this season for a winning percentage of .598. No other system has a winning percentage higher than .563.

The Braves continue to impress with five players with 25-plus homers for the first time in franchise history.

Matt Olson (43), **Austin Riley** (30), **Ozzie Albies** (28) **Ronald Acuña Jr.** (28) and **Marcel Ozuna** (28) are the Braves who have already reached the 25-homer mark. There's a chance **Sean Murphy** (20) and reigning National League Player of the Week **Eddie Rosario** (20) could end up reaching this mark.

The 2003 Red Sox (**Nomar Garciaparra, Jason Varitek, David Ortiz, Kevin Millar, Trot Nixon and Manny Ramirez**) and the 2019 Twins (**C.J. Cron, Max Kepler, Mitch Garver, Nelson Cruz, Miguel Sanó and Rosario**) are the only teams to have six players with 25-plus homers. No team has ever had seven players reach this mark in the same season.

Olson, Riley, Albies, Acuña and Ozuna all could easily reach 30 homers before the end of the season. The 2019 Twins (Kepler, Garver, Cruz, Sanó and Rosario) are the only team to have five players reach this mark in the same season.

That 2019 Twins set the MLB season record with 307 homers. Atlanta is on pace to hit 309.

Prior to Thursday, Red Sox infielder **Luis Urías** had one home run in 99 plate appearances this year. He had zero career grand slams—Little league, college, minors, majors.

What happened next is one of those *only-in-baseball* quirks:

Urías ended his final at-bat of Thursday's win over the Nationals with a grand slam off Nationals left-hander **Robert Garcia**.

After getting Friday off, Urías showed up Saturday and drove the first pitch he saw from **Gerrit Cole** over the left-field wall at Yankee Stadium for ... another grand slam.

Urías, acquired from the Brewers at the trade deadline, is the first Red Sox player to hit grand slams in back-to-back games played since **Jimmie Foxx** in 1940.

Reminds one of another Red Sox grand slam story— Red Sox third baseman **Bill Mueller** was a fine switch-hitter for a decade in the Majors. He won the 2003 AL batting title but 85 career home runs hardly represented a power threat.

On July 29, 2003, though, Mueller went off against the Rangers. It started simply enough with a

solo shot in the top of the third against a young **R.A. Dickey**. Four innings later, though, Mueller stepped up to bat again, this time from the right side of the plate and with the bases loaded against reliever **Aaron Fultz**. Only 29 of his career long balls came against lefties. The grand slam turned a 5-4 nail-biter into a 9-4 explosion.

Mueller had one more surprise in store. As fate would have it, he came up to bat in the very next inning -- with the bases loaded again. Righty **Jay Powell** was in the game for the Rangers now, sending Mueller back to the left-handed batter's box. Powell got ahead with a strike.

Mueller had the hat trick with three homers. He became one of just 13 players to hit two grand slams in one game. The record that made this game unique, though, was that Mueller hit slams from both sides of the plate. No one had done that before, and no one has done it since.

Chipper Jones was the first 3B to have 100+ RBI in 6 straight seasons. He was also the first player to have more than one multi-home-run game against **Randy Johnson** (9/5/1999), was the only player to strike out three times in Johnson's perfect game (5/18/2004).

Which team got the better of the January deal that saw **Luis Arraez** go from Minnesota to Miami in exchange for **Pablo López** in trade that also included a pair of prospects? That question can't be answered for at least a few more years, but we can look at the first-season performances. As the prospects are playing in the lower levels of the minors, let's focus on the centerpieces.

Arraez, who flirted with the .400 mark for the first three months of the season, is currently slashing .360/.404/.464 with a 139 wRC+. He has 3.3 fWAR and 4.7 bWAR.

López, who has allowed five runs in 20 innings over his last three starts, is 9-6 with a 3.51 ERA and a 3.17 FIP. He has 3.8 fWAR and 3.2 bWAR.

The better season to date? A valid argument could be made either way.

Boston's **Justin Turner** has come up with a runner on third base and less than two out 31 times this year and is 12-for-25 with one walk, five sacrifice flies, 25 RBIs, and an 1.139 OPS. He has fanned just five times.

Jose Altuve has 2,001 hits, 3,056 TB, a .307/.364/.470 slash line, and 51.6 WAR.

Joe Mauer had 2,123 hits, 3,040 TB, a .306/.388/.439 slash line, and 53.0 WAR.

Mel Ott had 511 home runs and 1,860 RBIs. **Miguel Cabrera** has 509 home runs and 1,868 RBIs.

Texas Rangers shortstop **Kevin Elster** had 99 RBIs in 1996, with 92 of them coming with him batting in the nine hole.

This week in 1985 **Dwight Gooden** had 16 strikeouts in a complete game effort as the New York Mets topped the San Francisco Giants 3-0. It was the 20-year-old right-hander's 13th consecutive winning decision on his way to a 24-4 record.



The Nationals beat the Phillies this week in what was one of the cooler games of the year. It happened in Williamsport, Pa., where the Little League World Series is happening right now. Even cooler: MLB sold no tickets for this game.

The entire crowd of 2,473 fans were Little Leaguers and their families (and some corporate sponsors for good measure). MLB has done a fantastic job with these one-off games the last few years. Bravo. And we got to see Phillies second baseman **Bryson Stott** rock a custom-made pencil bat, as seen above. A-plus.

Also, a few big-name Phillies attended a LLWS game earlier in the day to support the kids from Media, Pa., a suburb of Philadelphia. Imagine playing a little-league game and **seeing Bryce Harper** in the stands rooting for you.

The crowd was made up of just 2,473 Little League players and their families — an intimate setting that allowed players access to each other. Autographs were signed, both by big leaguers and little leaguers. Players even slid down the hill on cardboard!

Two top baseball prospects — San Diego's Ethan Salas and Washington's Dylan Crews — are both headed to Double-A in record time, both teams announced yesterday. Salas is just 17(!)

and spent all of nine days in High-A. Salas was signed in January to a record \$5.6 million bonus. He was born in Florida but grew up in Venezuela and qualified as an international player.

Meanwhile, Crews was playing college baseball (at LSU) two months ago and has crushed Single-A pitching. We'll see if he makes a September appearance in the majors.

The Angels took 21-year-old first baseman **Nolan Schanuel** with the 11th pick of the draft on June 9 and promoted him to the majors on Aug. 18 after only 21 minor league games. Schanuel was 7 of 19 in his first six games with seven walks and only two strikeouts. The out-of-contention Angels appear to be giving him what amounts to a tryout for next season.

Schanuel had hard-to-believe production at Florida Atlantic this season, slashing .447/.615/.868 over 59 games.

Call-ups have started. As long as a player stays beneath 130 at-bats, 50 innings pitched or — *oh hey, look at that* — 45 days on a big-league roster, they maintain their rookie eligibility for 2024, when they could help their team earn extra draft picks if they win Rookie of the Year.

Mike Maddux turned 62 this week. His 15-year career in the majors with nine teams from 1986-2000 included a stint with the Red Sox from 1995-96. Maddux was 7-3 with a 3.97 ERA over 59 games, 11 of them starts, with the Red Sox, and made his only two career playoff appearances in the '95 Division Series against Cleveland. Maddux retired during the 2000 season and became Houston's Double A pitching coach. He has since been pitching coach of the Brewers, Rangers, Nationals, Cardinals, and now the Rangers again. In all, Maddux has been in professional baseball since 1982. Not bad for a guy with 2,807 fewer strikeouts than his Hall of Fame younger brother **Greg**.

The Guardians inducted **Manny Ramirez** — along with outfielder **Dale Mitchell**, a 1948 champion and a .312 hitter in 11 seasons in Cleveland — into their Hall of Fame on Saturday.

Ramirez won a pair of titles in Boston, with **Terry Francona** steering the ship. He captured World Series MVP honors in 2004. He didn't win a ring in Cleveland, despite five division titles and a couple of trips to the Fall Classic. Ramirez finished his career with 555 home runs. He recorded a slash line of .312/.411/.585.

He played into his 40s, spending parts of three seasons in the minors with the Oakland Athletics, Texas Rangers and Chicago Cubs, plus stints in China and the Dominican winter league.

Before this year, the 2018 season held the record for the worst division in history, when — you guessed it — the AL Central mustered a combined winning percentage of only .436. This year's AL Central has a combined winning percentage of .433. Four of the division's five teams have losing records, and they have combined for a run differential of minus-334. Only the fourth-place White Sox ranked higher than 15th in Opening Day payroll.

The last place Royals have the second worst record in baseball (ahead of only the A's). They have not had a .500 record since 2016 and have found few signs of hope. MLB Pipeline recently ranked the Royals' farm system 29th out of 30 organizations, and the Royals do not have a single Top 100 prospect. The Guardians rotation is Noah Syndergaard and four rookies.

The Tigers share MLB's longest postseason drought with the Angels. 25-12 against their weak division rivals, Detroit, though, is 32-52 against the rest of the league, including a disheartening 5-20 against baseball's strongest division, the AL East.

At 65-60, the Twins could challenge the 2005 Padres (82-80) for fewest wins from a division champion.

The Yankees' recent nine-game losing streak was their longest since an eight-game skid in late August 1995. That team went 26-7 down the stretch to win the first A.L. wild card, with a quartet of precocious rookies — **Derek Jeter, Andy Pettitte, Jorge Posada, Mariano Rivera** — along for the ride. batting average of .230, ahead of only the Oakland Athletics.

The Yankees have not hit so poorly as a team since 1968, when the mound was higher, pitchers batted and **Mickey Mantle** played first base.

The Yankees lost 9 straight for the first time since September 1982. Every franchise besides the Yankees had at least one 9 game losing streak from 1983-2023.

No Yankees player was even alive the last time the franchise lost nine games in a row.

The Yankees are the only MLB team in the modern era to have a player who entered the game with a sub-.100 batting average (**Ben Rortvedt**) go 2-for-2 (or better) and the rest of the team go hitless.

Against the Nationals the Yankees got a trio of outfield assists, one for each member of the Yanks' new configuration: **Aaron Judge** in right, **Harrison Bader** in center and **Everson Pereira** in

left. It was the first time the club has notched that many since July 15, 2007, and it was the first time they tallied one at each position since **Lou Piniella, Ruppert Jones and Reggie Jackson** on July 27, 1980.

When the **Yankees** won on Wednesday, beating the Washington Nationals 9-0 at home, the **Seattle Mariners** lost, dropping a 5-4 contest to the White Sox in Chicago. The last time a Yankees win corresponded with a Mariners loss was way back on July 29, when New York's record was 55-49, and Seattle's was 53-51.

