

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

10.22.2023

Good morning baseball fans,

In today's issue Playoff notes, Career Post-season homers leaders, who is **Matt Kata**?

In Longer Reads – Two excellent pieces: the Voice pitchers hear over PitchCom, and the never-ending discussion on whether “clutch” exists.

Grab a coffee and enjoy.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE

(answers at bottom)

Team By Team Career Hits Leader—How many can you get?

Team	Career (entire career, not just with team he is hits leaders)
Arizona D'Backs	1990-2008
Atlanta Braves	1954-1976
Baltimore Orioles	1981-2001
Boston Red Sox	1961-1983
Chicago Cubs	1871-1897
Chicago White Sox	1930-1950
Cincinnati Reds	1963-1986
Cleveland Indians	1896-1916

Colorado Rockies	1997-2013
Detroit Tigers	1905-1928
Houston Astros	1988-2007
Kansas City Royals	1973-1993
Los Angeles Angels	1994-2010
Los Angeles Dodgers	1906-1927
Miami Marlins	1996-2010
Milwaukee Brewers	1974-1993
Minnesota Twins	1984-1995
New York Mets	2004-2018
New York Yankees	1995-2014
Oakland A's	1964-1983
Philadelphia Phillies	2000-2016
Pittsburg Pirates	1955-1972
San Diego Padres	1982-2001
San Francisco Giants	1948-1973
Seattle Mariners	2001-2019
St. Louis Cards	1941-1963
Tampa Bay Rays	2002-2016
Texas Rangers	2000-2013
Toronto Blue Jays	1983-2001
Washington Nationals	2005-2021

PLAYOFF NOTES

PHILLIES

The Phillies had a run of 13 of homers that were all solo shots, the longest such streak in postseason history. They also had a run of 16 in 5 games, also a record. The 2023 Phillies joined

the '08 Rays as the only teams in postseason history to go deep at least three times in four consecutive games.

Most HR in 1st 8 games of single postseason: 2021 Red Sox: 20 2004 Astros: 20 2023 Phillies: 19 (thru 3 in G2) 2020 Yankees: 17 [in 7 total games]

15 homers in less than 50 post season games

Babe Ruth

Bryce Harper

Phillies players have had 4 multi-homer performances in the 2023 playoffs. That's tied with the 2002 Angels and 2009 Phillies for the most in a single postseason. **Nick Castellanos** has done it twice, Bryce Harper and **Kyle Schwarber**.

In Tuesday's 10-0 win at citizen's bank stadium the noise at It hit 108 decibels for Trea Turner's HR yesterday and 111 for Bryce Harper's on Monday, which is like standing next to a jackhammer

The Phillies in their 33 seasons at the Vet (1971-2003): 11 postseason wins (as in 11-14).

The Phillies in the past 12 months and change at Citizens Bank Park: *12 postseason wins* (as in 12-2).

The Phillies did win a World Series in that other park (in 1980) ... and made it to two other World Series (in 1983 and 1993) ... and won more than 100 games in two other seasons (1976 and '77). So there was an eight-season stretch (1976-83) in there that was widely considered at the time to be the greatest run in franchise history. And that team still won fewer postseason games, in that whole run, than the current Phillies have won at the Bank in their last 14 home games.

ASTROS

A.J. Hinch, Jeff Luhnow, James Click, George Springer, Gerrit Cole, Charlie Morton, Carlos Correa and Zack Greinke have all departed during this run. The dominance hasn't stopped despite front office and player turnover that would crater most other clubs.

Setup man **Bryan Abreu** hasn't allowed a run *since July 15*, a span of 27.2 innings. He struck out seven of the 12 Twins he faced during the ALDS.

The 26-year-old reliever signed for \$40,000 displays some of the dirtiest stuff in baseball.

RANGERS

Going into Wednesday **Max Scherzer** allowed five homers on more than 1800 sliders from 2019 through 2022. He's allowed nine this year on 306 sliders.

Max Scherzer. The ask: Face the best road hitting lineup at age 39 after not pitching for 36 days because of an arm injury. Since he turned 35, he has shamed much younger pitchers by gobbling up more innings than anyone except Gerrit Cole. He is the only pitcher since 1884 to last 2,800 innings and maintain a strikeout-to-walk rate of 4.5.

