

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

Good morning baseball fans,

One eye on the Ryder Cup as this week's edition comes together, every damn Europe putt seems to go in.

As the baseball playoffs start, a week to salute greatness—RIP Brooks Robinson and Ronald Acuna Jr. reaches 40 HRs-70 SB.

Who made the post-season tournament came down to the penultimate day. Once my Yankees collapsed I was pulling for the Mariners -- maybe next year.

In this week's edition **Ozzie Virgil, Walter Alston**, stolen bases (**Trea Turner**) and strikeouts (**Kyle Schwarber**).

In Longer Reads Brooks Robinson, and pitchers' elbows,

Kick back with a cup of coffee and enjoy.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE

(answers at bottom)

CORRECTION – FROM LAST SUNDAY'S TRIVIA.

Three pitchers threw multiple no-hitters, multiple Cy Young awards and multiple World series championship rings.

No hitters 2013-2014, Cy Youngs 2008-2009 World Series wins 2010-2012-2014. Lefty.

TIM LINCECUM – throws right-handed. Editorial brain freeze. Apologies to those confused, thanks to those who pointed out the error.

Let's see how you do this week:

Twice in MLB history, the MVPs of both leagues were third basemen. Name the players.

1980 – one bats right, one bats left.

Both Hall of Famers

1964 – one played in the '64 World Series, one didn't.

National Leaguer led majors with 119 RBI in '64, hit 2 HRs in World Series for winning team.

The American Leaguer played 23 seasons with the same team, 16 Gold Gloves.

The Cleveland Indians/guardians have had three 20 game winners in the last 50 years.

1974. Hall of Fame righthander went 21-13 for the Tribe, also won '72 Cy Young for Cleveland.

2008. Cy Young winner, 22-3, later pitched in 2 World Series but not for Cleveland, lefthanded.

2018. He won two Cy Youngs for the Indians before his 20-7 season, righthander

The Mets have had four 30/30 players in their history.

2023 shortstop

1987 outfielder, lefthanded, had over 1,000 hits as a Met, rookie of the year with Mets in 1983.

1987, 1989, 1991. Righthanded. Led NL in HRs (38) and RBI (117) in '91, played 1317 of 1534 career games in the infield

2007. 7x Gold Glove righthanded infielder, played all 14 of his seasons for the Mets.

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

Saturday was a crazy day in baseball that saw the remaining five playoff spots filled with clinches from the Marlins, Rangers, Blue Jays, D-backs and Astros.

However, the AL West division is still up for grabs between the Astros and Rangers, while some playoff seedings are still not determined in either league.

AMERICAN LEAGUE

Here is what is locked in:

- **Orioles:** Clinched the AL East and the No. 1 seed in the AL.
- **Twins:** Clinched the AL Central and are locked into the No. 3 seed in the AL. They will host a Wild Card series against the No. 6 seed.
- **Rays:** Clinched the No. 1 AL Wild Card and will host a Wild Card series against the No. 5 seed.
- **Rangers:** Clinched a playoff berth with a win on Saturday.
- **Blue Jays:** Clinched a playoff berth on Saturday.
- **Astros:** Clinched a playoff berth on Saturday.

What's still at stake:

- The AL West division title and the seeding for the final two Wild Card spots.
- If the Blue Jays, Astros and Rangers all end up with 90 wins, it is not treated as a three-way tie, but rather as two separate two-way ties, with the AL West being settled first. In that scenario, the AL West would go Houston, by virtue of winning the season series against Texas. The Rangers would take the second WC spot while the Blue Jays would have the third WC spot. (Texas finished with a better head-to-head record.)
- If Texas wins the division and the Astros and Blue Jays finish with 89 wins, the second WC seed would go to Toronto, with the third spot going to Houston.

NATIONAL LEAGUE

Here is what is locked in:

- **Braves:** Clinched the NL East, the No. 1 seed in the NL, and home-field advantage through the World Series.
- **Dodgers:** Clinched the NL West and the No. 2 seed in the NL.
- **Brewers:** Clinched the NL Central and will be the No. 3 seed in the NL. They will host a Wild Card series against the No. 6 seed.

- **Phillies:** Clinched the No. 1 NL Wild Card and will host a Wild Card series against the No. 5 seed.
- **Marlins:** Clinched a Wild Card berth with a win on Saturday.
- **D-backs:** Clinched a Wild Card berth on Saturday.

What's still at stake:

- Miami holds the head-to-head tiebreaker over Arizona, so they will be the No. 2 Wild Card (No. 5 seed overall) if they win or if Arizona loses. However, if Arizona wins and Miami loses, then final seeding cannot be determined until the conclusion of Miami's suspended game against the Mets, which is currently scheduled for Monday. (The Marlins are leading the Mets 2-1 in the top of the ninth of a game that began Thursday but was suspended by rain.)

AL batting title

Rangers shortstop **Corey Seager** (.330) and Rays first baseman **Yandy Díaz** (.330) enter Sunday with the same batting average. However, Seager has a narrow edge based on percentage points -- he's at .3298 compared to Díaz's .3295 mark. The Rays have never had a batting champion, and even if Díaz comes up short, he could still post the best average from a qualified player in franchise history.

FEATS/MILESTONES/RECORDS

Freddie Freeman: 60 doubles

No player has more doubles than Freeman since he made his debut in 2010, and he's already led the NL in two-baggers three times during his career. He broke the Dodgers' single-season franchise record for doubles on Sept. 8, and he has more history in his sights. Freeman, who hit his 59th double Friday, is close to becoming only the seventh player in AL/NL history and the first since 1936 to record a 60-double season.

Mookie Betts: Single-season leadoff home run record

Betts' NL MVP candidacy is strengthened by how often he starts games with a bang. He has 12 leadoff homers this season, one off the AL/NL record set by **Alfonso Soriano** in 2003. Betts' 48 career leadoff dingers are tied with **Ian Kinsler** for the fifth-most in AL/NL history.

Bobby Witt Jr.: Fourth member of 30 HR/50 SB club

After **Ronald Acuña Jr.** joined the club with his 30th homer on Aug. 31, Witt (30 HR, 49 SB) has a chance to become the second member this season -- and just the fourth in AL/NL history. Prior to 2023, the only two players to pull off the feat were **Eric Davis** (37 HR, 50 SB) in 1987 and **Barry Bonds** (33 HR, 52 SB) in 1990.

Braves: All-time single-season HR record (307)

Owners of the best offense in baseball, the Braves have already bopped 305 homers, which is the most by any team in NL history. But with three more dingers, they would break the all-time

record of 307, held by the 2019 Twins. The 2019 Yankees, with 306 homers, are the only other team with more home runs than the 2023 Braves.

Braves: AL/NL record for slugging percentage

Even if they can't pass the 2019 Twins in terms of home runs, the Braves are almost certain to finish 2023 with the best team slugging percentage in AL/NL history. They are currently slugging .501, well ahead of the current record-holders: the 2019 Astros (.495).

This season is the first since 1994 that the Cardinals, Red Sox, and Yankees all missed the playoffs

The top four playoff seeds will have five days off before their first game in the Division Series. The Braves and Dodgers are planning on some intrasquad scrimmages and will invite fans into the park to create more game-like conditions.

It's a marathon, not a sprint. You might recall the Rays opened with 13 straight wins on their way to a 29-7 start. (Tampa Bay's 13-0 record matched the 1982 Atlanta Braves and 1987 Milwaukee Brewers, trailing only the 20-0 start by the 1884 St. Louis Maroons of the Union Association.) The Rays led the division by 6 1/2 games on July 1, and it appeared they had a chance to go wire to wire.

Fast-forward to this week. The Orioles clinched the AL east with their 100th win and gained top seed. It was the Orioles first division title since 2014, first time they won 100 games since 1980. They will receive a bye for the best-of-three Wild Card Series and advance directly to the best-of-five Division Series, which will begin Oct. 7 at Camden Yards.

Baltimore has now gone 90 straight series without being swept with a payroll of \$68 million—less than the Yankees pay their starting rotation. It is the longest such streak since the 1942-44 Cardinals made it through 125 series without being swept. (those Cardinals also made it to the World Series in all three years, winning two of them.)

Pretty good turnaround for a team that went 178-368 from 2018-2021, losing 100+ games in the three full seasons they played in that stretch. And you could probably win a bet with this tidbit—the Orioles never won 100 games while **Cal Ripken Jr.** played for them.

The American League won't have a 20 game winner for the 4th straight season. (last was Justin Verlander for the 2019 Astros). First time in league history—124 years.

Skip Schumaker is only the third manager in Marlins history to have a winning record in his first full season. The others were **Jim Leyland** in 1997 and **Jack McKeon** in 2004. Leyland won the World Series in '97. McKeon was 83-79 in '04 after leading the Marlins past the Yankees in the 2003 World Series. He took over after 38 games that season

Since 2021, **Mike Trout** has played only 41 games after the All-Star break. He's now 32 and hasn't played for a team with a winning record since 2015.

Worcester Red Sox. Polar Park was sold out 41 times this summer, and the WooSox sold more tickets than any other minor league team.

The Braves have been incredible this year. But give the Dodgers credit. 100+ wins in a season where **Trea Turner, Justin Turner, Cody Bellinger, Craig Kimbrel, Tyler Anderson** all left as free agents and they have had so many injuries to their starting rotation they have used 12 Rookie pitchers.

JP Crawford of the Mariners is 10 for 15 with the bases loaded this season. Clutch.

Jayson Stark in The Athletic brought up a great point—**Matt Olson** (league leading 54 HRs/134 RBI) and **Freddie Freeman** (207 hits/58 doubles) are having awesome seasons but likely won't finish in the top two in MVP voting thanks to **Ronald Acuna Jr. and Mookie Betts**.