Back then, both teams were underperforming expectations and hoping to get hot in time to make a run at a wild-card position. The Mariners turned it on and have gone 21-5 since. The Yankees also flipped a switch — and blew a breaker. When the lights came back on, they'd gone 8-18.

Ten years ago this week **Ichiro Suzuki** recorded the 4,000th hit of his professional career (1,278 in Japan and 2,722 in the Majors) with a first-inning single off the Blue Jays' **R.A. Dickey** at Yankee Stadium. Ichiro collected 311 hits with the Yankees from 2012-14, batting .281

In this space there have been many discussions on the value of RBIs and the concept of being "clutch". Being old, and old school, I remain convinced that the most valuable thing you can do offensively is deliver runs—score them and drive them in. From the obscure but telling stats file—scoring (runs scored plus runs driven in minus HRs). Leaders as of mid-week:

<u>Adolis Garcia</u>	Rangers	134
<u>Marcus Semien</u>	Rangers	134
Shohei Ohtani	Angels	123
Justin Turner	Red Sox	120
Alex Bregman	Astros	116
Freddie Freeman	Dodgers	141
Matt Olson	Braves	133
Ronald Acuna Jr.	Braves	130

Mookie Betts Dodgers 122

Christian Yelich Brewers 119

In contrast, the bottom team's leaders—**Ryan Noda**, A's, (70), **Bryon Buxton**, Twins (74), **Michael Conforto**, Giants (84), **Gleyber Torres**, Yankees (85).

You can probably win a beer asking "What do **Bob Gibson**, **Dave McNally**, **Mickey Lolich**, **Ken Holtzman** have in common?" All are pitchers who hit HRs in a World Series their team won. (the other four who did it—**Joe Blanton** of the 2008 Phillies, **Bucky Walters** of the 1940 Reds, **Jesse Haines** of the 1926 Cards and **Jim Bagby** of the 1920 Indians -- are all pretty obscure).

Or

Name to only 3 active players w 6 or more Gold Gloves: **Nolan Aronado** (10), **Zack Greike** (6), **Mookie Betts** (6).

Jordan Lyles of the Royals at 5.21 has the third-highest ERA of any pitcher who has made 200 starts.

One by one, the Yankees filed off the Boeing 757 jet on Thursday evening, thanking their captain for a smooth flight. That exchange occurs countless times during a baseball season, but with **Clarke Schmidt**'s father behind the controls, this trip was a family affair.

Dwight Schmidt, a veteran Delta Air Lines pilot of more than 20 years, guided the Bombers' charter flight from Newark Liberty International Airport to Tampa International Airport. The elder Schmidt said that he lobbied for the trip when he spotted the Yankees' tail number pop up on Delta's systems: DL8883.

Manager **Aaron Boone** added that he volunteered to help fly the plane, an offer that was kindly rebuffed. During the Yankees' recent series in Atlanta, Boone accepted an opportunity to test a flight simulator at Delta headquarters, practicing virtual takeoffs and landings at New York's LaGuardia Airport that included fly-bys of Yankee Stadium.

A former naval aviator in the Marine Corps, Dwight Schmidt said that he has piloted the Yankees' charter once before -- for the Field of Dreams game in Dyersville, Iowa, in August 2021. However, Schmidt was optioned to Triple-A Scranton/Wilkes-Barre the day before that memorable contest in the corn field.

San Diego Padres reliever **Robert Suarez** was ejected before throwing a pitch against the Miami Marlins after a sticky substance check Wednesday. Suarez is the sixth pitcher to be ejected during a sticky substance check since MLB implemented a policy in 2021 that results in a 10-game suspension.

The righty has a 4.73 ERA with eight strikeouts through 13 1/3 innings pitched for the Padres this season. A pitcher ejected for sticky substances automatically receives a 10-game suspension, during which his club must play a man short. Thus, the Padres could soon be limited to carrying only 12 pitchers on their active roster — and, after rosters expand to 28 players on Sept. 1, 13 pitchers until Suarez returns.

This year — the first of Suarez’s five-year, \$46 million contract — has been a disappointment for San Diego’s top setup man.

Since MLB began taking measures to cut down on the use of “sticky stuff” by pitchers, **Caleb Smith** (then with the Arizona Diamondbacks) and **Héctor Santiago** (then with the Mariners) were suspended for their foreign substance use in 2021. Earlier this season, **Max Scherzer** (then with the New York Mets), **Domingo Germán** (New York Yankees) and **Drew Smith** (Mets) were also ejected for violating the league’s foreign substance use rules.

WHO’S HOT

Bobby Witt Jr., Royals

On July 1: .244/.288/.415 with 12 homers and 23 steals.

Now: .278/.317/.499 with 25 homers and 37 steals.

Since July 1, he’s hitting .339/.369/.650 with 13 homers and 14 steals in 44 games. He’s got a real shot at becoming the Royals’ first 30-30 player since ... well, since ever. The Royals have never had a 30-30 player. The closest was **Carlos Beltran** in 2002, when he hit 29 homers and stole 35 bases.

Ryan Mountcastle, Orioles

July 1: .227/.264/.422 with 11 homers.

Now: .272/.421/.481 with 17 homers.

Returned from IL on July 9. Since then, he's hitting .369/.433/.595. The Orioles are 24-13 since Mountcastle's return.

Wilmer Flores, Giants

July 1: .255/.318/.460 with 8 home runs.

Now: .301/.361/.535 with 17 home runs

Since July 1 he's hitting .355/.412/.633 with 10 doubles and nine home runs in 39 games.

Matt Olson, Braves

July 1: .246/.353/.572 with 28 homers, 63 runs, 67 RBIs.

Now: .266/.378/.594 with 43 homers, 98 runs, 108 RBIs.

Olson was plenty good before July 1, but since then he's hitting .306/.425/.637 with 15 homers in 44 games. He has turned a good season into a potential MVP season.

MONDAY NIGHT CRYSTAL BALLS

In the top of the first inning in Houston, **Kevin Millar** — working Red Sox color commentary for NESN — predicted a home run from **Adam Duvall**. "He's going deep," Millar said, unprompted. "This is not a good matchup for (Astros pitcher **Cristian) Javier**."

Sure enough, — *BAM* — Duvall crushed a three-run shot over the left-field.

A couple hours later in Philadelphia, **Kyle Schwarber** had been frustrated with the strike zone for much of the night. In the seventh inning, after another questionable called strike, Phillies announcer **John Kruk** said "I've got a feeling this ball could travel long distances here."

Schwarber sent the next pitch 444 feet, to the second deck.

Terry Francona's health issues have been no secret over the last few years. **Francona** has already scheduled shoulder replacement surgery and plans on having a pair of hernia operations at the end of this season.

On more than one occasion, there seemed to be a question as to whether he would return to the Guardians' dugout at all. But each time, he has come back, adding to what is almost certainly a Hall of Fame managerial career.

As a manager, he has the 13th-most wins in history — a 1,934-1,962 record between the Phillies, Red Sox and Indians/Guardians — and two World Series titles from his time in Boston (including the curse-breaker in 2004). No fewer than 10 of the managers ahead of him are in the Hall of Fame, and the other two are **Bruce Bochy and Dusty Baker**. This week Francona indicated that he may be calling it quits after this season.

"I don't ever want to do this for the wrong reasons," he said Tuesday.

He said he has spoken at length to (president of baseball operations) Chris Antonetti and GM Mike Chernoff about his next steps, and has attempted to evaluate his situation on a regular basis.

"I'm not always pleased with the answer I'm getting," he said.

Of course you were trying to think of the 12 managers ahead of Francona in career wins—here you go:

Connie Mack	3731
Tony LaRussa	2902
John McGraw	2763
Bobby Cox	2504
Joe Torre	2326
Sparky Anderson	2194
Dusty Baker	2165
Bucky Harris	2158
Joe McCarthy	2125
Bruce Boche	2075
Walter Alston	2042
Leo Durocher	2008

Larry Walker batted .350 or better in four different seasons, all with Colorado. That included his best year, 1997, when he hit .366, topped the National League with 49 home runs, and won the Most Valuable Player Award. He also demonstrated an ability to hit at lower altitudes, as with his .322 BA and league-leading 44 doubles for Montreal in 1994.

Vladimir Guerrero won the American League's MVP trophy in 2004 by hitting 39 home runs, driving in 126 runs, and batting .337 for the Anaheim Angels. He launched at least 30 homers in eight different years, reached triple digits in RBIs 10 times, and batted .300 or better in 13 seasons.

Tony Gwynn took the National League's 1984 batting title with a .351 average. He won seven more crowns over the next 13 years, peaking with an awe-inspiring BA of .394 in 1994. His career average of .338 ranks as the highest for any Modern Era right fielder, beating runner-up **Roberto Clemente** by seven points.

The last Braves player to lead the NL in homers in a non-shortened season (**Marcell Ozuna** led the NL with 18 homers in 2020) was **Andruw Jones**, who hit a franchise-record 51 dingers in 2005. **Matt Olson** is on pace to break Jones' record, but **Pete Alonso** of the Mets is keeping it close in the NL home run race. The Mets' first baseman, who led the NL and MLB with a rookie-record 53 homers in 2019, has gone deep 13 times in his past 27 games and is on pace to reach the 50-mark again. The last time two hitters from the same league both hit 50 homers in a season? **Alex Rodriguez and Jim Thome** in 2002.

Kyle Bradish is atop the AL ERA leaderboard with **Gerrit Cole**. The Orioles right-hander, who has posted a 2.50 ERA over his past 18 starts, could become the first Baltimore pitcher to lead the AL in ERA since **Mike Boddicker** in 1984. It's been an even longer wait for the Yankees, whose last AL ERA leader was **Rudy May** in 1980.

Texas shortstop **Corey Seager** may have a sizable lead over Tampa's **Yandy Díaz** and Toronto's **Bo Bichette**, but he has made two trips to the injured list this season and is on pace to finish with 485 plate appearances, 17 fewer than the 502 it would take to qualify for the batting title. If he falls short of 502, Seager's place in the batting race would be determined by adding a select number of hitless at-bats to his ledger until he met the minimum requirement of 502 PAs, which could open the door for Díaz or Bichette to pull ahead. (Seager is on pace to finish with 147 hits over 427 at-bats, a .343 average. In that case, adding 17 hitless at-bats would knock his average down to .331 for the purposes of deciding the AL batting title.)