No team gave the ball in the postseason to a pitcher who had been out so long since the Rockies did it with **Aaron Cook** in the 2007 World Series. Cook had not pitched for the Rockies since Aug. 10 because of a strained muscle in his side. When he began a minor league rehab on Sept. 1, he re-aggravated the injury. Just before the World Series, Cook faced 16 hitters in a sim game. The Rockies put him on the roster and gave him the ball on 69 days of rest as a starter in Game 4. He gave up three runs in six innings and lost what was Boston's clinching win, 4–3.

DOUBLE DIGIT CAREER POST-SEASON HOME RUNS

A fun list to cruise through—the fifty players with 10 or more post-season homers.

- 29 **Manny Ramirez**
- 27 **Jose Altuve**
- 22 **Bernie Williams**
- 20 **Derek Jeter, Kyle Schwarber**
- 19 **Albert Pujols, George Springer**

- 18 **Alex Bregman, Carlos Correa, Mickey Mantle, Reggie Jackson, Nelson Cruz**
- 17 **David Ortiz, Jim Thome**
- 16 **Carlos Beltran**
- 15 **Bryce Harper, Babe Ruth, Jason Werth**
- 14 **David Justice, Corey Seager**
- 13 **Miguel Cabrera, Jim Edmunds, Kike Hernandez, Matt Holiday, Chipper Jones, Aaron Judge, Arod, Justin Turner**
- 12 **Yordan Alvarez, Yogi Berra, Joc Pederson**
- 11 **Randy Arozarena, Steve Garvey, Paul O’Neill, Jorge Posada, Duke Snider, Giancarlo Stanton, Jason Veritek**
- 10 **Johnny Bench, George Brett, Johnny Damon, Travis d’Arnaud, Lenny Dykstra, Freddie Freeman, David Freese, Lou Gehrig, Andrew Jones, Ryan Klesko, Evan Longoria, Javy Lopez, Manny Machado, JD Nartinez, Hideki Matsui, Fred McGriff, Max Muncy, Frank Robinson, Chase Utley**

Kyle Schwarber hit his 19th post-season homer to pass **Reggie Jackson** for most left =handed. Then his 20th to tie Derek Jeter, and he Phillies have more baseball to pay.

Since the start of the Wild Card era in 1995, the league’s postseason ERA is 3.85, nearly half a run below the regular season ERA of 4.29.

Former teammates with the Tigers and Mets, with 34 seasons, 471 wins and six Cy Young Awards between them, Verlander and Scherzer still in the thick of it.

On Friday night the Astros came back to beat the Rangers thanks to **Jose Altuve’s** three-run homer in the ninth. The D-backs came back to beat the Phillies thanks to a three-run, eighth-inning rally against **Craig Kimbrel**. First time in postseason history had multiple teams won when trailing by multiple runs in the eighth inning or later. Altuve didn’t just hit the 26th homer

of his postseason career, putting him only three shy of **Manny Ramirez's** record. He hit his third go-ahead home run in the ninth inning or later in the postseason. Never been done before.

Entering the sixth inning of Game 5, the Rangers and Astros had played 41 innings of this ALCS without the home team taking a lead. That was unprecedented.

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

Which city hosted the first indoor World Series game? That would be **Minneapolis**. In 1987, the Twins became the first team that played its home games in a dome to reach the World Series. Minnesota won the series in seven games.

Though they play outdoors now, the Twins were at the time one of five MLB teams that played under a roof. The Blue Jays had gotten close to the World Series two years earlier, losing the ALCS in seven games to the Royals. The Astros, MLB's longest-tenured indoor team, reached the NLCS twice (1980 and '86). The Expos made their lone playoff appearance in '81, losing in the NLCS to the Dodgers. The Mariners had never won more than 78 games by that point in their history and remain the only team in MLB history not to appear in a World Series.

MATT WHO?

He is the lone player in major-league history who can connect the dots from the Texas Rangers to the Houston Astros to the Arizona Diamondbacks to the Philadelphia Phillies.

Matt Kata suited up for all of them. He is an Immaculate Grid of one.

"I'm pretty cool in my kids' minds now," Kata said with a laugh, referring to twins, Tripp (boy) and Gentry (girl), who are high school freshmen. "So I'll take that for as long as I can."