Acuna by the way—only player in history with 40 HRs/50 stolen bases, then 40 HRs/60 stolen bases, now 40 HRs/70 stolen bases). No player has ever had a 40 HR season and a 70 stolen base season anytime in their career.

Acuña is hitting .336 with 41 homers and 104 RBIs from the leadoff spot, leads the majors in both stolen bases and runs (146), and leads the NL with a 1.010 OPS.

He also leads his league in hits, runs, OBP, OPS and total bases. Take a look at the players who have topped the NL or AL in those five departments in the same season. It's quite a group.

MVP award era — Stan Musial 1948 NL (*won MVP), Carl Yastrzemski 1967 AL (*won MVP).

Pre-MVP era (since 1900) — Rogers Hornsby 1921-22-24 NL, Ty Cobb 1909 and 1915 AL, Nap Lajoie 1901.

Add base stealing back into this, it's only Acuña and Ty R. Cobb.

Before Acuna there have only been two players to lead the league in Total Bases and Stolen Bases - **Chuck Klein, 1932**
Snuffy Stirnweiss, 1945

Or look at extra base hits plus stolen bases. Acuna is at 149. Only players with better totals--
Rickey Henderson twice and **Lou Brock**.

The 70 stolen base/70 extra base hit club-- **Ty Cobb**, 1911 — 83 SB, 79 XBH
Juan Samuel, 1984 — 72 SB, 70 XBH

Acuna is one of three players since WWII to score 146 runs.

Acuna has had an amazing season.

Mookie Betts-- 76 games started in right field ... 60 games started at second base ... 12 games started at shortstop. Only other player in history to hit 30 HRs and play all three of those positions-- **Felix Mantilla**, for the 1964 Red Sox. Betts has 80 extra base hits and 106 RBIs—

awesome. Only a handful of leadoff hitters have ever done that (**Francisco Lindor, Charlie Blackmon, Jimmy Rollins, Alfonso Soriano and Nomar Garciaparra**) though Acuna has a shot at this too. The 106 RBIs from leadoff is an MLB record (again with Acuna in close pursuit). He has led off 12 games with an HR—one behind Soriano's record.

Blake Snell of the Padres may win the National League Cy Young, but before you go signing free agent Snell, some things to consider.

Dating back to 2000, there have been 67 single-season cases of a pitcher logging at least 150 innings with a BB/9 rate of 4.50 or greater.

Prior to Blake Snell's inexplicable 2.33 ERA this season, the only members of that club with a sub-3.20 ERA were **Daisuke Matsuzaka** in 2008 (2.90) and **Clayton Kershaw** in 2009 (2.79).

Of the 67, 49 had an ERA of 4.10 or worse, and nearly half (28) ended up with an ERA north of 5.00.

But that's what you expect when a pitcher is handing out free passes left and right.

While not every walk issued is going to result in a run scored, repeatedly shooting yourself in the foot with walks *usually* means you get hurt when you allow hits, especially home runs.

By some miracle, though, Snell has walked 97 batters this season, and only 14 of those batters came around to score.

Going back to that "150+ IP since 2000" data set, there were 2,035 pitchers to reach that mark. Of the bunch, 2009 Kershaw had the highest ratio of walks issued (91) to total runs allowed (55), which equates to 1.65. The overall ratio in that 2,035-pitcher group is 0.645, or basically three runs allowed for every two walks issued.

At 97 walks and only 47 runs allowed, Snell's ratio is 2.06.

While you consider his walk rate, some thoughts on volume.

Logan Webb — 216 innings, 850 batters faced
Blake Snell — 180 innings, 742 batters faced

Those extra 36 innings — and 108 batters faced — provided so much extra value to the Giants. Low totals, short starts. Snell has faced just 11 batters after the 6th inning. He has pitched

beyond the 6th inning in just three starts. Webb has faced 129 betterers in 21 games past the 6th inning.

Zac Gallen, Spencer Strider, Corbin Burnes and Zach Wheeler are all way ahead of Snell in batters faced after the 6th inning. Snell leads the majors in ERA and walks—how do you do that? Two Cy Young winners lead the majors in walks but it has been a while—**Bob Turley** in 1958 and **Early Wynn** in 1959.

On the plus side-- Snell's last 23 starts: 13-3, 1.20 ERA, 19 runs allowed, .156 opp. AVG. It's the fewest runs allowed over any span of 23 starts, within a single season, in the past 100 years.

Bob Gibson (1968), **Vida Blue** (1971) and **Doc Gooden** (1985) delivered the most dominant pitching seasons in my lifetime.

Snell vs. Gibson '68. Gibson's most dominating 23 starts that year with Snell's final 23 starts of this season.

	<u>Runs</u>	<u>Earned Runs</u>	<u>ERA</u>	<u>OPP Average</u>	<u>OPP OPS</u>	<u>K/9</u>
Gibson	23	20	0.85	.175	.436	7.4
Snell	19	18	1.20	.156	.489	12.4

Gibson threw 76 more innings—almost 3 innings per start. But Snell has really been on a historic run.

Meanwhile, it hasn't been pretty in Kansas City. **Jordan Lyles and Zack Greinke** are paid to be the Royals two top starters.

Combined record: 6-32

Combined ERA: 5.77

Combined record in games they started: 13-43

Combined opponent OPS: .798

(Lyle's 38 homers allowed with just 5 wins is historic).

Only three teams in history have had *two* pitchers (or more) on their staff who had a season like these two guys have had — an ERA over 5.00, no more than five wins and at least 15 losses *apiece*? Here they are:

The 1899 Cleveland Spiders — The legends that were those 1899 Spiders — they went a sparkling 20-134 that year — set a standard that will never be matched. They had *four* starters who qualified for this list:

Coldwater Jim Hughey: 4-30, 5.41

Charlie Knepper: 4-22, 5.78

Frank Bates: 1-18, 7.24

Crazy Schmit: 2-17, 5.86

The 1928 Phillies — This team should file an appeal over having to pitch at the ridiculous Baker Bowl, where opposing hitters *hit .330 that season*. But whatever. Those Phillies had two pitchers who made this cut:

Jimmy Ring: 4-17, 6.44

Les Sweetland: 3-15, 6.58

The 2005 Royals — This was the losingest Royals team of all time (56-106), a standard this year's team (54-105) could still match or beat. The '05 club had two pitchers who qualified in this category. And let's just say one of them will look familiar.

José Lima: 5-16, 6.99

Zack Greinke: 5-17, 5.80

So Greinke bookended a very impressive career with brutal records: 5-17 at age 21 and this year 1-15 at age 39.

Noah Syndergard was not the Dodgers best ever pickup.

12 starts

1 win

7.16 ERA

.313/.350/.551/.900 opponent slash line

20 SB, 1 caught stealing

He was just the third Dodgers starter, since the team moved to L.A., to make that many starts and allow a .900 opponent OPS (or higher). He was the first Dodgers starter since 1900 to start that many times, win just one game (or none) and have an ERA north of 7.00.

All rookies since 1936 with as many doubles, triples and homers as Baltimore's **Gunnar Henderson**, plus an OPS as good as his (.818):

Joe DiMaggio, 1936
Ted Williams, 1939
Dick Allen, 1964
Tony Oliva, 1964
Nomar Garciaparra, 1997

Rookie **Corbin Carroll** of the D'backs. He's the only player ever to put up at least 50 steals, 25 homers and 10 triples in *any* season. Just three rookies in the live-ball era with at least 50 stolen bases and a 120 OPS+ or better: Carroll, **Ichiro Suzuki** (2001) and **Tim Lincecum** (1981).

Will **Shohei Ohtani** win the AL MVP despite getting one hit in September? Probably. **Mike Trout** won an MVP despite missing the Angels' final 19 games. But before that, no MVP had sat out his team's last seven games. **Dick Allen** was the old record-holder, for being absent in the final six games in 1972.

George Brett (1980-117 games), **Barry Bonds** (130 games in 2003) and **Ted Williams** (132 games in 1957) all won MVPs with less games played (and **Rickey Henderson** (136 games in 1990) and **Mookie Betts** (136 games in 2018) were close.

Ohtani still leads the league in ... home runs (44), walks (91), total bases (325) and extra-base hits (78), not to mention on-base percentage (.412), slugging percentage (.654) and OPS (1.066) *while mostly missing the entire month of September!* So how many home run champs in the live-ball era (excluding the 1994 strike season) have hit *none* of those home runs in September? That would be two — and none in the last 49 years **Dick Allen** (32 homers in 1974) and **Chuck Klein** (31 homers in 1931).

Tim Anderson has been the worst performer on a White Sox team of poor performers. He's hitting .226/.273/.268/.542 against right-handed pitching. That's the lowest OPS by any White Sox hitter in team history against right-handers.

He has a .235 on-base percentage leading off innings. He's led off 147 innings this season. He's reached base to start 40 of them. That, too, would be a franchise "record" for lowest OBP by anyone who led off that many innings in a season.

Doubtful that the Rockies are happy they paid **Kris Bryant** \$182 million. Bryant has 13 extra base hits this year. He once had 77 extra-base hits in a *season* (his MVP year of 2016).

GERRIT COLE

Is **Gerrit Cole** the greatest pitcher of modern times to get this deep into his career without a Cy Young Award?

140+ Wins, ERA under 3.20, 9+ K/9 IP through age-32 season, no Cy Young. Only Cole and Nolan Ryan.

140+ Wins, ERA under 3.20, .650+ win percentage through age-32 season, no Cy Young. Only Cole and Juan Marichal.

Cole has allowed the lowest opponent OPS in the league, compiled the best ERA in the league and done that while pitching the most innings in the league. But there's also this:

Record versus current playoff teams — 8-0

Dominance of opposing cleanup hitters — .167, 1 HR

Dominance of opposing leadoff hitters — .198, .281 OBP, five runs scored all season.