Bichette leads the AL in hits but **Marcus Semian** of the Rangers, **Julio Rodriguez** of the Mariners, Bobby Witt Jr. of the Royals and **Shohei Ohtani** are all within 10. **Luis Arraez**, 168 (MIA); **Ronald Acuña Jr.**, 167 (ATL); **Freddie Freeman**, 163 (LAD) are pretty close for the NL hits lead-- all on pace to record more than 210 knocks this season.

Winning back-to-back league saves titles is a rare feat in the volatile world of MLB closers. Since 1987, only five pitchers have done it -- **Craig Kimbrel** (NL 2011-14), **Jim Johnson** (AL 2012-13), **Jose Valverde** (NL 2007-08), **Francisco Rodriguez** (AL 2005-06) and **Lee Smith** (NL 1991-92). **Emmanuel Clase** of the Guardians, who led the AL with 42 saves a year ago, would join that list if he can hold onto his slim lead over **Felix Bautista** of the Orioles and **Jordan Romano** of the Jays.

Five years after his brother, **Edwin Diaz**, led the AL in saves (2018 Mariners), **Alexis Díaz** could do the same in the NL. He'd be the first Reds pitcher to lead the NL in saves since **Jeff Shaw** in 1997.

San Diego's **Blake Snell** has put up a sparkling 1.48 ERA in his past 17 outings to take control of the NL ERA lead.

Bryce Harper hit 4 balls Wednesday with an exit velocity over 110 mph. Since Statcast began tracking exit velocities in 2015, only Yankees slugger **Aaron Judge** has put more 110+ mph balls in play in a game. He did it five times on Sept. 18, 2022. The only other player to do it four times in a game is **Giancarlo Stanton** on May 7, 2015. **Kyle Schwarber** held the previous Phillies record with three such batted balls on Aug. 9, 2022.

On Jan. 10, 2020, less than a month before **Mookie Betts** was dealt, Red Sox owner John Henry, overseeing the top payroll in baseball, stated "We are focused on competitiveness over the next 5 years."

Four years in, the Dodgers have four playoff seasons and an annual MVP candidate who makes \$27 million annually. In exchange, the Sox (most likely) will have one playoff appearance in four seasons, plus two last-place finishes.

Since acquiring Betts, the Dodgers are 338-172, have won a World Series, and are likely heading for their third consecutive 100-win, first-place season. Betts has been a three-time All-Star, won two Silver Slugger awards, two Gold Gloves, and this season should finish in the NL's top five in MVP voting for the third time in four seasons. He comes to Fenway hitting .310 with 34 homers and 89 RBIs, top five in all three categories. He went 7 for 8 with three RBIs from the leadoff spot Thursday in two victories over the Guardians.

There is one significant bright side for Sox ownership. According to MLB's Team Payroll Tracker, since the Betts trade, the Sox have dropped from No. 1 to 13th in player payroll and are currently one slot ahead of the Colorado Rockies.

From 2014-19, **Mookie Betts'** 65 home runs at Fenway Park led all players. **Rafael Devers** (43) has the most since Betts left.

That he let the face of the franchise walk rather than pay him market rate will forever be part of John Henry's legacy.

Fenway Returns

The legendary **Babe Ruth**, who was sold to the Yankees 100 years before Betts was salary-dumped to the Dodgers, launched the greatest dynasty in the history of American sports for New York City ... but he didn't hurt the Red Sox when he first returned to Fenway. Playing center field and batting cleanup in April of 1920, the Bambino went a tepid 3 for 12 with two singles and a double in three losses at Fenway.

In 1980, World Series hero **Carlton Fisk** was allowed to sign with the White Sox after Red Sox owners Haywood Sullivan and Buddy LeRoux failed to deliver his contract renewal by a December deadline. When Fisk came to Fenway with Chicago on Opening Day '81, vendors sold "Haywood and Buddy are Killing the Sox" bumper stickers outside the park. Fisk wore No. 72 for the White Sox, the reverse of his Boston No. 27. And then he beat the Red Sox with an eighth-inning, three-run homer off former teammate **Bob Stanley**.

Roger Clemens' comeback in 1997 dripped with revenge. He'd won 192 games, three Cy Youngs, and an AL MVP award (like Betts) with the Red Sox, but general manager Dan Duquette allowed him to leave via free agency, stating that the Rocket was "in the twilight of his career." (Clemens went on to win another 162 games and four more Cys.)

On July 12, 1997, Clemens returned to Fenway in a Blue Jays uniform and fanned 16 (no walks) in eight innings of a 3-1 victory. He topped out at 98 m.p.h. When he came off the mound for the final time, he glared toward the Sox owners' box as fans chanted, "Rog-er, Rog-er!"

"He came to make a point," said **Mo Vaughn**, who fanned three times. "And he did."

Want to feel old? On September 9, **Derek Jeter**, now 49, will attend his first Yankee Old-Timers Day along with luminaries such as **Bucky Dent**, **Ron Guidry**, **Hideki Matsui**, **Jorge Posada**, **David Wells**, and **Joe Torre**.

The Yankees and Mets have never both finished last in the same season.

Since the start of 2020, nine Rays pitchers have had Tommy John surgery: **Shane McClanahan, Jeffrey Springs, Drew Rasmussen, Shane Baz, Brendan McKay, Jalen Beeks, Yonny Chirinos, Colin Poche, and Andrew Kittredge**. Also, **Nick Anderson** suffered a torn UCL.

Seven of the top 12 career save leaders pitched for the Red Sox at one time or another:

Lee Smith, Billy Wagner, Kenley Jansen, Craig Kimbrel, Dennis Eckersley, Jonathan Papelbon, Jeff Reardon (the non-Sox alums in the top dozen are **Mariano Rivera, Trevor Hoffman, Francisco Rodriguez, John Franco, and Joe Nathan**).

AH STEPHEN, WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN

It's been over a year since Washington Nationals pitcher **Stephen Strasburg** has been seen on the mound, and he's reportedly now ready to call it a career.

Strasburg is set to retire from MLB because he has been unable to overcome complications from thoracic outlet syndrome.

After undergoing surgery that included the removal of a rib and two neck muscles to address his thoracic outlet syndrome in 2021, Strasburg made one start in June 2022 and pitched 4.2 innings before being shut down again. It was reported earlier this summer that the 35-year-old has "severe nerve damage" and experienced pain, tingling and numbness while trying to stay in shape.

The No. 1 pick in the 2009 MLB draft, Strasburg was a massively-hyped prospect who quickly lived up to expectations. At age of 21 he was promoted to the majors only 364 days after he was drafted.

When he made his major league debut in 2010, he set a Nationals franchise record with 14 strikeouts. He went on to become a three-time All-Star who helped Washington win a World

Series title in 2019. He was named World Series MVP after earning two wins in his two starts and recording 14 strikeouts while allowing just 12 hits.

The Nationals rewarded Strasburg with a seven-year, \$245 million contract that offseason, but that deal precipitated his decline. The right-handed hurler has thrown just 31.1 innings since signing that deal.

Strasburg was a beast in his prime, posting a 3.21 ERA and striking out 1,579 batters in 1,346 2/3 innings from 2012-19.

Strasburg will continue be paid \$35 million annually through 2026 (with about \$11.4M deferred each year). He then will receive \$26.6M in 2027, 2028 and 2029 in his owed deferred payments. The contract was not insured, leaving the Nationals on the hook for its entirety.

Strasburg's career has been plagued by injuries. His rookie season was cut short by an elbow issue that required Tommy John surgery. He's made 30 or more starts in a season just three times in 13 years.

Strasburg ends his career with a 113-62 record, a 3.24 ERA and 1,723 strikeouts in 247 regular season starts. He excelled in the postseason with a 1.46 ERA in 55.1 innings.

GOOD AND BAD FINISHES

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Since 1961, 84% of teams in playoff position in the standings made the post season. That means only 56 teams mounted successful stretch drives after September 1. They snatched postseason berths in that final month from teams that had outperformed them in the previous five months. Fifty-six successful stretch drives in 61 seasons — an average of slightly less than one per year. It's obviously not an easy trick to pull off.

Those 56 resurgent squads, by the way, posted average records after September 1 of 19.5 wins and 9.7 losses — for a winning percentage of .668.

Best surges

- 1. Orioles 1974 (through August: 66-65, .504; afterward: 25-6, .806)

- 2. Yankees 1995 (through August: 57-59, .491; afterward: 22-6, .786)
- 3. Indians 2013 (through August: 71-64, .526; afterward: 21-6, .778)
- 4. Astros 2004 (through August: 69-63, .523; afterward: 23-7, .767)
- 5. Athletics 2000 (through August: 69-63, .523; afterward: 22-7, .759)
- 6. Mets 1969 (through August: 76-54, .585; afterward: 24-8, .750)
- 7. Phillies 1983 (through August: 67-64, .511; afterward: 23-8, .742)
- 8. Braves 1969 (through August: 73-62, .541; afterward: 20-7, .741)
- 8. Brewers 2019 (through August: 69-66, .511; afterward: 20-7, .741)
- 10. Braves 1993 (through August: 82-50, .621; afterward: 22-8, .733)
- Notes: The Orioles, as previously noted, salvaged a .500 season with their fantastic stretch drive in 1974. They finally cooled down in the American League Championship Series, which they lost to the Athletics. Most of these surging clubs met a similar fate, eventually running out of gas in the playoffs. Only two made it to the World Series — the 1969 Mets and the 1983 Phillies — and New York became the sole winner of the ultimate title.

Worst collapses

- 1. Padres 2021 (through August: 72-62, .537; afterward: 7-21, .250)
- 2. Red Sox 2011 (through August: 83-52, .615; afterward: 7-20, .259)
- 3. Diamondbacks 2018 (through August: 74-61, .548; afterward: 8-19, .296)
- 4. Astros 1996 (through August: 74-63, .540; afterward: 8-17, .320)
- 5. Cubs 1969 (through August: 83-52, .615; afterward: 9-18, .333)
- 5. Braves 2011 (through August: 80-55, .593; afterward: 9-18, .333)
- 7. Brewers 2014 (through August: 73-63, .537; afterward: 9-17, .346)
- 8. Angels 1998 (through August: 76-62, .551; afterward: 9-15, .375)
- 9. Red Sox 1974 (through August: 72-59, .550; afterward: 12-19, .387)
- 10. Angels 1995 (through August: 67-50, .573; afterward: 11-17, .393)
- Notes: This is the opposite of the previous list. A collapse involves any club that would have made the playoffs at the end of August, but fell short a month later. No team fizzled as dramatically as the San Diego Padres in 2021. They were 10 games above .500 at the beginning of the stretch drive, ticketing them for a wild-card berth. But their 7-21 finish — lowlighted by a seven-game losing streak — pushed them out of the hunt.