Kata (rhymes with "theta") totaled five seasons in the majors between 2003 and 2009, batting .239 with 12 home runs and a .660 OPS over 278 games. That stat line might have remained in mothballs forever, but late Thursday night the Phillies defeated the Braves to finalize a bizzaro LCS field lacking any of the three 100-win teams from the regular season. A baseball writer named Jay Cuda was the first to unearth Kata's distinction and posted on X about it before Game 4 began. It amassed more hits in a few days (322,000) than Kata did in his career (166).

His teammates included **Randy Johnson** in Arizona and **Lance Berkman** in Houston and **Mark Teixeira** in Texas and **Chase Utley** in Philadelphia.

The Diamondbacks selected Kata out of Vanderbilt University in the ninth round of the 1999 MLB draft. He made his big-league debut in 2003, at age 25, and enjoyed the best season of his career as a rookie, batting .257/.315/.420 with seven homers in 288 at-bats.

Perhaps foreshadowing recent events, Kata had a knack for tangential immortality. That 2001 spring training game in which Johnson drilled a dove with a fastball and sent feathers exploding into the sky? Kata was playing second base at the time.

More significantly, Kata was also the second sacker for Johnson's perfect game against the Braves on May 18, 2004. In fact, he helped keep it perfect. Kata made three assists in the game, all late. He threw out Julio Franco, a childhood idol whose batting stance he used to imitate, for the second out of the seventh. Then it was **J.D. Drew** for the last out of the eighth and **Mark DeRosa** for the first out of the ninth.

In all, Kata spent three years and 150 games with the Diamondbacks, but his brief times with the other current playoff squads also left an impression.

He played 10 games for the Phillies in 2005. "Philly was everything you're hearing **Bryce Harper** talk about right now 'in the town.' And that team was awesome. I was a bench guy. I got six at-bats on that team. But it was really exciting just to be part of a playoff run and race. ... **Jimmy Rollins, Ryan Howard**. I mean, some great veterans on that squad."

He played 31 games for the Rangers in 2007. "I just remember **Ron Washington** working with the infielders. That was his first year managing and (me) making the team as a non-roster invite was a big thing. ... Sitting next to Mark Teixeira and talking baseball and learning so much from him, from **Michael Young, Ian Kinsler**. I still randomly text with Ian Kinsler."

He played 40 games for the Astros in 2009. "I mean, being teammates with **Aaron Boone, Geoff Blum, Lance Berkman**. Those are people who make it so the first thing that I always look back on with those memories is really just the relationships and the players."

Remarkably, the player with links to all four LCS teams never ever reached the playoffs himself. (His other team was the 2007 Pittsburgh Pirates).

Jim Leyland and Lou Piniella are the only eligible managers with at least 1,750 victories not in the Hall outside of **Gene Mauch**. Piniella missed by one vote when he was on the ballot for the Class of 2019. No manager has been elected since 2014.

Wilbur Wood averaged an incredible 336⅓ innings from 1971-75.

Most times leading NL in homers—**Mike Schmidt** with 8. 1974 (36), 1975 (38), 1976 (38), 1980 (48), 1981 (31), 1983 (40), 1984 (36) & 1986 (37).

Aaron Judge's number 29 was retired by Fresno State this week. 3 seasons. 169 games. 205 hits. 18 HR. 93 RBI. .345/.451/.529

THIS WEEK'S BIRTHDAYS

Juan Marichal	86
Wilbur Wood	83
Bill Russell	75
Keith Hernandez	70
Doug Mirabelli	53

LONGER READS

THE VOICES IN THEIR HEADS: WITH PITCHCOM PITCHERS ARE BEVER SURE WHO THEY MAY HEAR

Chadd Jennings and Stephen J. Nesbitt, The Athletic

As **Max Scherzer** came set before the first pitch of Wednesday's ALCS Game 3 in Arlington, the voice in his ear was that of a Texan who never played pro ball. *Fastball. Away.* Scherzer obliged, the future Hall of Famer heeding the words of a software engineer who was working for a defense contractor back when Scherzer was winning his first of three Cy Young Awards.

Ryan Murray is the Rangers' senior director of research and development, rendering data into baseball insights for an organization chasing its first World Series championship. He also has a one-second cameo for each Rangers pitch as the voice of the team's PitchCom — the device catchers use to signal pitch and location to the pitcher 60 feet, 6 inches away. Murray's role is imperceptible to most, by design, but in the biggest moments on the biggest stage, his voice relays the orders.