Cole allowed two runs or fewer in 26 of his 33 starts this season. He's one of just three pitchers in franchise history to have at least 26 starts of two runs or fewer in a single season, joining **Jack Chesbro** (28 in 1904) and **Ron Guidry** (26 in 1978).

Having finished the season with a 2.75 ERA, Cole will be the 10th Yankee (14th time) to win an American League ERA title. **Rudy May** was the last Yankee to lead the league. May paced the American League with a 2.46 ERA in 1980, a season in which he went 15-5 in 41 games (17 starts). May also led the league in a few present-day stat categories that were not in play at the time: ERA+ (160), FIP (2.94), WHIP (1.044) and SO/W ratio (3.41).

Ronald Acuna Jr. became baseball's first 40-70 man this week. His Braves teammate **Matt Olson** is having an ok season too—54 HRs and 136 RBI leading the majors in both. Olson set the

RBI record when he drove in his 135th and 136th runs with a two-run homer in the first inning of Thursday night's 5-3 win over the Cubs at Truist Park. His MLB-leading 54th homer of the season broke the RBI record **Eddie Mathews** set in 1953, when he tallied 135 RBIs during a 154-game season for the Milwaukee Braves.

Olson broke **Andruw Jones'** franchise record with his 52nd homer on Sept. 16. With three games remaining, he likely won't break the record **Hugh Duffy** set with 145 RBIs in 1894 with the Boston Braves before RBI became an official stat. But setting the modern era (since 1900) mark and the homer record in the same year is quite impressive, when you consider **Hank Aaron, Mathews, Dale Murphy, Andruw Jones, Chipper Jones** never reached either of these marks.

Back again to Acuña Jr., what he has accomplished this season from a strikeout-slashing perspective is impressive.

A batter's whiff rate typically doesn't change much from one year to the next. And if there is any sort of significant deviation, it's usually that the whiff rate increases as the player advances in years.

Take **Manny Machado**, for example. In every season of his 12-year career, Machado has been somewhere in the 14.6 percent to 20.7 percent strikeout range.

Likewise, **Mookie Betts** has lived in the 11.0-16.3 percent range in each of his 10 seasons.

But Acuña's K percentage?

- 25.3% in 2018
- 26.3% in 2019
- 29.7% in 2020
- 23.6% in 2021
- 23.6% in 2022
- 11.3% in 2023

That is more than a 50 percent reduction in whiffs, which is ludicrous.

At the start of play Wednesday, there were 257 players with at least 200 plate appearances in each of 2022 and 2023.

Nearly one-fourth (63) of those players had a strikeout rate within one percentage point of what they put up in 2022. And nearly 90 percent (225) had a strikeout rate within five percentage points of last season.

But there are three who had a strikeout rate more than eight percentage points better than last year: Washington's **Luis García** (9.4%), Chicago's **Cody Bellinger** (11.4%) and Acuña (12.4%).

In Acuña's case, I don't have a good explanation beyond an observation that he's doing a way better job of putting the ball in play in two-strike counts.

Per Baseball Reference pitch splits, in each of the previous five seasons, he struck out at least 42.4 percent of the time when the count got to two strikes. He never had a batting average better than .182 with two strikes. But this season, he's at 25.2 percent and .268, respectively.

Considering Acuña struck out in 25.3 percent of all plate appearances from 2018-22, striking out in just 25.2 percent of plate appearances *that have gotten to two strikes* this season is absurd.

Swing and a Miss

Dating back to 1997, there have been 50 instances of a player reaching at least 400 plate appearances in a single season and either walking, homering or whiffing in at least 50 percent of them. **Aaron Judge** is finishing up his fifth such campaign, with **Kyle Schwarber**, **Jack Suwinski** and **Ryan Noda** also in the 2023 club.

But **Joey Gallo** has taken this "never put the ball in play" thing to a whole new level.

Gallo already had three of the four highest marks of the aforementioned 50 instances, finishing last season at 58.05 percent, 2017 at 58.65 percent and 2021 at 58.77 percent. (The only other player to finish a season in the past quarter century above 57.1 percent was **Jack Cust** at 58.19 percent in 2007.)

This season, he's not going to get to 400 plate appearances because he has been banged up and often used as a pinch hitter/runner. Through 332 trips to the plate, though, Gallo has 21 home runs, 48 walks and 142 strikeouts for a staggering three true outcomes percentage of 63.6.

Of the 73 games in which he had at least three plate appearances, there was only one where he put the ball in play all three times, going for a double and a pair of groundouts on June 16 against Detroit.

Meanwhile, Gallo has had 14 games with at least three plate appearances and zero balls put in play, including putting Toronto's fielders to sleep on May 27, with one walk and four strikeouts in his five trips to the plate.

Dating back to 2000, there have been 2,638 cases of a player recording at least 550 plate appearances in a season. And, of that bunch, there have been just two instances where the player's OPS was at least 4.1 times greater than his batting average:

- 2001 **Barry Bonds**: 1.379 OPS, .328 AVG, 4.20 ratio
- 2023 Kyle Schwarber: .818 OPS, .198 AVG, 4.13 ratio

So, yeah, it's exclusively what Schwarber is currently doing and the historic season when Bonds set both the single-season HR record and the single-season BB record. (He later broke his own walk record in both 2002 and 2004.)

Obviously, these are two very different situations. Bonds ranked among the league leaders in batting average; Schwarber is struggling to get above the Mendoza Line. Bonds' slugging percentage (.863) was 45 points greater than Schwarber's OPS.

But break it down to a simple OPS-to-AVG ratio and they are 1A and 1B since Y2K.

Schwarber is neither walking nor homering like Bonds was, but he has been one of the best in the business in both departments this season. Only Atlanta's **Matt Olson** (54) has more home runs than Schwarber (45), and only San Diego's **Juan Soto** (126) has more walks than Schwarber (123).

UN-CAUGHT

Trea Turner is a perfect 30-for-30 in stolen bases with one game to go.

Even with the new pitch clock, base sizes and disengagement rules, no other player has more than 13 SB without at least one CS. But despite starting slow with just four stolen bases in his first 38 games, Turner is on the brink of making history. If Turner can close out this final weekend without getting nabbed, he'll set the record for most steals in a season without getting thrown out. The current record is held by another Phillie -- **Chase Utley** (23-for-23) in 2009.

The swift, smooth-sliding shortstop has always been a good swiper. From 2016-22, he went 228-for-268 (85.1 percent), leading the NL in stolen bases in both 2018 and 2021. But last year (27-for-30) was his first with a 90 percent success rate.

Turner is also one of eight players already in the 25 HR/25 SB club, along with **Ronald Acuña Jr.**, **Julio Rodríguez**, **Bobby Witt Jr.**, **Kyle Tucker**, **Francisco Lindor**, **Fernando Tatis Jr.** and **Corbin**

Carroll. José Ramírez (24 HR, 28 SB) and/or **Randy Arozarena** (23 HR, 22 SB) could also join the club with a big final day..

If either one gets there, it will mark a new record for the most 25/25 campaigns in a single season. At the moment, 2023 is tied with 1987, which also had eight 25/25 players.

Aaron Judge collected 14 total bases in his three-homer performance against the D-backs on Friday evening, which ranks third in Yankees history for a single game. **Lou Gehrig** collected 16 total bases against the Philadelphia Athletics on June 3, 1932. **Tony Lazzeri** had 15 against the A's two weeks earlier than Gehrig.

A's have not had the worst record in baseball to themselves since 1960, when they were in Kansas City. The Royals may be bad but they can't "catch" the A's.

Two **Dodgers** hit milestones over the weekend: **Mookie Betts** set the record for RBI by a leadoff hitter (105 and counting), and **Freddie Freeman** got his 200th hit.

Clayton Kershaw. Just a reminder. Three Cy Young awards (and seven top-five finishes in a row).

Spencer Strider of the Braves leads the Majors with 274 strikeouts and 19 wins. He has one more start to break the record Smoltz set with 276 strikeouts in 1996. This final outing will also give him a chance to join **Kyle Wright** (2022), **Russ Ortiz** (2003) and **Tom Glavine** (2000) as the only Braves pitchers to notch a 20-win season in the 2000s.

No major-league pitcher in this century has done what Mariners starter **George Kirby** did when he was 16 years old.

In 2014, as a sophomore at Rye (N.Y.) High School, Kirby threw 153 pitches in the sectional championship game against Lakeland High. No pitcher in the majors has thrown that many pitches in a game since Colorado's **Pedro Astacio** in 1999. Nobody in the last decade has come within 20.

Kirby kept pitching in high school, going 23-0 in his final three years, then becoming a first-round draft choice by the Mariners out of Elon in 2019. According to the Elias Sports Bureau, no pitcher in major-league history has issued fewer walks over his first 54 starts than Kirby, nor posted a better strikeout-to-walk ratio. Kirby has allowed just 40 walks to go with 294 career strikeouts, an average of one walk for every 7.35 whiffs. At Elon, Dipoto said, Kirby stood out as "the perfect Mariner" prospect; as a junior in 2019, he issued just six walks in 88 1/3 innings. That summer, with the Class-A Everett AquaSox, Kirby walked nobody in 23 innings.

The Mariners lead the majors in first-pitch strike percentage, at 64.8 through Sunday, with **Logan Gilbert** also in the AL's top 10 for lowest walk percentage. Kirby has the best ratio, naturally, at 0.9 walks per nine.

Sept. 28, 2008: Mike Mussina earned his 20th win in the first game of a doubleheader at Boston's Fenway Park, becoming the oldest pitcher in Major League history to win 20 games for the first time. It was the final start of Mussina's Hall of Fame career.

SOME CRAZY STATS FROM MLB.COM

Anthony Castrovine

Atlanta's amazing .501 SLG

It's hard to even know where to begin with the bonkers Braves stats this season. Their offense is one of the best in history, and references to it could take up this entire column.

Let's just run through a handful here before getting to .501 ...