Best finishes

- 1. Indians 2017 (through August: 76-56, .576; afterward: 26-4, .867)
- 2. Athletics 2001 (through August: 79-56, .585; afterward: 23-4, .852)
- 3. Royals 1977 (through August: 76-54, .585; afterward: 26-6, .813)
- 4. Orioles 1974 (through August: 66-65, .504; afterward: 25-6, .806)
- 5. White Sox 1983 (through August: 75-57, .568; afterward: 24-6, .800)
- 6. Mets 1988 (through August: 78-54, .591; afterward: 22-6, .786)
- 6. Yankees 1995 (through August: 57-59, .491; afterward: 22-6, .786)
- 8. Cardinals 2002 (through August: 76-59, .563; afterward: 21-6, .778)
- 8. Indians 2013 (through August: 71-64, .526; afterward: 21-6, .778)
- 8. Astros 2018 (through August: 82-53, .607; afterward: 21-6, .778)
- Notes: The final two lists cover all teams in the Modern Era, regardless of their playoff status on September 1. No team ever got hotter down the stretch than the 2017 Cleveland Indians, who won 22 straight games between late August and mid-September. All 10 clubs on this list made the playoffs, but (interestingly enough) none of them won a world championship or even a league title. So much for the value of momentum.

Worst finishes

- 1. Orioles 2002 (through August: 63-71, .470; afterward: 4-24, .143)
- 2. Blue Jays 1978 (through August: 55-80, .407; afterward: 4-22, .154)
- 2. Tigers 1996 (through August: 49-87, .360; afterward: 4-22, .154)
- 4. Rangers 1972 (through August: 49-76, .392; afterward: 5-24, .172)
- 5. Pirates 1998 (through August: 64-71, .474; afterward: 5-22, .185)
- 6. Tigers 1975 (through August: 52-81, .391; afterward: 5-21, .192)
- 6. Tigers 2002 (through August: 50-85, .370; afterward: 5-21, .192)
- 6. Giants 2018 (through August: 68-68, .500; afterward: 5-21, .192)
- 9. Tigers 2017 (through August: 58-74, .439; afterward: 6-24, .200)
- 9. Orioles 2008 (through August: 63-73, .463; afterward: 5-20, .200)
- Notes: The Orioles certainly weren't of championship caliber in 2002, but they didn't seem terrible, either. They had a .500 record as late as August 23, and they still sat at 63-71 at the end of the month. But a disastrous record of 4-24 down the

stretch dropped Baltimore to a miserable final mark of 67-95. The 1978 Blue Jays and 1996 Tigers were nearly as bad at the end, each going 4-22.

THIS WEEK'S BIRTHDAYS

Carl Yastrzemski	84
Graig Nettles	79
Paul Molitor	67
Julio Franco	65
Mark Langston	63
Cal Ripken Jr.	63
Albert Belle	57
Andy Benes	56
Craig Counsell	53
Todd Helton	50
Brett Gardner	40
J.D. Martinez	36
Mike Yastrzemski	33

LONGER READS

THE JOE POSNANSKI NEWSLETTER HAS INTERESTING STUFF EVERY DAY (you should consider subscribing). THIS EXERCISE WAS TO PICK YOUR ALL-TIME SHORT TEAM AND YOUR ALL-TIME TALL TEAM. BAR-NAPKIN-WORTHY.

The 5-foot-9 and Shorter Team

Catcher: Yogi Berra (5-foot-7) or Roy Campanella (5-foot-9).

Catcher is a position where being short — “squat” is usually the way that the sportswriters say it — has often been considered an advantage. Pudge Rodriguez was also 5-foot-9.

I’ve been thinking about something: I want to show you Yogi vs. Campy from 1948 through ’55, which was when they were each winning MVP awards like crazy.

Campy: .286/.368/.522, 163 2Bs, 209 HRs, 557 runs, 721 RBIs, 131 OPS+, 3 MVPs.

Yogi: .294/.356/.495, 181 2Bs, 195 HRs, 686 runs, 840 RBIs, 130 OPS+, 3 MVPs

By Total Zone Rating, Campy was the better defensive catcher — you couldn’t run on him, for one thing. He threw out 60% of attempted base stealers over those eight seasons, ranking among the leaders every year. Yogi was no slouch throwing out baserunners himself; he threw out about 50% over those years and led the league three times in caught-stealing percentage. But Campy was all-world.

Of course, Campy’s career and Yogi’s career had very different shapes. Yogi was at D-Day, joined the Yankees at 21, won lots of World Series, and continued on as a terrific player for another five years after this peak. Campy started in the Negro leagues when he was 15 and was already a terrific player before World War II. He joined the Dodgers at 26, played for the great and star-crossed Boys of Summer, declined rapidly after 1955, and his career ended suddenly and tragically at 35 when he was paralyzed in a car accident. Yogi and Campy are obviously all-timers, and their careers are hard and perhaps impossible to compare in total. But I’m thinking about them at their best ... and at their best, I don’t know. It’s too close to call. But maybe I’d go with Campy.

First base: Joe Judge (5-foot-8)

Here’s something fun — here are the WAR leaders for first basemen 5-foot-9 or shorter over the last 50 years:

See that blank space? Yeah, that’s right, there has not been a player in the last 50 years who is that short and has played half his games as a first baseman.

Joe Judge played almost his entire career for the Washington Senators, and he would have hit .300 for his career had he retired after his age-37 season. He didn't retire, alas, and his career average dropped to .298. In 1928, he had what was a typical Joe Judge season — he hit .306/.396/.417 — but finished third in the MVP balloting for some reason, something he had never done before or after. It's unclear to me why this sudden Joe Judge love flourished; it's not like the Senators had a great season (they were 75-79-1). I guess a bunch of people, all at the same time, thought: Hey, that Joe Judge is a good player!"*

It might be that in 1928, **Babe Ruth (or his ghostwriter) wrote this about Judge: "**Goose Goslin** will out-hit Joe in the averages by 20 to 50 points. But with runners on base and a hit needed to win the ball game, most pitchers would rather pitch to Goose a dozen times over." In other words: Joe Judge was clutch!*

Second base:

Joe Morgan (5-foot-7)

So many great short second basemen, starting with Little Joe, but, I mean, **Eddie Collins** was 5-foot-9, and then you've got **Dustin Pedroia and Jose Altuve and Chuck Knoblauch and Davey Lopes** and, obviously, **Cupid Childs**. You should never forget Cupid Childs.

Shortstop: Willie Wells (5-foot-9)

You know what never fails to blow my mind? **Pee Wee Reese** was 5-foot-10. He wasn't really pee wee at all.

Even as we often discuss great Negro leagues ballplayers, we don't spend enough time talking about how great Willie Wells was. In Mexico, they nicknamed him *El Diablo* — the Devil — and the story goes that Wells hit baseballs so hard and so far that he had to start wearing a miner's helmet to the plate because of the way frustrated and vengeful pitchers kept throwing at his head.* This made him one of the pioneers of the batting helmet. He hit with immense power, setting the early Negro leagues home run record in 1926 and topping it in 1927. Defensively, he was apparently without equal; he is said to have shown Jackie Robinson the proper way to turn the double play.

**Larry Lester's research has led him to believe that Wells probably started using the helmet in 1937 after he was beamed by Ray Brown and was in critical condition.*

Third base: José Ramirez (5-foot-9)

Sure, I could have gone way back in time and pulled out **Jimmy Collins or Heinie Groh or John McGraw** himself ... but why do that when we have such a wonderful little miracle playing right now? How can you not just love Jose Ramirez?

Leftfield: Tim Lincecum (5-foot-8)

I never thought of Lincecum as a smaller man, but there you have it. How about this: From 1981 to 1987, Lincecum hit .310/.396/.448 with a 135 OPS+ and averaged 72 stolen bases and 102 runs per season. What the heck was anyone waiting for with this guy and the Hall of Fame?

Centerfield: Oscar Charleston (5-foot-8, maybe?)

For the longest time, Charleston was listed at 6-0, 200 pounds on Baseball-Reference and in most other places. But through research, particularly from Jeremy Beer, it looks like he was no taller than 5-foot-8. My theory is that Charleston simply carried himself big. He was a larger-than-life character who was not to be trifled with; Ted Page said that the only thing Charleston liked as much as baseball was fighting.

Rightfield: Mookie Betts (5-foot-9)

Obviously. Sure, this could have been **Mel Ott or Paul Waner**, who at the moment are ahead of Mookie in career achievements. But, uh, the whole POINT of this list is to honor the greatest living American, Mookie Betts.

Pitcher: Harvey Haddix (5-foot-9)

I cannot believe — seriously, cannot believe — that **Pedro Martinez** is listed at 5-foot-11. No way, right? He's gotta be 5-foot-9 or shorter, right? I mean, he was BORN to be on this team. But it looks like he doesn't qualify, and I'm stuck. Sure, I can go back to the 19th century and pluck the rough stylings of **Old Hoss Radbourn**, who did win 60 games in 1884, or someone like

Pud Galvin. But I KNOW who is going to be the pitcher on the 6-foot-5 and taller team ... do I really want to match up Old Hoss or Pud against **Randy Johnson**? Uh, no. Trouble is — who else? Looking at post-World War II pitchers, I mean, there just haven't been many great 5-foot-9 pitchers. **Tom Gordon? Bobby Shantz? Marcus Stroman?** So I'm going to go with Harvey Haddix and hope that I get him on the right day.

The 6-foot-5 and Taller Team

Catcher: Joe Mauer (6-foot-5)

I first thought catcher would be a tough position — I forgot that Mauer was such a giant. As it turns out, even if not for Mauer, I could have taken **Matt Wieters or Sandy Alomar Jr.**, who were both good players. My original thought was that I would have to take one of my favorite players when I was in college, Cleveland's **Andy Allanson**, who was SO big and yet somehow hit with absolutely no power. I remember he did have a really strong arm. Joe Mauer's better.

First base: Freddie Freeman (6-foot-5)

Since 2018, Freddie Freeman has led the league in doubles four out of six seasons. Weirdly, in 2021, though, he hit only 25 doubles. I don't get it. He had a terrific year that year — hit .300/.393/.504 and led the league with 120 runs. He obviously was mashing the ball. But so few doubles. Looking back at that weird year, here's what stands out.

Doubles and ground-ball-to-fly-ball ratio (GB/FB)

2018: 44 doubles (led league); 1.16 GB/FB

2019: 34 doubles; 1.12 GB/FB

2020: 23 doubles (led league); 0.85 GB/FB

2021: 25 doubles?; 1.32 GB/FB

2022: 47 doubles (led league); 1.14 GB/FB

2023: 45 doubles (leads league); 0.84 GB/FB

In 2021, Freeman was just hitting more balls on the ground. That's all.