The PitchCom system was approved by Major League Baseball in 2022 to combat sign stealing. It is now used by all 30 teams and comes standard with tracks recorded by a voice-over artist. Teams are welcome to record their own tracks, and some immediately did upon figuring out how to work the thing, but that option grew increasingly popular after a media report revealed that then-Guardians catcher **Austin Hedges** had recorded a "F— yeah!" track to cue, sometimes two or three times, after a nasty pitch. Not only could Hedges call pitches without putting a finger down. He could have a mini conversation not meant for public consumption with his pitchers.

PitchCom co-founder John Hankins estimated a third of MLB teams by now have recorded their own tracks. *The Athletic's* survey of ALCS and NLCS clubs determined the Diamondbacks and Astros use PitchCom's standard tracks; the Phillies recorded two sets, with catcher J.T. Realmuto in English and interpreter Diego Etedgui in Spanish; and the Rangers had Murray voice theirs.

Not that every player could tell. Rangers pitchers **Andrew Heaney and Chris Stratton** both figured they were hearing PitchCom's voice-over guy.

"I didn't know you could change the voice," Stratton said.

"I've never thought to ask," Heaney added.

These are the most important pitches of the year, thrown by the world's foremost experts of their craft, and even the pitchers sometimes don't know whose voice is inside their heads.

In the seconds before every defining play this postseason — from strikeouts to homers to all manners of baseball madness — come a couple clicks from a catcher's nine-button keypad, a signal transmitted to devices worn by the pitcher-catcher battery and up to three fielders, and the sound in their ears of a small but clear voice engineered to rise above the roar of 40,000 faithful.

Here's a short video of a receiver with English, Japanese and Spanish tracks

<https://twitter.com/i/status/1712977681732796631>

In Game 2 of the AL Wild Card Series, Twins starter **Sonny Gray** awaited a full-count pitch to the Blue Jays' **Bo Bichette** with two outs and runners on first and second. Catcher **Ryan Jeffers** took a sign from the dugout and tapped it into PitchCom. In the field, Gray and shortstop **Carlos Correa** heard bullpen coach Colby Suggs' voice over PitchCom: *Timing pick to second base*.

With the Target Field crowd on its feet and Bichette wagging his bat, Correa crashed second base. Gray spun. Correa caught Gray's throw and applied the tag to a diving, dead-to-rights **Vladimir Guerrero Jr.** Rally thwarted, the Twins went on to win their first playoff series since 2004.

Hankins, speaking generally and not about specific MLB clubs, said teams regularly ask him prior to the postseason for a few new tracks. "They'll say, for example, 'We're facing a team that might bunt a lot, so we want some bunt plays. Can you have these recorded?'" Hankins said. The voice-over artist will record the tracks, which Hankins then sends to a sound engineer in Nashville to enhance them. The teams typically have the requested tracks within 24 hours.

Because Hankins kept getting other teams asking for the same tracks later, he decided to build a PitchCom library for teams to pull from. The library now has more than 200 tracks — pitch types, locations, pick-off moves, bunt plays and even a few exhortations.

Still, some teams prefer to customize further — if they can figure out how to do it.

In the spring of 2022, Charlie Madden just wanted to be useful.

A 24th-round pick out of Mercer, Madden reached Double A as a player before transitioning to Red Sox bullpen catcher. His first official assignment to a staff locker room just happened to be the same spring when PitchCom was introduced as a possibility at the major league level.

"I was just always looking to be more a part of the team and add value anywhere," Madden said. "So, I just grabbed the manual."

Want to avoid calling PitchCom headquarters for customization? Have a 26-year-old pro catcher figure it out. Madden tinkered with the device enough that when manager Alex Cora decided in April 2022 he wanted to start using it in games, Madden was ready. The Red Sox were on the road, so Madden sat pregame in the left-field pavilion of St. Petersburg's Tropicana Field and recorded tracks using downloaded software and a set of headphones with an attached microphone. PitchCom recommends each track be less than a second.

"You have to kind of play with being clear, while being loud, while being short and concise," Madden said. "It's not hard, but it takes a little feel for it."