- As you know, **Ronald Acuña Jr.** is the first 40-homer, 70-steal season in MLB history ... after already amassing the first 30- (and 40-) homer, 60-steal season in history.

- The Braves are the second team ever (joining the 2019 Twins) to have five guys with 30-plus dingers and have an outside shot at becoming the first ever to have nine guys with 20-plus.
- With 299 home runs, the Braves lead the Majors ... by 59 (over the Dodgers' 240)! You could take Matt Olson's MLB-leading 54 homers off the books, and they'd still be in the lead. According to MLB.com researcher Sarah Langs, the only three home-run-leading teams to finish the season with a greater differential over second place were the 1884 White Stockings (102 more than the second-place Cleveland Buckeyes ... and 140 more than our friends the Quicksteps) and 1947 Giants (65 more than the Pirates).
- With those 299 home runs, the Braves are not only closing in on the 2019 Twins' single-season record (307) but will become the first team in history with 300 homers and 100 steals (they already have 124).
- Oh, and Atlanta's 124 weighted runs created plus (wRC+) is just one point shy of the all-time single-season mark set by the 1927 Yankees. Ever heard of 'em?

But because more fans are familiar with slugging percentage, let's just go with that for our main bonkers number. The Braves' .501 mark would be the greatest of all time ... by six points (2019 Astros, .495). As of this writing, there are only 19 qualifying players in MLB with a slugging percentage as high as the Braves' *team* mark. And of course, five of those 19 -- Olson (.606), Acuña (.595), **Marcell Ozuna** (.533), **Austin Riley** (.516) and **Ozzie Albies** (.504) -- are on the Braves.

Arizona's **Corbin Carroll** of the D-backs and **Gunnar Henderson** of the Orioles each have nine three-baggers this season.

Carroll became the first AL/NL rookie ever with at least 20 homers and 50 steals.

Carroll and Henderson both have nine triples on the year, giving Henderson a share of the lead in the AL with the **Royals' Bobby Witt Jr.** and Carroll a share of the NL lead with teammate **Ketel Marte**.

How rare would it be for rookies to have at least a share of the league lead in triples in both the AL and NL? According to the Elias Sports Bureau, it's happened only once -- in 1904! That year, the Washington Senators' **Joe Cassidy** led the AL with 19, and **Harry Lumley** of the Brooklyn Superbas led the NL with 18.

Royce Lewis's 4 grand slams

The Twins' third baseman somehow has four grand slams this season, giving him five for his career -- a career in which he has played only 70 games! You probably don't need us to tell you that Lewis is the fastest ever to five career grand slams.

But just to put his achievement in proper perspective, the recently injured Lewis has his four grannies this year in only 217 at-bats. No one had ever had that many grand slams in a season in fewer than 450 at-bats.

Lewis hit his four grand slams in an 18-game span. According to Langs, the previous smallest span of games in which a player hit four grand slams was 39 for **Don Mattingly** with the 1987 Yankees.

Home teams winning at a measly .521 clip

This is the winning percentage of home teams leaguewide. OK, so they have a winning record. But if that winning percentage looks low to you, it should. It would be the lowest mark in a full season since 1999.

LOWEST MLB LEAGUEWIDE HOME WINNING PERCENTAGES

.506: 1917
.509: 1923 and 1948
.510: 1913
.511: 1968
.517: 1994^
.520: 1971
.521: 1981^, 1999, 2023

^Partial season

One team notably dragging this percentage down is the confounding Astros, who were struggling so much at home that they painted part of the Minute Maid Park batter's eye after their hitters voiced concerns. The Astros are desperately vying for first place in the AL West with a .481 winning percentage at home. The only team to win its division with a home winning percentage lower than .518 in a full season was the 2001 Braves (.494).

Padres finally won an extra inning game after going 0-12. San Diego had been in a tie for the most extra-inning games without a win all time, knotted with the expansion 1969 Montreal Expos (0-12).

In 483 plate appearances as a leadoff man, **Kyle Schwarber** has hit .206. According to Baseball-Reference's Stathead tool, the only player with that many lead off plate appearances and a lower average was **Dick Schofield** (.199 in 483 plate appearances) of the Pirates/Giants in 1965.

Schwarber gets on base at a reasonable .345 clip. So how many other players, with a minimum of 300 plate appearances in the leadoff spot, have hit below .210 as a leadoff man but have put up at least a .340 OBP? Just two -- **Goat Anderson** of the 1907 Pirates (.204 average, .350 OBP) and **Floyd Baker** of the 1948 White Sox (.206 average, .362 OBP). In those two seasons, those two combined for just one home run (by our guy Goat). Not the 32 Schwarber has hit as a leadoff guy.

Clayton Kershaw leads the Dodgers in innings pitched with 126 1/3. He will finish with the lowest innings total ever for a leader on a division winner. The previous low was 153 1/3 innings for **Mike Fiers** on the 2017 Astros.

ALL IS NOT HAPPY IN ANAHEIM

Player development is the lifeblood of any franchise because it provides a flow of inexpensive players, everyone from fill-ins for injured stars to the nightly supporting cast. But the Angels have long struggled to advance their young players.

Only three homegrown players have been named an All-Star for the Angels in the last decade: Trout, Jared Walsh and Erick Aybar. The Astros have nine. The Dodgers have 10. The Cardinals have 11.

It takes investment. Total front office staff—Dodgers 79 people, Angels 43. The Rays have a 13-person performance-science department, a division that utilizes biomechanics, physiology, and other scientific disciplines to improve athletic outcomes. The Angels had one person listed as a director of performance integration. The Angels employ 20 international scouts—the Yankees have 42, the Giants 35. The Angels are so cheap they don't pay for travel of their radio broadcasters—games are called from the TV feed. Last year they didn't pay for travel for alumni of their 2002 World Series team to come celebrate the 20th anniversary. Want to compete rather than just let the franchise value grow? Invest in the product.

Investing big bucks in pitchers is risky. Case in point—**Chris Sale**. When he signed with the Red Sox for over \$200 million he was going to be their front of rotation flame thrower for a decade. They have paid him \$157 million so far. Sale has had six straight years of major injuries that have sidelined him for months at a time: bursitis of the shoulder in 2018; an elbow strain in 2019; a blown out elbow in 2020 with the rehab lasting through much of 2021; a broken rib, pinkie and wrist in 2022; and a stress reaction in his pitching shoulder in 2023.

A LITTLE HISTORY FOR YOU

On Sept. 28, 1938, **Gabby Hartnett** hit a dramatic walk-off home run for the Cubs that became known as the “Homer in the Gloamin’”?

The homer became legendary for a number of reasons. First, the Cubs were in the process of completing a dramatic season turnaround. On Aug. 20, they were nine games out of first place. As late as Sept. 4, they were seven games back. But as the first-place Pirates came to Wrigley for a three-game set at the end of September, Chicago had won 16 of its last 20 and was just 1½ games behind Pittsburgh in the standings. The Cubs won the first game to cut the deficit to just a half game. A win in the second game of the series would put the Cubs in first place for the first time since June 7.

The Pirates scored two runs in the top of the eighth to take a 5–3 lead, but then the Cubs tied it back up with a pair of runs in the bottom of the inning. It was growing dark as the Pirates were retired in the top of the ninth, and the umpires met to decide whether play could go on. They decided that, no matter what, the bottom of the ninth would be the last inning played. MLB rules at the time dictated that a game called due to darkness would be replayed from the beginning. The Cubs were in prime position to get a critical win, but they risked having to start from scratch if they couldn’t break the tie in the bottom of the ninth.

After two quick outs, it was down to Hartnett, Chicago’s player-manager. He came through with a walk-off homer that gave the Cubs a much-needed victory. It was pandemonium on the field as Hartnett tried to circle the bases, Edward Burns wrote in the *Chicago Tribune*:

The mob started to gather around Gabby before he reached first base. By the time he had rounded second, he couldn’t have been recognized in the mass of Cub players, frenzied fans and excited ushers but for that red face, which shone out even in the gray shadows.

After the skipper finally had struggled to the plate, things became worse. The ushers, who had fanned out to form that protective barrier around the infield, forgot their constantly [rehearsed] pretty maneuver and rushed to save Hartnett’s life. They tugged

and they shoved and finally they started swinging their fists before the players could carry their boss into the safety afforded by the tunnel behind the Cubs dugout.

A homer that legendary deserves a name of its own, and so Hartnett's heroic blast has been known for 85 years as the Homer in the Gloamin', a name believed to have been originated by Associated Press writer Earl Hilligan, who coined the phrase as a play on the 1911 song "Roamin' in the Gloamin'" by Scottish singer Harry Lauder. (*Gloaming* is a Scottish word for "twilight.")

The win put the Cubs in first place, and they won the next day to complete a three-game sweep before taking two out of three from the Cardinals to clinch the pennant.

Astros' home records and winning percentages since 2019:

2019: 60-21 (.741)

2020: 20-8 (.714)

2021: 51-30 (.630)

2022: 55-26 (.679)

Total: 185-85 (.686)

That is the best home record in the American League over that four-year span — only the Dodgers have a better home record in baseball. Over the past four seasons, the Astros have hit well at home (tying the Red Sox for the highest on-base percentage in the league and slugging .464 as a team) while pitching fantastic (holding opponents .214/.283/.365 split). It has been utter domination in Houston.

This year? Not so much.

2023 home record: 39-42 (.481)

This year, the Astros' OPS at home is bottom-half in baseball — it's lower than the Angels and Royals, for crying out loud — and their home ERA of 4.25 is also bottom-half and almost a full run worse than it has been the last four seasons.

Yordan Alvarez. He has played only 109 games this season, but he mashed his 30th home run on Monday and he's got a 1.005 OPS.