Second base: Archi Cianfrocco (6-foot-5)

He was not a second baseman. But he did play 24 games there, the most for any player 6-foot-5 or taller. If you could drop it to 6-foot-4, you could put **DJ LeMahieu** out there, and I'll admit that I didn't realize he was that tall. But it doesn't matter, you can't drop it to 6-foot-4, so Archi Cianfrocco, your country of tallness needs you.

Shortstop: Elly De La Cruz (6-foot-5)

We hate to rush the kid, but ... it's either him or **Oneil Cruz**, and we're going with Elly. I love that the only two qualified shortstops who are 6-foot-5 are both named Cruz and both have crazy, off-the-chart tools. Elly has been hitting sub-.200 the last month or so — he has struck out at least once in every game but one since July 23 — and so, yeah, there are adjustments to make. But I continue to believe.

Third base: Troy Glaus (6-foot-5)

Listen, I don't want to tell the Immaculate Grid people how to do their job, but they might want to play around with this whole height and weight concept, because it was really a lot of fun trying to predict which players are super-tall or super-short. For some reason, in my mind, I thought **Doug DeCinces** was super-tall; he is tall (6-foot-2), but not this kind of tall. Fortunately, Troy Glaus is.

Leftfield: Frank Howard (6-foot-7)

One of my father's three all-time favorite players — it's **Tony Oliva, Frank Howard and Brooks Robinson** for my dad. I love looking at Howard's Neutralized batting stats — they show what an impossible situation he was in, playing his games in Washington's hitter's dungeon during the most dominant pitcher's era since Deadball.

Howard's actual stats: .273/.352/.499 with 382 homers, 864 runs, 1,119 RBIs.

Howard neutralized: .287/.468/.522 with 410 homers, 971 runs, 1,256 RBIs.

Hmm. Those neutralized stats make a Hall of Fame case, don't they?

Centerfield: Dexter Fowler (6-foot-5)

I really thought I could put **Dale Murphy** here — but he was 6-foot-4. This would be a very different team if the challenge had been to find players 6-foot-4 or smaller — suddenly we'd have Murph and **Cal Ripken Jr. and Jim Thome and Chipper Jones and Miggy Cabrera and Willie McCovey** and so on. I suppose that's why it's 6-foot-5.

Rightfield: Aaron Judge (6-foot-7)

While we have almost no centerfielders to choose from, we have a buffet of rightfielders who were 6-foot-7 — **Dave Winfield, Dave Parker, Giancarlo Stanton, Darryl Strawberry** ... surely we could play **Jason Heyward** in center, no? He's been such a defensive force, and he played more than 220 games in center. I went with Judge in right, not so much because he's the best player — Winfield's career is much more accomplished — but because I wanted 6-foot-7 giants at each corner outfield spot.

Pitcher: Randy Johnson (6-foot-10)

I knew Unit was the choice, but there are a bunch of other superb pitchers at this height — **Fergie Jenkins, Justin Verlander, Roy Halladay, Curt Schilling, Sudden Sam McDowell, Chris Sale, Brandon McCarthy***, etc.

THE GIANTS STOLE A POTENTIAL BIG-LEAGUE RELIEVER, AND THE DODGERS ARE NOT HAPPY

Andrew Baggarly, The Athletic

Darien Núñez woke up in a recovery room groggy from the anesthesia. He wore a shower cap and surgical gown and the familiar L-shaped scar of someone who just had his left elbow reconstructed.

He had a new arm. He also learned that he had no team.

Núñez, a 29-year-old left-handed reliever from Cuba, had made his major-league debut with the Los Angeles Dodgers in 2021. His fastball touched 98 mph and his deceptive, segmented mechanics were strikingly similar to other successful Cuban pitchers like **Orlando “El Duque” Hernandez** and **José Contreras**. Núñez expected to play a significant role in the Dodgers’ bullpen in 2022. But it was apparent by the end of that spring that the elbow pain he pitched through for years would not allow him to continue. So he underwent surgery and made peace with the 14-to-16 months of rehab that would follow.

While he was on the operating table, the Dodgers designated him for assignment — a procedural move made mid-procedure. A day later, they placed him on release waivers.

Núñez took the news better than one might expect. For one, the pain meds were kicking in. For another, the Dodgers had been in touch with his agent, Armando Rios, about contingency plans. They had told Rios of their plans to take his client off the roster. But they wanted to sign Núñez to a two-year minor-league contract. They pledged to pay for his follow-up care and rehab.

“We’re like, ‘Well that’s great, but he has to clear waivers,’” Rios said. “They said ‘Don’t worry about it.’ The Dodgers thought nobody would take him. I didn’t think so, either. I gave it maybe a 1 percent chance. I mean, it’s going to be two years before he can pitch.”

What organization has space on their 40-man roster for a pitcher who can’t face a hitter for two years? What organization would commit thousands of dollars to fix someone else’s broken player? What organization would chase ambulances and turn over every word of transactional agate type? What organization peruses the waiver wire with all the glee of a septuagenarian geared up for a weekend of antiquing?

What organization employs Farhan Zaidi as its president of baseball operations?

“So the Giants picked him,” Rios said. “And the Dodgers were *pissed*.”

Three days after undergoing Tommy John surgery on April 24 of last year, Núñez had a new organization. The Giants did exactly what the Dodgers planned to do. They rostered him for two days (taking advantage of a temporary opening while reliever **Zack Littell** was on the COVID-19 injured list), then put him on release waivers, and after he went unclaimed, they re-signed him to a two-year minor-league contract. They offered him more money than the Dodgers had — seven times as much, according to Rios. They offered him housing and car allowances. They helped him bring his brother, Dariel, from Cuba. They pledged to invite him to major-league spring training in 2023, even though he’d just be spending all of February and March rehabbing at the Papago Park complex anyway. His locker at Scottsdale Stadium was empty all spring. But the big-league camp invite came with major-league meal money and a host of other perks.

And of course, the Giants committed themselves to funding and overseeing every aspect of Núñez’s recovery and rehab under the oversight of pitching rehab coordinator Matt Yourkin

while hosting him at their new, \$65-million player development complex at the foot of the picturesque Papago Buttes.

“After the Giants picked him, the Dodgers called me, desperate,” said Rios, a former big-league outfielder who debuted with the Giants in 1997 and played parts of five seasons with them.

“They knew the Giants would take Darien off the roster. They said, ‘Once they do that, he can choose.’ It got a little personal, I have to say. They were really mad. They acted like it was our choice, not theirs. But they made the choice to let him go.

“Once he woke up, I said, ‘Do you want to stay a Dodger?’ He said, ‘Hell no, I want to be with a team that wants me.’ It was the best decision. He’s very happy. The Giants have been great, very professional.”

And now the Giants are nearing a potential return on their investment. Núñez completed his rehab last month and took the mound in a competitive game on July 13. After six relief appearances in the Arizona Complex League in which he struck out 13 in 7 1/3 innings, the Giants sent him to Low-A San Jose for one outing. He joined Triple-A Sacramento on Aug. 9. He’s allowed one hit, a home run, over three one-inning appearances for the River Cats.

“Stuff-wise, he has shown a very devastating fastball-changeup combo when he is right,” Giants farm director Kyle Haines said. “The arm strength has come back and he’ll get into the mid-90s, but the changeup is a pitch he is able to throw anytime. It’s exciting to have what amounts to a nice potential major-league bullpen option being added to Triple A at this time of the year. It goes to show that just getting guys healthy can be a nice way to add depth when it’s needed.

“Darien was quite a unique story but he handled a tough injury and roster situation very well. He worked hard each day.”

The Giants have invested in dozens of injured and rehabbing players in the five years since Zaidi left his GM position with the Dodgers to head up their archrivals.

Some of those investments hit paydirt. A few weeks after the Giants claimed Núñez last year, they signed left-hander Scott Alexander to a minor-league contract. Alexander had reported to Arizona while spring training was in full swing after agreeing to terms with an undisclosed club. Then its medical staff failed him on his physical. So he signed with another undisclosed club. That team flunked him, too.

“It’s literally a month after the season had started,” Alexander said. “I was like, ‘I’ll take anything at this point.’ I’d been on the 60-day (injured list) twice the season before. So teams were going off that information and comparing MRIs. Every pitcher has a tear in their rotator cuff, right? It almost becomes a judgment thing. Nobody’s going to override what the team’s orthopedic surgeon says. The Giants were the only team that passed me on the physical.”

(This is where we should express our fervent hope that Carlos Correa isn't reading this story. Please, if you're on friendly terms with him, don't show him this. Kindly change the subject to the weather, or the really addictive TV series you've been streaming lately.)

It helped that Zaidi was familiar with Alexander and his power sinker from their time together with the Dodgers. After several months of shoulder rehab, Alexander appeared in 17 games last season and posted a 1.04 ERA. He's been a durable and versatile presence this season, serving in every leveraged role including as an opener while posting a 6-2 record and 4.10 ERA in 43 appearances.

"It felt like a flier at the time," Zaidi said. "But having seen him at his best, we felt it was worth a shot."

Other investments haven't panned out. The Giants claimed former Colorado Rockies infield prospect **Colton Welker** last season and stashed him on the 60-day injured list on July 8, paying him nearly half the major-league minimum salary of \$700,000. They took over his rehab from shoulder surgery and got him back on the field with Sacramento. But performance didn't follow. They released him last month.

In May of 2021, the Giants made a cash deal with the Seattle Mariners to acquire injured right-hander **Sam Delaplane** and kept him on their 60-day IL the rest of the season. When he encountered bumps in his return from Tommy John surgery, the Giants twice re-signed him to minor-league contracts to give his velocity more time to recover. It hasn't worked out. Delaplane missed more time this season and he's currently at Double-A Richmond, where he reported Aug. 1.

But it's been a life-changing opportunity for Delaplane, a San Jose native — not just because he grew up a Giants fan idolizing closer **Brian Wilson**.

"The major-league money allowed me to purchase a house here (in Arizona)," Delaplane said in March as he gazed out onto the field at Scottsdale Stadium. "This is home now. I have an Arizona driver's license. I guess that makes me fully gone, right? I've been a free agent twice for a total of probably 20 seconds. This was where I want to be. I just want to be healthy, have a good season, and debut, of course. Turn a selfish goal into a team goal and help the Giants win baseball games."