PitchCom has four modes, each essentially a playlist offering between 18 and 27 signals, but the most basic setup is this: there are nine buttons arranged in a three-by-three grid. Each button can give two different signals. Press 1, and it might signal "fastball." Press and hold 1, and it

might signal “inside.” Through various combinations of presses and buttons, catchers can signal pitch type and location, call a pickoff play, or simply send a message. Once Hedges got some press, others followed suit. Other teams asked Hankins for their own “F— yeah” track. That was an interesting ask for the voice-over guy. (That track is now available in the library.) One team requested something to the effect of: *Throw it over the plate, you [expletive].*”

This spring, the Red Sox pranked one of their pitchers by customizing PitchCom to make every button say: *Are you mad?*

Hankins, PitchCom’s co-founder and co-inventor, admits the device isn’t all that complicated. The receiver, he said, “is just a glorified mp3 player.” Plug it into a computer. Drag and drop tracks to align with specific buttons. Done.

But there are a bunch of buttons — the keypads have nine, and the receivers have volume buttons, a power button and a button to shift between modes — and it all has occasionally led to some confusion. Blue Jays starter **Chris Bassitt** was calling his own pitches until midway through this season, using a keypad affixed to his belt. In his April 7 start, Bassitt committed a pitch-clock violation before his first pitch, then asked for a new PitchCom device, then started the game with a walk and a homer. The issue: He’d put his PitchCom on the wrong mode.

Other pitchers have accidentally switched modes or turned off their receivers. They are particularly prone to this during sticky-stuff checks, as PitchCom devices can fall out of caps and into hands that can expertly manipulate curveballs yet often clumsily disrupt a tiny bit of technology.

A common request Hankins has heard — mostly from fans, but sometimes from teams — is to have a more authoritative voice for PitchCom’s standard tracks. He gets tweets about James Earl Jones a lot. (That one’s not in the budget.) A couple teams tried a voice changer, but in action it always sounded a little off. The Giants had minor league coach Craig Albernaz, who has a thick Boston accent, voice their PitchCom tracks for spring training. “SLYDAH, SLYDAH, BACKFOOT,” catcher Blake Sabol told MLB.com, mimicking Albernaz. “When I was getting quizzed by my fiancée, she was like, ‘Did you change the accent on this thing?’ And I was like, ‘No, that’s my catching coach.’” The Giants switched to Fernando Perez, their director of video coaching, for the regular season so they’d have the same voice for English and Spanish tracks.

Orioles reliever **Danny Coulombe**, whose team used the stock PitchCom tracks this season, suggested a British accent. Or Siri. “That might get annoying,” he said. Or, better yet, “Why can’t we choose our own voice? That would be pretty cool.” Good news for Coulombe: he can.

Padres closer **Josh Hader** voiced his own mode this season, recording his pitch types and locations on the Voice Memos app on his iPhone. So, while the rest of the Padres pitchers heard catcher **Austin Nola**’s commands, Hader heard himself.

“It’s self-talk for whatever you’re going to do,” Hader said. “If you keep telling yourself what you’re going to do, your mind is going to tell your body that’s what you’re going to do. Whether you do it or not, I mean, that’s after the fact. But when you only have that one thought on what you got to do, you’re not putting thoughts elsewhere and losing focus on what the goal is.”

Hankins said teams can get as creative as they like. The guidance he offers is that each term should be quick and clear. He said some ballparks during the postseason can reach 125 decibels, which is somewhere in between a motorcycle and a jet engine. It’s loud. PitchCom has to be louder.

Which is odd for a device specifically designed for secrecy.

“It feels like it’s screaming in my ear,” Red Sox pitcher **Garrett Whitlock** said. “Can the hitter hear this?”

Paranoid pitchers have been known to check in with their infielders to make sure no one else can detect the PitchCom calls. But that’s not the only adjustment. With the pitch clock limiting the battery to 15 or 20 seconds between pitches, depending on whether there’s a runner on base, there’s no time for a protracted negotiation between pitcher and catcher. There’s sometimes a slight delay between the pitch type and the pitch location — catchers might take a second to make sure they initially hit the right button — and shaking off a pitch means starting over again.

“With 15 seconds, you only get two or three shakes before you’re like, I gotta throw whatever they call,” Whitlock said.

Hedges, the voice that launched a thousand f— yeahs, was traded to the Rangers this summer. After recording PitchCom tracks for the Guardians in 2022 and the Pirates in 2023, Hedges arrived in Texas at the trade deadline and discovered they were all set. He wasn’t sure who had recorded the Rangers’ tracks this season. Hedges knew it wasn’t the stock PitchCom voice, and it wasn’t one of the other catchers, **Jonah Heim** or **Mitch Garver**, but he couldn’t place it.