Top five in games played since 2019:

1. **Marcus Semien**, 694
2. **Freddie Freeman**, 690
3. **Paul Goldschmidt**, 679
4. **Pete Alonso**, 678
5. **Eugenio Suárez**, 667

The Yankees have spent \$79,970,372 on players occupying the injured list, the most for any team in MLB.

Heading into Monday's game, the Yankees were tied with the Athletics for last in batting average (.246) against all fastballs, including sinkers and cutters. When they have hit fastballs, the Yankees haven't done much damage with them, ranking seventh-to-last in slugging percentage.

The Yankees are at .226, which is their lowest mark since 1968, the year no one hit,

They have eight players with at least 50 plate appearances batting under .200. They had two former MVPs (**Giancarlo Stanton** and **Josh Donaldson**) batting under .200.

We've run this before -- Sept. 25, 1984, Rusty Staub joined Ty Cobb as the only players in MLB history to hit a home run as a teenager and a 40-year-old. There were followed by **Alex Rodriguez and Gary Sheffield**. A-Rod's first homer came June 12, 1995, six weeks before his 20th birthday. His last was July 18, 2016, nine days before he turned 41. Cobb hit only 117 homers in his career, but that number includes two hit in his first two seasons, before he turned 20, and six hit in his final two seasons, after he turned 40.

Spencer Strider struck out 202 hitters in just 131.2 innings for the Atlanta Braves in 2022, his rookie season. He has been even more intimidating this year, seizing the big-league lead in strikeouts. He notched his 250th K on September 6; nobody else in the majors had more than 209 at the time.

Here's another way to document Strider's dominance, using a different set of statistics and a slightly earlier cutoff point (September 1).

Batters had taken 587 at-bats against Strider by that point of the season. They put the ball in play 342 times and struck out the other 245. Those figures translate to a contact rate of .583 and a strikeout rate of .417. Both figures are the best for any pitcher who has worked at least 100 innings this season.

It will be interesting to see Boston's off-season. Is ownership happy to roll in \$ for a weak product? Last place 6 of the last 12 years, 44 games under .500 over the last two seasons, highest ticket prices in mlb.

Walter Alston's lone MLB appearance as a player came with the Cardinals on the final day of the 1936 season. He had crushed the ball in the minors that year, hitting .326 with 35 homers in 120 games for Class C Huntington, which was good enough to earn him a September call-up. In the eighth inning of St. Louis's final game of the year, Alston entered the game at first base, replacing pinch hitter **Frankie Frisch**. (Frisch had hit for **Johnny Mize**, so Alston was, in a way, replacing *two* Hall of Famers.) On the first ball hit to him, Alston made an error. In his only turn at the plate, he struck out on three pitches.

Alston played 11 more years in the minors but never got another shot in the majors. In his final few years in the minors, Alston was a player-manager. He kept managing after retiring as a player and, after six straight winning seasons in charge of several Dodgers affiliates, he got the opportunity to manage the big-league club.

The Dodgers won the World Series in 1955, Alston's second year at the helm, and won three more titles and three NL pennants before retiring after the '76 season. He was elected to the Hall of Fame in '83 but died before he was inducted.

Padres' .210 batting average in high-leverage situations is very real, third-worst for any team this century.

The Reds picked a heck of a time to blow a 9-0 lead. Despite spotting the Reds a nine-run lead by the third inning, Pittsburgh stormed back to score 13 unanswered runs and take an historic 13-12 victory on Saturday night at Great American Ball Park that staved off a losing record with seven games to go.

It was quite the comeback -- in fact, it's the largest the Pirates have completed in the franchise's 142-year history, per Elias. Coming into the game, they were 0-819 when trailing by nine runs or more.

Clayton Kershaw struck that balance on Saturday night, hurling five scoreless innings in a 7-0 win over the Giants at Dodger Stadium. It was Kershaw's 210th career victory, moving him past **Don Drysdale** for sole possession of second on the Dodgers' all-time wins list (behind **Don Sutton's** 233).

It also ensured that the Dodgers will not have to play in the National League Wild Card round of the postseason, as they secured at least the second-best record in the NL. A three-time NL Cy Young Award winner, 10-time All-Star and the 2014 NL MVP



Nine years after **Jackie Robinson** broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball, the Dominican Republic saw one of its own not only make history, but set an entire nation on a path to changing the landscape of baseball forever.

On Sept. 23, 1956, Osvaldo Virgil Sr., or **Ozzie Virgil**, made his Major League debut with the New York Giants, becoming MLB's first Dominican-born player. Now, 67 years later, almost 900 players from the Dominican Republic have donned Major League uniforms, the most of any nation besides the United States. On Opening Day 2023, there were 104 Dominican Major Leaguers, far outpacing other countries and territories outside the continental U.S.

It all started with Virgil that day at the Polo Grounds, where he went 0-4 against the Phillies while playing third base.

by 1956, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Mexico, Panama and even Colombia had representation in the big leagues; Colombia's Luis Miguel Castro, known as **Lou Castro**, was the first Latin American player in MLB in 1902. But with the debut of Virgil, who would soon be followed by famous countrymen **Juan Marichal and Felipe Rojas Alou** (along with his brothers Mateo and Jesús), the stage was set for the impact and influence we've come to know and expect from the Dominican Republic.

Virgil would play two more games for the Giants in 1956, going 5-for-8 with a double, triple, two runs scored and two RBIs in a season-ending doubleheader against the Phillies.

Virgil hit .235 in 96 games for New York in 1957, and one year later, the man nicknamed "Oregano" would become the first player of color to play for the Detroit Tigers in 1958.

After playing in parts of nine seasons with the Giants, Tigers, Kansas City Athletics, Orioles and Pirates, Virgil retired in 1969. After his playing career, Virgil was a long-time coach at the Major League level, first for the Giants and then notably under Hall of Fame manager **Dick Williams** for the Expos, Padres and Mariners.

Virgil also was a successful Winter League skipper, winning championships in the Dominican Republic and Venezuela.

Since Virgil's debut in 1956, the Dominican Republic has produced four Hall of Famers (Marichal, **Pedro Martínez**, **Vladimir Guerrero Sr.** and **David Ortiz**), with a fifth (**Adrián Beltré**) almost assuredly joining them in 2024, and of course **Albert Pujols** on the horizon in 2028. Add to that seven MVP Awards, four Cy Young Awards and seven Rookies of the Year.

It began with little fanfare in 1956, but the legacy of Ozzie Virgil Sr. -- whose son, Ozzie Jr., was a two-time All-Star in a 11-year Major League career as a catcher with the Phillies, Braves and Blue Jays -- lives on in the Dominican Republic and beyond.

The Kansas City Royals, over 50-plus years, have had notably few sluggers. They have only had 12 players in the history of the team hit 30 home runs in a season.

As such, it was very unlikely for them to have a 30-30 player. The closest they had among their 30-homer hitters was **Bo Jackson** in 1989, when he hit 32 homers and stole 26 bases. He only played 135 games that season; with, say, 20 more games, he probably would have been 30-30.

The Royals, on the other hand, have had 20 players steal 30 bases in a season, 12 of them did it in multiple years, **Willie Wilson** had ELEVEN seasons with 30 stolen bases. This has long been a team driven by speed. The closest to 30-30 among the speedsters was **Carlos Beltrán** in 2002, when he stole 35 bases and hit 29 home runs. SO close. The next year, Beltrán stole 41 bases and hit 26 home runs.

on Friday, **Bobby Witt Jr.** brought the two worlds together, finally. He hit his 30th home run, to go along with his 49 stolen bases, to become the first 30-30 guy in Royals history.

This has been, thanks to the new rules and some incredible athletes, a pretty spectacular 30-30 season — Witt became the fourth player to do it this year, tying for the season record.

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LONGER READS

BROOKS ROBINSON, THE STANDARD SETTER AT THIRD BASE

Jay Jaffe in Fangraphs

Variously known as the “The Human Vacuum Cleaner,” “Mr. Hoover,” or “Mr. Impossible,” **Brooks Robinson** set the standard for defensive wizardry at third base, winning a record 16 consecutive Gold Gloves thanks to his combination of ambidexterity, supernaturally quick reflexes, and acrobatic skill. He was an 18-time All-Star, a regular season, All-Star Game, and World Series MVP, and a first-ballot Hall of Famer. More than that, he was “Mr. Oriole” for his 23 seasons spent with Baltimore, a foundational piece for four pennant winners and two champions, and a beloved icon within the community and throughout the game. In 1966, *Sports Illustrated*’s William Leggett wrote that Robinson “ranked second only to crab cakes in Baltimore.” He may have surpassed them since.

Robinson died on Tuesday at the age of 86. According to his agent, the cause was coronary disease. On the broadcast of the Orioles' game on Tuesday night, longtime teammate and fellow Hall of Famer **Jim Palmer** fought back tears to pay tribute. "We all know he's a great player, he won 16 Gold Gloves, but we also know how special a person he was," said Palmer, who like Robinson debuted with the Orioles as a teenager, spent his entire career with the team, and was elected to the Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility. "I think as a young player you make a decision early in your life, 'Okay, who do I want to emulate? Who do I want to be like?' Brooks was that guy."

Indeed, Robinson the person was even more revered than Robinson the player. Wrote the *Washington Post's* Thomas Boswell on the occasion of the third baseman's 1983 induction to the Hall:

The part of Robinson that will be hardest to transmit to posterity will be his upright character, his manly gentleness, his constant consideration for others, his knack of blending candor with kindness. In an age seemingly committed to exposing every foible of a public figure, Robinson — almost alone among baseball players — was accepted as a kind of natural nobleman. "People love Brooks because he deserves to be loved," said Manager **Earl Weaver**.