"They traded for me when I was sitting in the trainer's room with an icepack on. They worked with me through the highs and lows. Seattle ... it is what it is. They didn't want to pay me to rehab. It's a business decision. I can't hold anything against them for that. But the Giants have brought me back two years in a row when the progress hasn't always been so great."

The Giants made a similar investment in outfielder **Luis González**, claiming him on release waivers in August of 2021 when he underwent shoulder surgery and the Chicago White Sox didn't want to pay him to rehab. Although González required lower back surgery in March and

the Giants designated him for assignment on Monday, they received a more than ample return on their investment. In May of last season, González played regularly in the outfield and hit .368 to become the first Giants position player to win National League Player of the Month honors since Buster Posey in 2010.

González might be buried on the depth chart now. But he gave the Giants a decent run of All-Star-level production for a modest sum.

Zaidi said the Giants do not operate with a strict budget allocation to invest in acquiring injured or rehabbing players from other teams. But they plan to remain aggressive when opportunities arise.

“We looked at it and the return is still significant,” Zaidi said. “We know how expensive it is to get major-league production in trade and free agency. And a lot of times you’re looking at players who, if you get them back to health, they can potentially help you for a few years. It’s not just a rental situation.”

For a club that was one physical exam away from signing Correa to a 13-year, \$350 million contract in December, a few million dollars invested in the rehab space isn’t a whole lot of scratch.

“Our annual budget in this space is something every team could do,” Zaidi said. “No team couldn’t re-orient how they spend their money and have, say, a \$5 million pool to acquire players who are hurt and rehab them. So I don’t see this as a big-stack strategy. It’s primarily driven by what I feel is a competitive advantage with our training staff. The best salesmen for that group are the players themselves who have come through here and gotten back to full health.

“And really, that’s the number one thing: We just have a lot of confidence in our training staff and our rehab group and we think we can get guys back to full health as well as any organization in baseball. We just have to make sure we’re not overtaxing that group. We constantly talk to them about staffing, making sure they’re not at excess capacity. We really believe in our ability to do this.”

Zaidi said he’ll occasionally remind Giants head athletic trainer Dave Groeschner: If the club needs to hire additional rehab coordinators, just say the word. With the Papago complex up and running, staffing is usually a more finite resource than space.

“We have the facilities and we have terrific people,” Zaidi said. “And from a baseball medicine standpoint, particularly on the pitching side with elbow and shoulder injuries, we’re as good as an industry as we have ever been. We tend to heavily discount what we might get from a guy if he’s hurt this year. But our future selves are going to be looking for exactly that kind of guy. You try not to be too myopic from a timing standpoint. A year goes by quickly. We’ll need depth and good players a year from now, too.”

What if the Giants risk ticking off the rest of the league, starting with the Dodgers? Ask Zaidi the question and you'll get a shrug and two upturned palms. He's been doing this long before he met Pederson for the first time. Zaidi started playing in a fantasy NBA league when he was a high school junior. His younger brother is in it. So is Atlanta Braves president of baseball operations and general manager Alex Anthopoulos.

"The NBA, you can be pretty shady," Zaidi said. "With all the load management, you can effectively operate with a 14-man roster if you stay on top of it."

"When you can do it, you do it."

Núñez was a teenage phenom in Cuba before his elbow began to throb. He had an arthroscopic procedure when he was 15 — Tommy John surgery in Cuba was out of the question — and the surgery allowed him to pitch again even if it didn't fully resolve his symptoms. He focused on strengthening everything around his elbow and learning to deal with the pain. But he was damaged goods. Years later, when he found a way out of Cuba, the top bonus he could get was \$15,000. He pitched with elbow pain for as long as he could remember. So he demurred when the Dodgers suggested a platelet-rich plasma injection in April of last year. It was time to give his elbow a fresh start and a chance to properly heal.

"I'd rather stop wasting time," Núñez said through Spanish interpreter and Giants assistant director of player development Gabe Alvarez.

When the Giants claimed him, Núñez said he went from the hospital to his Los Angeles hotel room to grab a few things and reported to Papago Park the same day.

"It's the same dream, same goal, just a different uniform," Núñez said. "I'm grateful for the Giants for taking care of me. Even though I'm the new guy, the Giants took me right in and it felt like family from the get-go. I'm very appreciative of that."

It's a mental challenge as much as a physical challenge to spend a year in the rehab protocol. Núñez would encounter other grab-and-stash guys when they showed up at the complex. He became a touchstone for all of them, especially teenagers from the Dominican Republic and Venezuela.

"He really became a leader of our rehab group and would take some players under his wing each day as they pushed through things together," Haines said. "He became a mentor to some players about taking the weight room and routines seriously. He was in that group so long that it was natural that a player with some major-league time was looked up to by so many."

"I call him *La Maquina*," Rios said. "You see him work out, he's so hungry. He had no money but he never gave up. He just kept hustling and working hard. After I saw that, I said, 'I've got to give everything for this guy.' I love him like a son. We have a different relationship now."

Alvarez said it isn't a cliché: Núñez really was the first player to arrive at the complex every morning. He'd usually have Fernando Vasquez, a 20-year-old right-hander from the Dominican Republic, in tow.

"They spent a lot of time together," Alvarez said. "They'd go over to each other's hotel and play dominoes. Darien has been an amazing mentor. Fernando completely transformed his body in the weight room. His work ethic, understanding personal development, it's mind-blowing, and all the credit goes to Darien."

There's just one thing left to do. Núñez's fastball sat at 93 mph in his last appearance for Sacramento and he's touched 96. He still has that deceptive, distinctly Cuban delivery. His changeup is still an out pitch. He's 30 years old and he needs an opening to crack the 40-man roster. But he's the closest he's been to the big leagues since those six appearances for the Dodgers in 2021. He's hoping all his hard work will pay off — for him and the team that believed in him enough that they were willing to wait.

"I got hurt and the Dodgers were willing to move on from me," Núñez said. "So I appreciate that this organization, in my lowest state, was willing to take a chance on me and let me build myself back up. I really appreciate them for that."

NOTHING REVEALS MORE ABOUT A PITCHER THAN HIS DECISION ON A FULL COUNT

Explaining why a hurler's pitch selection on a 3-2 count works as baseball's "truth serum."

Tom Verducci, Sports Illustrated

In 1924, a doctor in Ferris, Texas, who specialized in obstetrics noticed a certain drug prevented patients from creating rationalizations. The patients revealed only what they considered to be true. Robert Ernest House discovered what soon came to be known as "truth serum," often known under the trademarked name Sodium Pentathol.

The full count pitch is the Sodium Pentathol of pitching. It reveals the truth about what a pitcher feels about his stuff. When you have exhausted the tree of possible pitch counts to its last limb—when there are no more pitches to waste and you must throw a competitive pitch—what will you throw? Your choice says much about who you are as a pitcher.

I've long been fascinated by full counts. I remember how **Bobby Valentine**, after managing in Nippon Pro Baseball, said the full count was regarded with such honor in Japan that pitchers strove to steer at bats toward the 3-and-2 pitch. It is considered the epitome of the art of war between the pitcher and batter.

Think of your backyard dreams as a kid. What was the count in your mind's eye when you hit that winning home run in the World Series? Full, of course—same as it was for **Kirk Gibson and Derek Jeter** in real life.

Whenever I broadcast games, I make sure to have on hand a pitcher's full count history. Never mind what *I* think of your stuff. What do *you* think? The full count pitch reveals it.

Last Saturday, for instance, I knew heading into a Red Sox–Yankees game that **Gerrit Cole** of the Yankees throws his four-seam fastball 75% of the time on full counts, the kind of overwhelming percentage hitters love to see. Sure enough, Cole threw six pitches on full counts, and every one of them was a fastball. Not once did he get strike three. **Connor Wong** smacked the last one for a two-run homer.

What does it tell you? With pride and confidence, Cole will go to his fastball when he needs a pitch. And Boston could sell out for it.

Max Scherzer, on the other hand, throws his four-seamer only 44% of the time on full counts. In 2016, when he threw harder and won his second Cy Young Award, he used his fastball 66% of the time on full counts. The truth serum in his case tells you he doesn't trust his fastball as much, has growing conviction in his changeup and slider, and does not mind walking batters in certain spots.

Here's another bit of truth serum: **James Paxton** of the Red Sox should throw his fastball more. He throws it 55% of the time until he gets to a full count, then chooses his heater 64% of the time in full counts. The result? He has allowed the lowest on-base percentage this year among pitchers who have faced at least 50 batters in a full count (.321, tied with Zack Greinke). The revelation from the truth serum for Paxton: Trust your fastball more. It's working when you must throw a strike.

Surprisingly, **Framber Valdez** of Houston is the worst pitcher in baseball on full counts (.426/.581/.630). Why? He elevates his favorite pitch, the sinker, to the middle of the strike zone rather than keep it on the edges and risk a walk.

Who has the edge in full counts, the pitcher or the hitter? The pitcher has a huge edge when it comes to preventing hits. But if you define "winning the war" of full counts as getting on base, the hitter has the big edge.

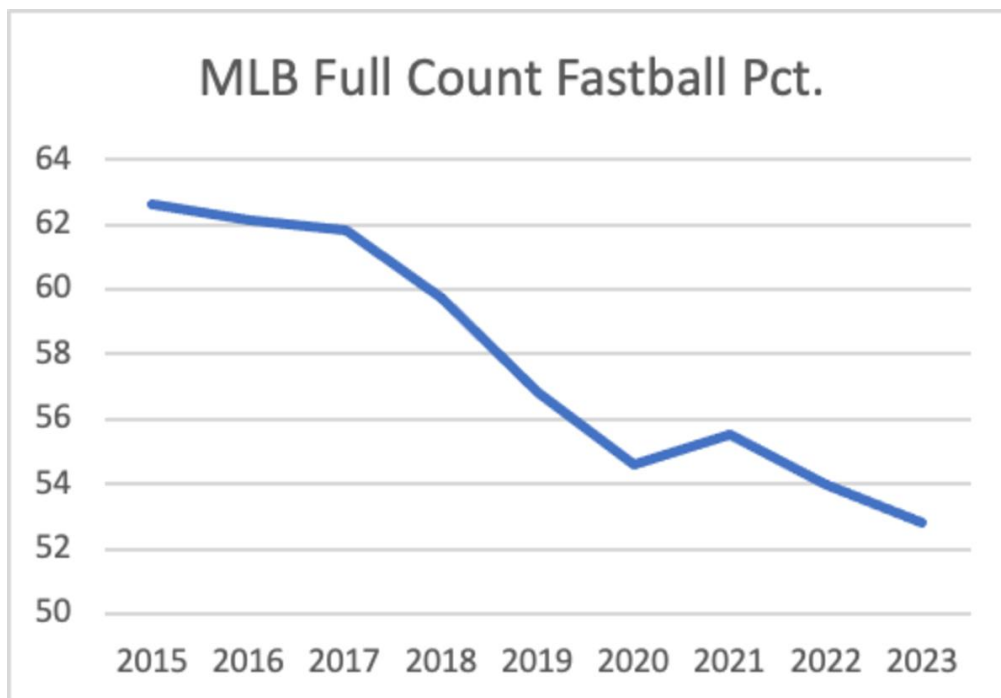
Batters this year are hitting only .190 on full counts—the lowest in any full season since pitch tracking began in 1988. But their on-base percentage is .455, only the 11th lowest in those 45 years.