Hedges went about his business, punching buttons and framing pitches. He was an effective, defense-first catcher back in the days when catchers called pitches with their fingers. But he thinks PitchCom has made his communication with pitchers even better.

“It makes it personal,” he said. “It just makes it specific so there’s no questions about what you wanted. If you just put a pinkie down, that doesn’t say a whole lot. There’s a lot inferred. There’s a lot to wonder. Ideally, you need to be on the same page before that. With PitchCom, it’s specific.”

And it didn’t take long for Hedges to discover that the “F— yeah” button, the one he’d created two stops prior in Cleveland, had beaten him to Texas. His exclamation preceded him.

Only, Stratton, traded over from St. Louis at the trade deadline, said he's still never heard it.

"Maybe I haven't thrown a good enough pitch," he said.

CLUTCH GENE? THE HOT HAND? WHAT THE NUMBERS SAY ABOUT OLD-SCHOOL PLAYOFF BELIEFS.

Eno Sarris, The Athletic

In one corner, fighting with the force of their convictions and the accumulated knowledge of decades of historical examples, are the eye test and the old school. In the other, armed with spreadsheets and cold, hard numbers, are the analytics and the new school. Let's get ready to rumble.

That's a bit overstated. Every team uses scouting and analytics in their quest to win. But the balance between the two is not the same for every team. The same could be said at this point for any pundit, analyst, or writer, really. Numbers are so ever-present in player development and coaching processes that there aren't many players left who are strictly old-school, at least not in major-league clubhouses.

Still, there are battlegrounds where the old-schoolers and the numbers don't see eye to eye. Those skirmishes are bubbling up in places like San Francisco, where an aggressively analytics-based coaching approach may have suffered a setback with manager **Gabe Kapler's** firing, and Toronto, where the players expressed surprise about their dealing pitcher being taken out of a playoff game early. And then there are the countless broadcasts and social media spaces where deeply held beliefs about baseball are being put up against what the research finds about those ideas.

Let's look at four of those long-held beliefs in baseball and what the numbers reveal about them.

A clutch gene exists

Philadelphia's **Bryce Harper** is clutch. We can see the homers, the panache, and those gaudy postseason numbers that make him one of the three or 10 best of all time, depending on where you place the playing time cutoff.

"There's a reason you get the nickname, 'The Showman,'" Bryson Stott said about Harper's growing October legacy. "He's just one of those guys where it feels like any time you need a run, you need a hit, you need a home run, he's always up. And then he always does what he's supposed to do."

According to the best research out there, though, “clutch” is not a repeatable thing. It’s clear on the team level that situational hitting comes and goes — you have several hitters, all going in different directions, dealing with various issues and facing teams of varying quality.

There’s no relationship between a team’s batting average with runs in scoring position over the last month and their batting average with runs in scoring position in the future. And it doesn’t help if you look at the last two or three months. It’s all just chaos.

More surprising to some might be that the numbers have yet to show any relationship between a specific hitter’s ability to be clutch and their future clutchiness. Yes, there is a “clutch” stat, which looks at how players perform in close and late (high-leverage) situations compared to how they perform in less critical situations, and yes, Harper was first in that stat this year. He was 52nd in 2022. He was 176th out of 188 in 2021.

These wild swings in year-to-year numbers were replicated in the research. Different analyses have looked at how “sticky” clutch is year to year and have found virtually no correlation between one year and the next. One found that it does not exist, but if it did, it would be on the order of single-digit points of batting average. Even the studies that found an effect didn’t find a large effect. Statistician Nate Silver found that clutch hitting was maybe two percent of a player’s overall quality (which would agree with the single-digit batting average hypothesis). Another study found that clutch exists, but you need 7,600 plate appearances in the clutch before you can believe it. Harper has had 651 high-leverage plate appearances in his career.

There’s a big difference between proving it doesn’t exist and not being able to show it exists, though, and that’s an important distinction. Our understanding of the physics of ball flight has changed with the improvement of technology; just look at the concepts of seam-shifted wake and how that led to the sweeper pitch boom as evidence. Sometimes, further study results in new findings.

What if we had a better way to study clutch?

“I firmly believe that if put heart monitors on us in the games, you’d find that some people are just more chill than others in big moments,” outfielder **Brett Phillips** told me this year.