Robinson spent his entire major league career with the Orioles, debuting in 1955 as an 18-year-old and retiring late in the '77 season at the age of 40. Though rarely a spectacular hitter, he totaled 2,848 career hits and 268 homers to go with a .267/.322/.401 (105 OPS+) batting line. He made 18 All-Star teams (including two a year from 1960–62) and set a record for position players with his 16 straight Gold Gloves (from 1969–75); only pitcher **Greg Maddux** won more (18), while pitcher **Jim Kaat** equaled Robinson's total. In 1964, he won AL MVP honors by hitting .317/.368/.521 (145 OPS+) with 28 homers and leading the league with 118 RBI and 8.1 WAR.

The pinnacle of Robinson's career was the 1970 World Series, when he etched himself into the national consciousness with his outstanding, MVP-winning performance on both sides of the ball against the Reds. He hit for a .429 average with two homers and six RBI in the Orioles' five-game triumph, and with his diving stops and improbably accurate throws across the diamond, produced some of the most memorable and oft-aired highlights of any Fall Classic.

"I'm beginning to see Brooks in my sleep," said Reds manager **Sparky Anderson** afterwards. "If I dropped this paper plate, he'd pick it up on one hop and throw me out at first."

Robinson additionally helped the Orioles win the 1966 World Series as well as pennants in '69 and '71, with division titles in '73 and '74 as well. He hit .303/.323/.462 in 156 plate appearances in his postseason career, and even with a 1-for-19 performance in a losing cause against the Mets in the 1969 World Series, carried a reputation as a clutch hitter. But for all of his accomplishments, he was hardly a five-tool standout. He lacked foot speed and bat speed, and had neither great power nor a particularly strong arm; in fact, he was a natural left-hander who learned to throw right-handed in his youth, and built up his arm by throwing newspapers

on a delivery route that included Hall of Fame catcher **Bill Dickey**. His play at the hot corner was unorthodox, as the *Chicago Daily Herald's* Mike Klein explained in 1973 (h/t Mark Simon):

"It's a cardinal rule of baseball that any successful infielder crouch low, keep his head down and glove close to the ground. 'Play the ball; don't let the ball play you.'

"But Robinson, and this attests to his great quickness (different from speed, which he lacks) plays higher than most brothers of the Hot Corner Fraternity. His crouch is less pronounced. Playing down at shell city means attack and charge the ball. Which he does to perfection.

"There's even a worked-up set of Brooks Robinson footsteps for making sure he pivots off the left foot when fielding bunts. What makes his golden magnetic glove work so intriguing however is that Robinson going backwards and to either side will make a better play than most third basemen playing it by all the rules. It is distinctly Robinson.

"Nobody else does it quite the same."

Brooks Calbert Robinson was born on May 18, 1937 in Little Rock, Arkansas. His father, Brooks Robinson Sr., was a fireman who played semiprofessional baseball, while his mother, Ethel Mae (Denker) Robinson, was a clerk at the Arkansas State treasury department. The elder Robinson introduced the game to his son, sawing off a broomstick to use as a bat, hitting him groundballs, and employing him as his team's batboy. The younger Robinson listened to the Cardinals on the radio growing up, and when he was 12 years old, wrote a school composition assignment on his ambition to play third base for the team.

At Little Rock Central High School — which two years after his 1955 graduation would become famous for its Supreme Court-ordered desegregation — Robinson starred in basketball, earning all-state honors as a junior. He played football as well, but the school did not have a baseball team, so he followed in his father's footsteps by playing with the city's American Legion team, the Little Rock Doughboys. His glove work drew the attention of Lindsay Deal, a scout who had a brief cup of coffee with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1939 and was a former teammate of Paul Richards, who took over as the manager and general manager of the Orioles in 1955, a year after their inaugural season in Baltimore (they had been the St. Louis Browns prior). "He's no speed demon, but neither is he a truck horse," wrote Deal in a letter to Richards. "Brooks has a lot of power, baseball savvy, and is always cool when the chips are down."

The Orioles, Reds, and Giants each offered Robinson a \$4,000 bonus to sign, with all but the last of those teams offering major league contracts as well. Robinson chose Baltimore, signing two days after graduating from high school in May. Scout Arthur Ehlers convinced him that the organization's low standing (they had finished seventh at 54-100 in 1954) offered Robinson a quicker path to the majors. That turned out to be correct, in that after hitting .331/.415/.489 with 11 homers in 95 games for the York White Roses of the Class B Piedmont League, he was called up. In his major league debut on September 17, 1955, Robinson went 2-for-4 with singles off the Senators' **Chuck Stobbs** and **Webbo Clarke**, driving in a run via the latter. At 18 years

and 122 days old, he remains the second-youngest position player to debut with the Orioles since their move to Baltimore.

Those were the only two hits Robinson collected in 22 PA in the majors that year. He spent all but 15 games of the 1956 season with Double-A San Antonio, collecting his first major league homer off the Senators' **Evelio Hernández** on September 29. He made the Orioles' Opening Day lineup in 1957 but tore cartilage in his knee two weeks into the season, missed two months, and spent over a month rehabbing at San Antonio before returning to the majors. He hit just .239/.286/.359 with two homers in 50 games that year.

With incumbent third baseman (and future Hall of Famer) **George Kell** retiring after the 1957 season, Robinson finally spent a full year in the majors in '58. Alas, his dismal performance (.238/.292/.305, 69 OPS+) and then a slow start in 1959 — fallout from a winter stint in the Army National Guard, and a late arrival to spring training — led to a return trip to the minors, in this case Triple-A Vancouver. Upon being recalled, he got hot over the season's final two months and finished with a respectable .284/.325/.383 (97 OPS+) line in 88 games. He was in the major leagues for good.

Robinson broke out in 1960, his age-23 season. He hit .294/.329/.440 (108 OPS+) with 14 homers, and began All-Star and Gold Glove streaks. His 4.1 WAR ranked sixth in the league (though of course the metric was about half a century away from being invented), and he finished third in the AL MVP voting behind **Roger Maris and Mickey Mantle**. The Orioles went 89-65 and finished second in the AL, the franchise's first season above .500 since 1945 (they went 76-76 in 1957).

The 1960 season began a five-year stretch in which Robinson hit well in even-year seasons but was slightly subpar in odd-year ones, though defense always bolstered his value. After hitting for a 98 OPS+ with just seven homers in 1961, he set career highs for himself across the board with a 126 OPS+ (.303/.342/.486) performance with 23 homers and a league-leading 6.1 WAR in '62. After a tepid 1963, he had what would stand as the best statistical season of his career in '64 while helping the Orioles to 97 wins under first-year manager **Hank Bauer**. He was a near-unanimous choice as the AL MVP, receiving 18 of 20 first-place votes.

Robinson followed that great 1964 season with third- and second-place finishes in the MVP voting thanks to more consistency at the plate. In the second of those seasons, 1966, he was joined by Frank Robinson via a trade from the Reds. The newcomer had been the NL MVP half a decade earlier but was viewed as "an old 30" in the words of Reds owner Bill DeWitt. The Orioles had never had a Black star before, and they already had a clubhouse leader in their third baseman, but concerns about how the incoming Robinson would be received were allayed when the incumbent one greeted him at the batting cage by telling him, "Frank, you're exactly what we need." On Opening Day, after the Red Sox's Earl Wilson hit Frank with a pitch in his first plate appearance as an Oriole, Brooks followed with a two-run homer. "The Act," as *Sports Illustrated* termed the pairing of the Robinsons, quickly became a smashing success.

Frank's firebrand play put a stamp on the Orioles as he won the AL Triple Crown and MVP honors. The Orioles won their first pennant, then faced off against the Dodgers, the reigning champions, in the World Series. The Robinsons hit back-to-back home runs off **Don Drysdale** in the first inning of the opener and didn't trail for a single inning as the Orioles pulled off a shocking four-game sweep.

Thanks to above-average offense and off-the-charts defense — Total Zone ratings of 32 and 33 runs — at a time when pitching was becoming ever more dominant, Robinson was runner-up to Carl Yastrzemski on the AL WAR leaderboards in both 1967 (7.7) and '68 (8.4), though the Orioles couldn't repeat as AL champions. At the All-Star break in 1968, Bauer was fired, replaced by Weaver, and thanks to a late charge the Orioles won 91 games and finished second.

They were just getting started under Weaver. With each league split into two divisions starting in 1969, the Orioles began a run of dominance in the new AL East, winning a total of 318 games over a three-season span as well as three AL pennants. Robinson hit for a modest 105 OPS+ across that stretch but still averaged 20 homers and 4.7 WAR. After beating the Twins in the 1969 ALCS, the Orioles were upset by the Miracle Mets; Robinson, who had gone 7-for-14 in the ALCS, was held to just one hit, though twice he drove in the Orioles' only run in 2-1 losses, no small feat for a team that scored just nine runs in five games.

After going 7-for-12 in the Orioles' three-game sweep of the Twins in 1970, Robinson took over the World Series against the Reds from the outset. In the sixth inning of the opening game at Cincinnati's Riverfront Stadium — the first outdoor ballpark with AstroTurf — Robinson set the tone with his stop of a hot smash off the bat of **Lee May** down the third base line. Robinson backhanded the ball while lunging into foul territory, and with his momentum still carrying him to his right threw a high, arcing one-hopper to **Boog Powell** at first base in time for the out. Thanks to the confluence of color television and slow-motion instant replay, the play has become one of the most famous in modern World Series history, a mesmerizing spectacle and an archetype for similarly dazzling plays by the likes of **Manny Machado** and **Nolan Arenado** in this day and age.