Only on 3–0 and 3–1 counts are hitters more likely to get on base. And here's how much pitchers should avoid getting to a full count: If a 2-and-2 pitch is a ball, the hitter's probability of

getting on base jumps from 18.3% to 45.5%. That should be a huge incentive to challenge hitters at 2-and-2.

But what qualifies as “challenging” a hitter these days? We know despite rising velocity there are fewer fastballs in the game today than ever before. In just the past five years, the percent of fastballs (not including cutters) has dropped from 55% to 47%.

A similar decline is happening in full counts. Eight years ago, a hitter could expect a fastball 63% of the time in a full count. This year it’s a veritable flip of a coin as to what’s coming: 53% fastballs. The decline of throwing fastballs in full counts has accelerated in the past five years:



Is it working? That is, is the trend away from fastballs when you “must” throw a strike allowing pitchers to win those battles more often? Yes and no.

Again, throwing fewer fastballs in full counts is *reducing hits* to levels not seen since 1988:

Lowest Average in Full Counts Since 1988

2020 .188

2023 .190

2022 .194

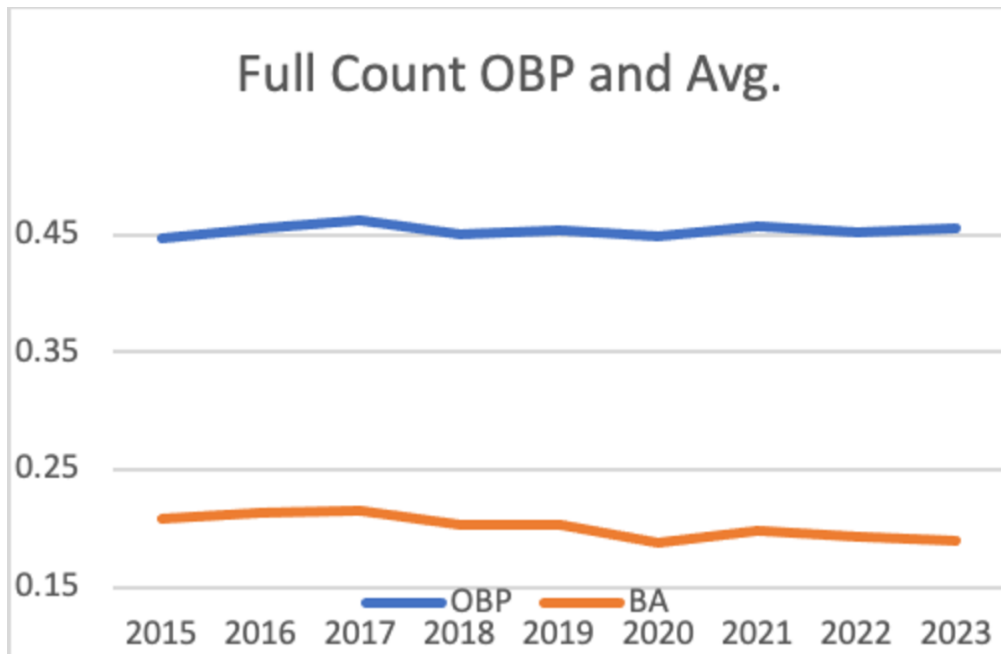
2021 .199

2019 .203

2018 .203

Full count batting average has dropped from .216 in 2017 to .190 this year. Slugging is down to a record low this year in full counts (.325, tied with last season for the worst since 1988).

But all those non-fastballs are leading to more walks. The on-base percentage in full counts has remained steady despite fewer hits:



Despite the pitch timer and the ban on shifts, the game still pivots more on home runs than anything else. And throwing more non-fastballs in full counts—not “challenging” hitters—is part of this passive-aggressive defense of the home run. A common tenet of pitching today is “a walk is not a bad play.”

It should not come as a surprise to know that this “defending the home run” mindset is leading to more full counts:

Plate Appearances Reaching Full Counts

2023: 14.1%

2013: 12.8%

2003: 12.2%

1993: 11.1%

It takes a certain kind of pitcher to excel in full counts. It takes someone who can throw multiple pitches for strikes. You can see that common thread in this list:

Lowest OBP Against, Full Counts Since 1988 (min. 1,000 PA)

Greg Maddux	.376
Dan Haren	.394
Zack Greinke	.401
Mark Buehrle	.402
Pedro Martinez	.404

On the offensive side, high-contact hitters who control the strike zone tend to fare best on full-count outcomes:

Highest OBP, Full Counts (min. 500 PA)

Quilvio Veras	.561
Nick Johnson	.554
Tim Lincecum	.553
Barry Bonds	.552
Dave Magadan	.549
Larry Walker	.549

That seems an eclectic group, but Veras posted a career on-base percentage of .372 and walked almost as often as he struck out. He hit only 32 career homers in seven seasons but was the most difficult hitter to put away in full counts.

The full count is the batter-pitcher confrontation pushed to the brink, especially late in a close game. The full count added drama—and a classic backstory—to the Gibson home run in Game 1 of the 1988 World Series.

On the eve of the game, three left-handed Dodgers hitters, **Mike Scioscia**, **Mike Davis** and **Gibson**, sat on the floor of the clubhouse with their backs against the wall as they listened to scout Mel Didier give his report on Oakland's pitchers. Didier had been watching the A's for a month. He ran through the Oakland pitching staff one by one, finishing with Eckersley, the closer.

Didier pointed at the Dodgers' lefties and said, "Podnuh, let me tell you this: If Eckersley gets you at 3-2 and there's a runner at second base or third base and it's the tying or winning run, Eckersley will throw you a backdoor slider on 3-2. Don't forget that, because that's what he will do as sure as I am standing here breathing."

Didier later said he had seen Eckersley do it only twice, "but I felt confident enough to tell them."

In fact, Eckersley went to a full count against a left-handed hitter only eight times all year, regardless of game situation. Four of those occasions happened in May, when Didier would not have been scouting Oakland. Only one of them happened since Sep. 17. In Game 1 of the American League Championship Series, Eckersley had a full count to a left-handed hitter **Rich Gedman** with the tying run at second base—the exact scenario in which Didier told the Dodgers' hitters that Eckersley would throw a backdoor slider "sure as I'm standing here breathing."

Eckersley did not throw a backdoor slider. He threw Gedman a *fastball*. It missed off the plate for ball four.

Gibson didn't know that when he called timeout with the count full. Eckersley had thrown 17 straight fastballs. Gibson knew only what Didier told him.

Said Gibson, "I said to myself, looking at Eckersley, 'As sure as I'm standing here breathing, you're gonna throw a backdoor slider.' Then I stepped back in."

Gibson widened his stance and told himself to shorten his stroke. Eckersley threw a slider. Gibson hit it out. As he rounded third, he screamed at third base coach **Joey Amalfitano**, "Backdoor slider!"

Nineteen eighty-eight was the first year of tracking pitches by count. Eckersley was such a premier strike thrower he had gone to a full count only 21 times all season—just 7.5% of the plate appearances against him. He had held batters to a .133/.381/.133 slash line in full counts. It would be another eight years before Eckersley gave up another home run on a full count pitch.

The tension of a full count also helped give us the at bat of the year: Shohei Ohtani pitching to **Mike Trout** with a one-run lead and two outs in the ninth inning of the WBC final. One slider and four fastballs brought the count to 3-and-2.

Trout would later say, “He didn’t throw me a split that whole at bat. That was in the back of my mind.”

What pitch would **Shohei Ohtani** throw at 3-and-2? Ohtani can throw his fastball 100 mph. But in full counts the previous season, Ohtani threw only 24% fastballs. When pushed to the brink in counts, Ohtani’s favorite pitch is the sweeper, which he threw 58% of the time in those spots last year. He remained true to his favorite pitch against Trout with the WBC on the line. In terms of velocity and break, it was the nastiest sweeper Ohtani has thrown in the big leagues. Trout swung and missed.

Think about everything behind that pitch. At 3-and-2 and the game on the line, a pitcher who can throw 100 mph opted to throw a nasty breaking pitch rather than a challenge fastball. As trends go, it was the Sodium Pentathol of pitches in today’s game.

WHERE HAVE ALL THE ERRORS GONE?

Dan Shaughnessy complained in a recent Boston Globe column “The leaguewide corruption of baseball’s official scoring (everything is now a hit, and errors are almost never assigned) got the attention of The Athletic, which produced a fairly thorough analysis of the sad situation.”

This passage jumped out at me: “When a reporter for The Athletic contacted several scorers, MLB director of official scoring, Tyler Barton, e-mailed the reporter to explain that employees were ‘prohibited from speaking with any media’ without approval from the league.”

Scorers are considered MLB employees. And MLB doesn’t want them talking.

MLB’s partnership with legalized gambling undoubtedly has something to do with the cone of silence.

I’m just amazed that more pitchers aren’t complaining. Their ERAs are unfairly affected when everything’s a hit.

IN MLB, PLAYS THAT WERE ONCE ERRORS ARE NO HITS, AS PLAYERS WONDER WHY

(here is The Athletic piece Shaughnessy referred to.)

On June 16, in the third inning of a game against the Yankees at Fenway Park, Red Sox infielder **Pablo Reyes** chopped a grounder into the dirt in front of home plate. The baseball bounced

toward third baseman **Josh Donaldson**, who fumbled the transfer out of his glove. Reyes reached base safely.

The next batter, outfielder **Alex Verdugo**, sprinted through the bag after Yankees first baseman **Anthony Rizzo** ranged to his right to secure a check-swing dribbler — only to find rookie pitcher **Matt Krook** had neglected to cover first base. An inning later, Rizzo bobbled a groundball off the bat of outfielder **Masataka Yoshida**.