Right now, wearable tech is not allowed in game situations, but theoretically, if it were, we might find that some hitters have different cardiac characteristics in high-leverage moments. Finding that biological processes were ultimately different between players in clutch situations would be a good way to prove it exists, but that is also fraught with implications when it comes to measuring those processes, who owns that data, and how front offices could use that information when it comes to paying players.

For now, clutch exists in our hearts but not really in our spreadsheets.

Pitchers get into grooves

This one is similar to clutch but on the pitching side. A pitcher is dealing, hitting his spots, cruising through the innings, and up comes a crucial decision for the manager. Blue Jays starter **José Berríos** struck out five while allowing just three hits to the first 11 batters he faced in Game 2 of the Wild Card Series against the Twins, and his manager took him out of the game. When asked later if he understood the reasoning behind the move — ostensibly, the thinking was that the righty was about to face a lefty for the second time in the game, and pitchers are progressively worse against hitters the more they see them, and it was a must-win game — the pitcher said:

“Honestly, I don’t know,” Berríos said after the game. “But other than that, I can’t control that. So, like I say, I did my best ... So that’s what it is.”

Other managers have made different choices and been praised for it.

But history is littered with people yelling about taking a pitcher out too early or too late. What do the numbers say about the likelihood that a dealing pitcher will continue doing what he’s doing? Mostly, they say: “You’re only hot till you’re not.” The most robust study about this showed that there was virtually no difference in seventh-inning production between pitchers who dealt for six and pitchers who were not dealing and that managers haven’t, as a group, demonstrated the ability to make that decision successfully.

This flies in the face of many pitchers’ lived experiences.

“We can all see it. We know it. I know it when I’m dealing and when I’m not,” said one veteran starting pitcher when asked about the feeling.

Again, maybe more research will change the message. There’s already been a new and surprising study on the subject that suggests that this might be a legit thing. Writer and analyst Rob Arthur found that starting pitchers can have the “hot hand” and that the best way to measure it is the radar gun; when pitchers have their best velocity, they perform much better than when they don’t, and they go through somewhat predictable streaks. A pitcher may be fundamentally different when they have a better fastball, and it’s not really a hot hand, but that’s semantics.

The study that’s yet to be done (publicly, at least) is to take Arthur’s work and see if, by using radar gun readings, managers could make better in-game decisions on when to take a pitcher out. Berríos? He’d thrown just seven fastballs and they were all a tick higher than his seasonal average, and he ended his short start with the second-best fastball velocity of the season.

It’s totally possible that the numbers say he should’ve been left in.

A hitter can “own” a pitcher

Rangers starter **Nathan Eovaldi** dispatched the first three Astros in Game 2 of this year's ALCS in 11 pitches. Then **Yordan Alvarez** came up and demolished a high fastball. Eovaldi dispatched eight of the next nine and then ... struck out Alvarez on five pitches, none of them fastballs. In their last matchup, Alvarez walked. In all three cases, the batter seemed to be stepping in confidently against the pitcher. With good reason:

Yordan Alvarez is 8-for-11 against Eovaldi.

But we've also seen a good example of the opposite: a great hitter stepping in against a nasty pitcher, with a trail of defeat in their rearview mirror.

Saying that the numbers are entirely meaningless is not quite right. The numbers between a batter and pitcher tell the story of what happened in the past, so there's meaning there. It's part of telling the story of Turner's night and how good he was. In terms of the narrative, batter versus pitcher numbers can help spin the yarn. But how impactful are those numbers, even in telling a story, if they have no predictive quality?

The research suggests that, almost always, past results between a specific hitter and a specific pitcher are much too small a sample size to have any statistical meaning. Tom Tango, MLBAM's Senior Data Architect, once co-authored a book called "The Book: Playing the Percentages in Baseball" and after looking into the issue mathematically, the text had this to say about batter versus pitcher numbers:

... having twenty to thirty PA against an opponent is a drop in the bucket, and it tells you almost nothing about what to expect. The player has a long history, say 1,500 PA, against the rest of the league. Any way you slice it, you can't equate, or even compare, twenty-five PA against one opponent to 1,500 PA against the rest of the league. ... When a particular batter has faced a particular pitcher two hundred or three hundred times, come back and we'll talk. Maybe.

Put this way, it makes intuitive and statistical sense, but that isn't to say that other research doesn't provide us with some asterisks.