"His arm went one way, his body another, and his shoes another," said Reds pitcher **Clay Carroll** of the play. In the next half-inning, Robinson broke a 3-3 tie with a solo homer off **Gary Nolan** that proved to be the deciding run. In the fourth inning of Game 2, Robinson victimized May again, making a diving stop to his right, spinning, and then starting a 5-4-3 double play (see the top video at the 1:58 mark); he later singled and scored in the midst of a five-run fifth inning that erased a 4-1 deficit. In Game 3, he drove in a pair of first inning runs with a double off **Tony Cloninger**, ended the top of the sixth with a diving catch of a line drive to his left off the bat of **Johnny Bench**, and in the bottom of the frame added another double and scored when pitcher **Dave McNally** hit a grand slam. In Game 4, he went 4-for-4 with another solo homer off Nolan as well as an RBI single in a losing cause. In the ninth inning of Game 5, he dove to spear a foul ball off the bat of Bench, and, fittingly, began the Series-clinching play by fielding a routine grounder by **Pat Corrales**, then firing to first to give the Orioles their second championship in a five-year period.

Robinson was the obvious MVP of the Series. “If we’d have known he wanted a new car that bad, we’d have chipped in and bought him one,” quipped Bench afterwards. When combined with his 1964 AL MVP award and ’66 All-Star Game MVP award, Robinson was the first player to claim all three honors. Frank Robinson became the second just a year later with his All-Star Game award. Nobody has done it since.

After the Orioles won the AL East again in 1971, Robinson came up big in the ALCS against the A’s, a budding dynasty themselves. In Game 1 he singled against rookie sensation **Vida Blue** and scored the tying run in a four-run seventh-inning rally that proved decisive. In Game 2, he started the scoring with a second-inning solo homer off **Catfish Hunter**; the Orioles won again, 5-1. In Game 3, his two-run, bases-loaded double off **Diego Segui** broke a 1-1 tie in the fifth inning, and he added another double in the seventh as the Orioles completed the sweep. In the World Series against the Pirates, he went 3-for-3 with two walks and three RBI in an 11-3 win in Game 2 but was otherwise comparatively quiet in the seven-game classic, which the Pirates won.

Wanting to find space for the up-and-coming **Don Baylor**, the Orioles traded the 36-year-old Frank Robinson to the Dodgers after the 1971 season. Subsequent Orioles teams weren’t as strong, and neither was Brooks. Though he totaled 11.0 WAR from 1972–74, he produced just one above-average season with the bat, in the last of those years. With Baylor and second baseman **Bobby Grich** providing a much-needed injection of youth, the Orioles won back-to-back division titles in 1973 and ’74, but they couldn’t get past the A’s in the ALCS in either year.

After hitting a dismal .201/.267/.274 in 1975 — still a season in which he was 18 runs above average defensively en route to 1.8 WAR — and struggling at the plate into 1976 as well, Robinson was finally supplanted as the regular third baseman by 25-year-old **Doug DeCinces**. He spent 1977 as a player-coach, setting a record for 23 consecutive seasons with one team (**Carl Yastrzemski** later tied it), but he played sparingly. He pinch-hit a three-run walk-off off Cleveland’s **Dave LaRoche** in the 10th inning on April 9; it was his 268th and final home run.

On August 21, with the team facing a roster crunch, Robinson retired as a player. “Despite the logic of the move, it was a very difficult decision to make, considering Brooks’s tremendous achievements and the love we all have for him,” said general manager Hank Peters. “He has been, unquestionably, the Orioles’ most important and most beloved player and he never will be replaced in the hearts of his countless fans.”

A month later, the Orioles paid tribute with a pregame ceremony that included retiring his no. 5. They drove Robinson around the field in a 1955 Cadillac, representing his first year in the majors, and presented him with a new car, a Hawaiian vacation, and Memorial Stadium’s third base itself. The Rawlings Company gave him replacement Gold Gloves, as he had donated all but two of his original 16 to local charities. May, by this point a teammate, presented Robinson with a vacuum cleaner, referring back to the 1970 World Series as he said, “Everything we hit, you sucked it up. And you’ll notice, Brooks, that just like you, this machine has a lot of miles on it.”

In 1978, Robinson joined the Orioles' broadcast booth, a role he would remain in through '93. He could not afford to retire to a life of leisure, as he made less than \$1 million in salary in his entire career, and wound up broke in 1976 when his sporting goods store was overextended. He became a regular on the baseball card show circuit (this scribe got his autograph at the 2002 All-Star Game Fan Fest), and was involved in numerous businesses, lending his name to products and serving as a spokesman for Crown Petroleum. Later he was involved in a group that owned four minor league teams, including one in York, Pennsylvania, where he began his professional career.

Robinson was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1983, receiving 92% of the vote and becoming the first third baseman to be elected by the BBWAA in his first year of eligibility — and just the third they had elected at all in 48 years. To that point, only **Ty Cobb, Henry Aaron, Babe Ruth, Honus Wagner, Willie Mays, Bob Feller, Ted Williams, and Stan Musial** received higher shares of the vote, though today Robinson ranks 28th in voting share. He was inducted alongside **Juan Marichal, Walter Alston**, and Kell, the fellow Arkansas native who had served as his mentor with the Orioles in 1957.

In terms of advanced statistics, Robinson ranks seventh among third basemen in career WAR (78.4), 11th in seven-year peak (45.8), and eighth in JAWS (62.1), with five of the seven players above him in the last of those categories hailing from more recent eras. Not surprisingly, his standing is driven by the estimate of his defensive value, which is based on data admittedly less sophisticated than we have today. He's first among third basemen in Fielding Runs (Total Zone and Defensive Runs Saved) by a country mile:

Third Basemen Career Fielding Runs Leaders

Player	From	To	Fielding Runs
Brooks Robinson	1955	1977	293
Adrián Beltré	1998	2018	216
Scott Rolen	1996	2012	175
Buddy Bell	1972	1989	174
Clete Boyer	1955	1971	159
Nolan Arenado	2013	2023	156
Robin Ventura	1989	2004	155
Graig Nettles	1967	1988	140
Gary Gaetti	1981	2000	131

Mike Schmidt 1972 1989 127

SOURCE: Baseball-Reference

Includes runs via Total Zone (through 2002) and Defensive Runs Saved (since 2003) for players who spent at least 85% of their careers at third base.

Additionally, Robinson is third all-time among all fielders in dWAR, the total defensive value that includes both Fielding Runs and positional adjustments:

Career Defensive WAR (dWAR) Leaders

Player	Primary Pos	From	To	dWAR
Ozzie Smith	SS	1978	1996	44.2
Mark Belanger	SS	1965	1982	39.5
Brooks Robinson	3B	1955	1977	39.1
Cal Ripken Jr.	SS	1981	2001	35.7
Joe Tinker	SS	1902	1916	34.3
Luis Aparicio	SS	1956	1973	31.8
Rabbit Maranville	SS	1912	1935	30.8
Iván Rodríguez	C	1991	2011	29.6*
Omar Vizquel	SS	1989	2012	29.5
Bobby Wallace	SS	1894	1918	28.7

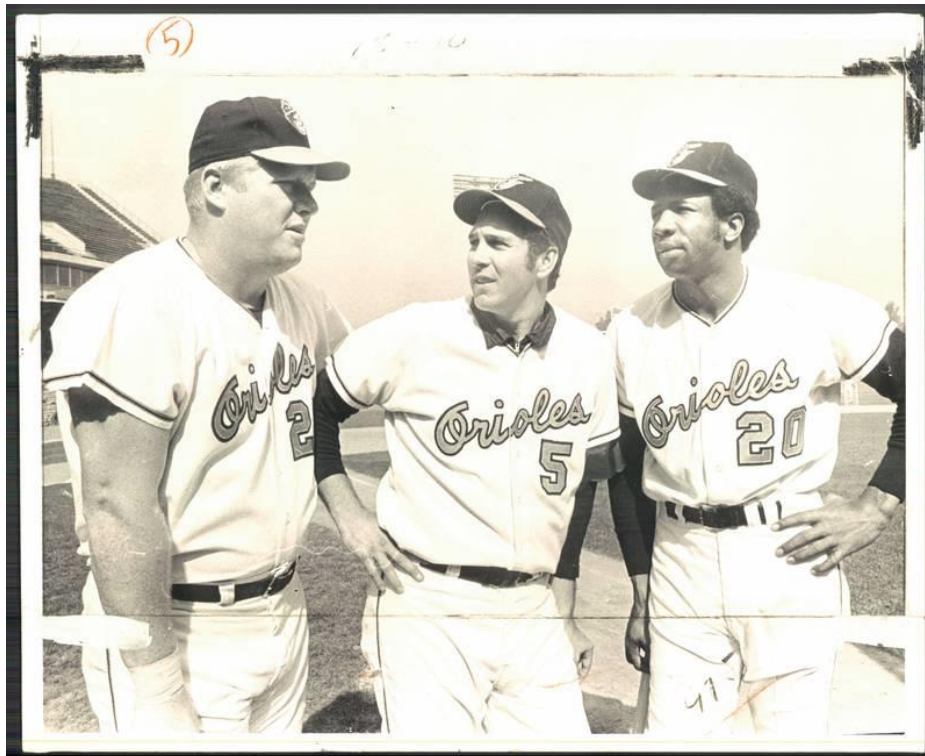
SOURCE: Baseball-Reference

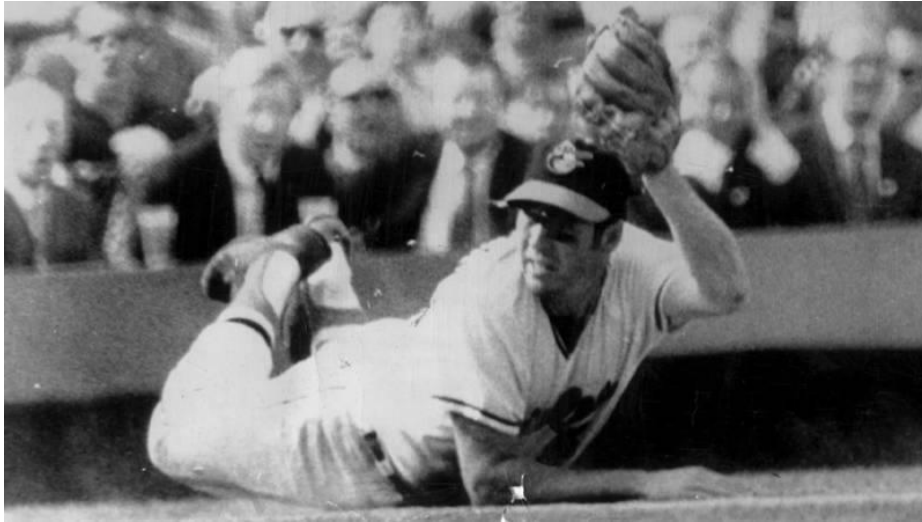
Includes Fielding Runs (Total Zone and Defensive Runs Saved) plus positional adjustments. * = Does not include framing runs.