None of the balls were hit particularly hard; Yoshida recorded the speediest exit velocity at 75.3 mph. None of the balls reached the outfield. Yet all received the same assessment from the official scorer: These were hits, not errors. The sequence encapsulated a trend that has become notable to those inside and outside of baseball this season.

“This year more than any other,” Yankees pitching coach **Matt Blake** said, “you look up and you’re like, ‘How is that a hit?’”

That sentiment has been vocalized often by broadcasters throughout the season, but those in the announcing booth have not been the only ones to notice, according to interviews with players, coaches and managers, several of whom requested anonymity in order to speak freely about the situation. The voices formed a chorus, suggesting the scorers are less willing than ever to register a misplay in the field as an error.

“It’s become very lenient,” one manager said.

Another coach added: “It’s almost like guys now are like, ‘Well, if it’s not a routine ball, they’re getting hits.’”

“They have definitely loosened that up,” Marlins reliever **David Robertson** said. “And it needs to be taken into account that in the big leagues, guys can play defense, and they need to play defense. It’s part of their job. I think a lot of plays are like, ‘Oh, well, he had to move two steps to his left.’ Well, you have to move two steps to your left to catch it. They sit there and they go, ‘Oh, the ball was hit this hard.’ Well, it hit him right in the glove.”

For the first time since 2019, the sport’s collective batting average has risen year over year, improving from .243 last season to .248 heading into Wednesday’s games. The number of errors has fallen to the lowest tally per game in recorded history, 0.51, part of a gradual decline dating back to the 1970s. The league-wide fielding percentage, .986, is also an all-time high.

The rise in batting average and fall in errors come during a season in which Major League Baseball implemented a series of new rules designed to improve the pace of play and generate more action on the field, including the use of a pitch clock, restrictions on infield shifting and larger bases. Some within the game view the increase in hits as more than a coincidence.

“Everything’s a hit,” Angels pitcher **Patrick Sandoval** said. “I have a little conspiracy about it: That they are telling the scorers to be more lenient with the hits so they can be like, ‘Oh, the new rules work. You have more hits.’”

Chris Marinak, MLB’s chief operations and strategy officer, described these developments as a potential unintended consequence of the new rules, rather than part of a campaign designed to promote them. “I can tell you very clearly there has been no directive from MLB to score more hits versus errors this year, as it relates to the new rules or anything else, frankly,” Marinak said. A better explanation, Marinak insisted, is two-fold: Scorers are under pressure to make quicker judgments thanks to the pitch clock, and viewers are looking at a slightly different game and different types of action due to the reduction in shifts. What qualified as a routine play in 2022, Marinak said, was no longer routine in 2023, and under heightened time pressure, scorers may default to leniency.

“It’s not different because of some directive or aspiration from Major League Baseball,” Marinak said. “It’s just different because the game is being played a little bit differently.”

In recent years, though, Major League Baseball *has* altered its oversight of official scorers in hopes of standardizing their decisions across the sport. Since the pandemic-altered season of 2020, when scorers were not permitted inside ballparks, the league has provided an increased array of “different video resources to help them make decisions,” in addition to Statcast data related to exit velocity and hit probability, Marinak said. The league strove for consistent rulings, similar to its approach with umpiring and instant replay. But it also provided some input, making the once solitary decisions of the official scorer into more of a group effort at times: The league created a Slack channel so scorers could communicate with each other during games, in addition to “a two-way communication vehicle” that connected scorers to the central office to discuss close calls, Marinak said.

The new tools are all geared toward uniformity, according to some scorers, who requested anonymity in order to speak freely about the situation. When a reporter for *The Athletic* contacted several scorers, MLB director of official scoring Tyler Barton emailed the reporter to explain that MLB employees were “prohibited from speaking with any media” without approval from the league.

After surveying the scorers in July, last week the league altered the in-game communication system with the MLB office because some scorers felt it distracting. It is now a one-way system where scorers can reach out when they feel they need help. Eliminating distractions is crucial, Marinak explained, because “the scorers feel like they’re under additional pressure this year, because of the pitch clock and the reduced amount of time that they have to make decisions.”

There are several reasons for that push for standardization, but one stands out. With fans in many states now able to legally place bets on every game, every inning, every at-bat — and in some cases, being paid out in real-time — players, executives and even scorers have pinpointed

sports betting as part of the impetus for the league's more hands-on approach to scoring. A hit in one city ought to be a hit in another, one scorer said.

Marinak said that they would be striving for consistency and uniformity in scoring regardless of whether betting was now legalized, but acknowledged that sports betting is a consideration. "The fact that sports betting got legalized in the United States, however many years ago, I think by definition it has an impact on the level of attention we pay to integrity with regards to the scoring process," he said. "There's no question about it."

MLB is not the only league seeking greater uniformity. The NBA, which embraced sports betting earlier than the other pro leagues, oversees statistical decision-making from its offices in Secaucus, N.J., where a third scorekeeper, in addition to the two on-site, reviews each play and finalizes the box score at the end of the game.

Marinak said MLB does not intend to centralize all of its scoring in one location. He stressed the importance of scorers being able to see the game live from inside the ballpark while supplementing their view with data when needed. "We really feel like we try to empower our scorers to take that accountability, but also to give them the tools and let them make the decision of what they think is helpful for them to make the best call possible," Marinak said.

These elements have led to some curious decisions in 2023, uniformed personnel interviewed by *The Athletic* said. There are examples littered throughout the season. When Robertson failed to glove a well-struck grounder in late May, Phillies outfielder **Brandon Marsh** received credit for a hit. "I reached out, thought I had it and it hit right off the tip of my glove," Robertson said. "But I should've caught it."

During a July game in Cleveland, Phillies second baseman **Bryson Stott** ranged a few steps to his right but tumbled to the ground while trying to scoop a grounder. Guardians first baseman **Josh Naylor** received credit for a hit. "That would have been an error 10 years ago," one scorer said.

Two days later in Anaheim, Pirates infielder **Nick Gonzales** hit a sinking liner toward shortstop Andrew Velasquez, who failed to pick the baseball. Gonzales got credit for a single.

"Usually when I come out of the game," Sandoval said, "I'm like, 'That was a hit? They gave that a hit?'"

In order to determine an error, the official scorer is expected to factor into the process a concept known as "ordinary effort," which MLB defines as "a fielder of average skill at a specific position should exhibit on a play." After years in which teams could overload infields to siphon up grounders, the shift restrictions may have altered the perception of observers about the ease with which plays should be made, Marinak said.

“You’re seeing more plays where, ‘Oh, hey, that should be a routine out,’ or whatever,” he said. “But it’s not, because a guy has to go (move) into the hole. He has to make an extraordinary effort to make a play. And we’re seeing more of that this year than we had last year.”

And the ticking clock may make scorers less willing to charge an error when uncertain.

“Human nature is that you’re going to be reticent to say that someone made a mistake unless you are confident that you have the data and information to back it up,” Marinak said.

The situation, of course, tends to bother pitchers more than hitters — several pitchers raised the issue of arbitration, and how the reduction in errors may cost pitchers real money when arbitration salaries are determined.

“As a reliever in particular, you have a two-out error that’s classified a hit and you end up with a three-spot instead of zero runs, that’ll ruin a month,” Astros reliever **Ryne Stanek** said. “It drastically shifts arbitration guys, I think.”

MLB does afford players the opportunity to appeal scoring decisions. The league utilizes a five-person panel — former players **Gregor Blanco, Rajai Davis, Raul Ibañez and Dan Otero**, plus an official scorer who did not make the initial call — to decide appeals. The council recently overturned a play from July that initially cost Cubs pitcher **Justin Steele** five earned runs after second baseman **Nico Hoerner** failed to field a grounder that bounced off his glove. Hoerner, Cubs manager **David Ross** said afterward, “makes that play 99 out of 100 times, right? That’s a pretty routine play in the big leagues.” Eventually, the council agreed and removed the earned runs from Steele’s ledger.

But the process does not always end with happy resolutions. Yankees pitcher **Gerrit Cole** said he had challenged 10 plays during his 11-year career. “And I’ve gotten none of them overturned,” he said. “I’m 0-for-10. And there’s some ones that I still believe are not hits.”

Last week in Miami, new Marlins addition **Jake Burger** hit a grounder to the left side of the infield. The exit velocity registered at 71.9 mph. Phillies shortstop **Trea Turner** took a few steps and dropped his glove. The baseball clanked off the leather and dribbled across the dirt.

“(Let’s) see how they score that one ...” the Marlins broadcaster said.

The verdict came back before the next pitch could be thrown. It was a hit.

THIS WEEK’S TRIVIA CHALLENGE ANSWERS

Who Am I?

3,000 hit club

Most career hits as a DH

No other batter had a season with more hits in the season he turned 40.

MVP of 1993 World Series, hitting .458 with 1.457 OPS.

I also played in the 1982 World Series in which I batted .355.

7x All Star playing 2B and 3B

PAUL MOLITOR

Of Molitor's 3,319 career hits, 1,457 were while batting DH.

Molitor led the AL with 225 Hits in 1996. He turned 40 on August 22 that year.

Knuckle-baller **Hoyt Wilhelm** set the career games pitched record in 1972, he retired with 1,070. He was passed by **Dennis Eckersley** in 1999. Four relief pitchers later passed Eckersley. Name them.

Lefty reliever, 24 seasons for 9 teams, 1252 games, 4 appearances/2 saves in 1986 World Series.

JESSE OROSCO

Lefty reliever, 19 seasons for 8 teams, 7 seasons for Yankees and for Braves, 1178 games, 3-0 in 20 World Series games.

MIKE STANTON

Lefty reliever, 21 seasons with Reds/Mets/Astros, 1119 games, won a game in the 2000 World Series.

JOHN FRANCO

Right-handed reliever, 1115 games, 13x All Star, 5x World Series, 653 saves

MARIANO RIVERA

Two double play combinations won Gold Gloves in the same season for the same team four times.

AL 1973-74-75-76. Shortstop won Gold Glove with another 2B teammate twice (1969 and 1971), he won 8 total. The 2B hit 234 career HRs.

BOBBY GRICH AND MARK BELANGER

NL 1974-75-76-77. Includes a Hall of Famer, played together in back to back World Series 1975-76.

JOE MORGAN AND DAVE CONCEPTION

A reminder to checkout sundaybaseballtidbits.com. Thanks to the efforts of subscriber (and Wesleyan baseball Wall of Famer) Todd Mogren, all back issues of the newsletter are archived and accessible. At the request of another subscriber there is a tab for all our trivia questions and a separate tab for questions with answers. No scrolling through the archives—easy access to all the trivia.

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HOUSEKEEPING

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