If there's an advertisement for the Oriole Way, whose foundation was laid by Richards and maintained by his successors, it's here. Not only did the homegrown Robinson and Belanger form the best defensive left side of any infield for a period of over a decade, but Aparicio preceded Belanger as the team's regular shortstop from 1962-66. Ripken was the son of a career minor leaguer who served as the backbone of the organization as a coach and manager; Cal Ripken Sr. managed Belanger at A-level Aberdeen in 1964.

Anyway, longevity obviously has something to do with Robinson's standing — in fact, his 2,896 games played ranked fifth when he retired and is still 16th — but it's also notable that he never started a game at another position, and played just 47.1 innings elsewhere, switching to second or shortstop in late-inning situations early in his career. He never played first base or DH, and provided significant defensive value at third for as long as he held the regular job.

"I don't think anybody will care what I did here 20 or 25 years from now," said Robinson with typical humility to *Sports Illustrated's* Mark Kram in 1970. Yet more than half a century later, people still do care, not only about the feats Robinson accomplished on the field but about the way he carried himself off of it. That's quite a legacy.





THE MINI-BOMBS BLOWING UP THE ELBOWS OF BASEBALL'S TOP PITCHERS

Lindsey Adler and Jared Diamnd, Wall Street journal

Pitching injuries are a huge problem in baseball. What's to blame: the pitch clock, the mechanics of throwing nasty stuff or even the ban of sticky stuff?

Max Scherzer made a dark prediction at the beginning of the baseball season. Pitcher injuries, already at high levels, would intensify. His concern, Scherzer repeatedly warned to anybody who would listen, was the introduction of the pitch clock.

He was right about at least one thing: It has been another painful year for pitchers. **Jacob deGrom, Shohei Ohtani, Shane Bieber and Tony Gonsolin** are among the key starters who have undergone elbow surgeries that will likely keep them off the mound until 2025. Scherzer himself strained a muscle in his throwing shoulder last week, leaving the Texas Rangers without their ace for the final stretch of a fierce postseason race.

Now everyone—players, teams, league officials and the top doctors responsible for treating these injuries—is searching for answers.

In some ways, what has happened over the past few months is simply a continuation of a devastating trend. The dramatic rise of star pitchers succumbing to elbow ligament surgery has been one of the defining story lines of the last decade.

But the top orthopedic surgeons who routinely work with major leaguers are sounding alarm bells about what they consider to be a concerning development. It isn't just the number of significant injuries that has them worried—but the severity of them.

Dr. Keith Meister, the Rangers' team physician, said the MRIs of some of his recent patients "look like a friggin' mini-bomb going off on the medial side of the elbow." And he's not the only expert to take notice.

"I'm seeing injuries now that I haven't seen to this degree," said Dr. Neal ElAttrache, a prominent orthopedic surgeon in Los Angeles who has operated on many major-league players. "There's definitely something different happening now to the shoulder and elbow, and before any other changes are made to try to fix something, people in baseball need to better understand exactly what we're seeing right now."

The ramifications of an injured ace extend far beyond the emotional agony, for the player and fans, of a pitcher not working every five days. It's an overwhelming financial burden. Teams pay elite starters enormous amounts of money. Losing them for a year or more destroys their investment, and teams are desperate to solve the mystery that is keeping the human elbow intact. (The Rangers, for instance, awarded deGrom a \$185 million contract before this season. He made six starts and now probably won't pitch again until 2025.)

Experts are trying to understand what is causing all these injuries, despite the strict pitch counts and innings limits teams now impose in the name of health. The explanations being mooted include rising velocities, the pitch clock, the pitching mechanics needed to throw today's mind-

bending breaking balls and even the league's crackdown on "sticky stuff" used to enhance grip and spin—or some combination of them all.

For Scherzer and others, the pitch clock has emerged as a potential boogeyman. With less time to recover between throws, the thinking goes, pitchers are more likely to be fatigued, which leaves them more susceptible to injury.

"You put a pitch clock in play now, and you get guys who are now really working hard to meet the clock and the time and you pile on a bunch of pitches, and their endurance is not going to be the same," said ElAttrache, who performed elbow surgery on Ohtani this week. "As soon as that starts to break down, then their mechanics break down."

Meister said he has spoken with veteran pitchers who told him they believe the clock has "increased their fatigue level pitch to pitch, which could have potential consequences." He said that in general, younger pitchers haven't expressed that sentiment.

Glenn Fleisig, the director of biomechanics research for the American Sports Medicine Institute, is part of a MLB-created research committee that is studying this issue. He said the committee will compile all the injury data after the season and present their findings this winter.

At this point, there appears to be limited concrete evidence directly linking the pitch clock to additional injuries. There have been fewer injury list placements among pitchers than this time last year, though injuries soared to record highs in the wake of the pandemic-related shutdown in 2020. IL placements among pitchers are up from 2019.

As of now, MLB says its in-season research has found no correlation between the pitch clock and pitcher fatigue and injury, pointing out that pitcher injuries have been on an upward trajectory for many years. There have been few violations of the clock at all this season, with the league noting that pitchers are leaving time on the clock.

"We don't live in a world where only one thing changed from last year to this year," Fleisig said. "Unfortunately, we don't live in a laboratory where any change we see we can definitely say it's because of the pitch timer or not."

Consider the other changes that have taken place across the sport in both the last decade and in very recent seasons. Pitchers are throwing harder than ever, with the average fastball velocity now sitting at 94 mph, compared with 92 mph in 2013. Today's pitchers are taught to throw every pitch with maximum effort, rather than conserve energy for later innings like in the past, putting even more stress on the arm.

"Pitch speeds are going up and up, and injuries are going up and up," Fleisig said. "This is one statistical factor that correlates."

Pitchers are throwing physically strenuous pitches like sliders at a higher rate, too. The century-long convention in pitching has been to build an arsenal around the fastball. Now, in an era when pitchers can maximize the velocity and movement on their secondary pitches, teams are urging pitchers to use their statistically best pitch more frequently.

The inciting incident for this change in pitching philosophy comes from the fairly new ability to quantify the spin rate on a pitch using technology.

Pitchers have always sought to optimize the spin on their pitches—a true backspin can create the illusion of a “rising” fastball, while the frontspin sends a curveball tumbling toward a batter’s knees. But the ability to measure spin has led to a hyperfocus on the value of spin and research into how to increase it.

ElAttrache said the arm actions required to generate that kind of spin are “the worst set of forces and mechanics for the ligament.”

Knowing the value of spin, many pitchers started using extremely sticky substances to help generate more friction and spin on their pitches. When MLB cracked down on the use of sticky stuff, some pitchers struggled to adjust.

In 2021, Tampa Bay Rays starter **Tyler Glasnow** blamed his elbow ligament tear on the crackdown. He said, quite colorfully, that he had intensified his grip on the baseball as a result, which led to the flexor strain that so often precedes a UCL tear.

“I’m choking the s—out of all my pitches,” Glasnow said.

Meister believes Glasnow isn’t alone. He said in order to generate spin without the assistance of sunscreen or pine tar, pitchers are gripping the ball harder than they should, which is “biomechanically a very dangerous problem.”

Scherzer found himself mired in the continued fallout of the sticky stuff crackdown this year when an umpire ejected him for having hands that were deemed as too sticky, leading to a 10-game suspension. Scherzer has denied any improper use of the league-provided rosin for grip, but he additionally helped foment another wave of caution amongst pitchers.

Scherzer can proceed with the knowledge that to some extent, his concerns about pitcher injuries this season were proven correct. Unfortunately for him, the foresight and caution around the topic didn’t spare him from suffering the same miserable situation he worried would befall many others.

He is finishing the regular season on the injured list, one of many of the game’s aces who will not be able to participate in their team’s championship effort in October.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE ANSWERS

Twice in MLB history, the MVPs of both leagues were third basemen. Name the players.

1980 – one bats right, one bats left.

Both Hall of Famers

Mike Schmidt and George Brett

1964 – one played in the '64 World Series, one didn't.

National Leaguer led majors with 119 RBI in '64, hit 2 HRs in World Series for winning team.

The American Leaguer played 23 seasons with the same team, 16 Gold Gloves.

Ken Boyer and Brooks Robinson.

The Cleveland Indians/guardians have had three 20 game winners in the last 50 years.

1974. Hall of Fame righthander went 21-13 for the Tribe, also won '72 Cy Young for Cleveland.

Gaylord Perry

2008. Cy Young winner, 22-3, later pitched in 2 World Series but not for Cleveland, lefthanded.

Cliff Lee

2018. He won two Cy Youngs for the Indians before his 20-7 season, righthander

Corey Kluber

The Mets have had four 30/30 players in their history.

2023 shortstop

Francisco Lindor

1987 outfielder, lefthanded, had over 1,000 hits as a Met, rookie of the year with Mets in 1983.

Darryl Strawberry

1987, 1989, 1991. Righthanded. Led NL in HRs (38) and RBI (117) in '91, played 1317 of 1534 career games in the infield

Howard Johnson

2007. 7x Gold Glove righthanded infielder, played all 14 of his seasons for the Mets.

David Wright

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