Back in 2013, Andrew Koo at Baseball Prospectus noticed that the Oakland Athletics were loading up with fly-ball hitters and linked that with a passage in "The Book" that pointed out that fly-ball hitters are especially good against ground-ball pitchers to suggest that the A's were countering the league's ground-ball pitchers with hitters who had swing paths that could lift those low pitches.

I talked to then-Mariners starter **Chris Young** ahead of a 2014 start against those Athletics and told him throwing his high-80s fastball up in the zone was daring, considering the risk of homers up there.

“That’s your opinion,” he told me. “I’ll show you a chart on every hitter that shows you that most hitters have a hole in the zone up.”

He then scrolled through heat maps on an iPad to show me he wasn’t worried about high fastballs against any of the A’s hitters other than Coco Crisp. Which was interesting, because despite being a high ball hitter, Crisp was only 3-for-15 with three singles against Young at the time. In any case, the current GM of the Rangers was an early adopter of how many analysts are now thinking about batter versus pitcher matchups.

Teams have gotten even more sophisticated with this type of analysis. They have linked swing paths to pitcher strengths and even started incorporating biomechanical markers in their batter versus pitcher models. Imagine something along the lines of: *this hitter’s hips commit early, but his hands are adjustable so he’s theoretically better against this pitcher’s changeups than breaking balls with bigger movement profiles*. Once you start getting into process versus process comparisons, you can potentially start to model that batter versus pitcher matchup and say something predictive about a future interaction.

But that’s a lot more complicated than saying *this guy is 3-for-10 off that pitcher*.

Hitters get cold after four days off

After a divisional round in which three of the four teams with byes lost — and did so while seeing their bats go ice cold — this belief is perhaps the most contentious. It’s definitely true that Atlanta, after being one of the best offenses of all time during the regular season, hit .186/.255/.264 in their short series against the Phillies, and that the Dodgers hit only .177/.248/.250 against the Diamondbacks. It’s also true that baseball is the most chaotic sport.

From April 18 to April 21, **Matt Olson, Ronald Acuña Jr., Mookie Betts and Freddie Freeman** combined for 58 plate appearances and a .143/.260/.262 line. In the playoffs, that foursome combined for 56 plate appearances and a .137/.241/.157 line. poop happens!

Anything can happen in a short series, too. One study estimated that for MLB to match the NBA’s rate of the better-ranked team advancing in the playoffs, they’d have to play a best-of-75 series, so it’s possible even the American League East’s 11-game losing streak could all be due to chance.

Therefore, studying whether players get cold during those layoffs is fraught with issues. Ben Clemens at FanGraphs found that teams with four-plus days of rest are 24-11 against teams with two or fewer days of rest, and that number is 21-10 in the Wild Card era — and that is through this year, so it doesn’t suggest that teams do poorly overall with byes. That makes sense because it gives their pitchers time to rest and recover, but it also doesn’t look at hitters specifically.

“I’m a firm believer that more than three days off of facing a live pitcher can only hurt you,” said Giants outfielder Mitch Haniger this week. “We just never do it other than the All-Star break, and most guys talk about how they feel like crap in the box coming out of the break. Multiple days off can’t help your timing. It may help your body or mind.”

Again, the numbers don’t back the subjective experience. Thanks to STATS Perform, we have baseball’s OPS on the day after the break, compared to the season overall, in each of the last three years.

Season	Season OPS	OPS First game after the All-Star Game
2021	.728	.793
2022	.706	.772
2023	.734	.748

The August OPS across this sample was .731, so it doesn’t look like hitters suffer as a group coming out of the All-Star Game. Plus, teams with byes have ways to keep their hitters fresh.

“The teams that had the Wild Card off were working out and likely getting live at-bats during the downtime. And if they weren’t, that was a mistake,” said recently retired hitter Jed Lowrie earlier this week. **Tommy Pham** echoed the sentiment, saying it was on the coaches to help keep the players sharp during downtime.

This one is obvious, though: there’s more research required, and the players talking about getting cold should be considered. Those who work on how the body adapts to its peak outcomes suggest that some adaptations — like peak sprint speed — can disappear within as soon as five days. But again, can training keep those adaptations without the benefit of the best live pitching? Do you have to face someone as good as Zack Wheeler live five days before you face him, or can a lesser pitcher throwing live BP help you keep your timing?

“No good answer,” said Diamondbacks third baseman **Evan Longoria**.

And that’s an important thing to remember: the numbers only give us their best possible answer right now. As data and tech improve, the answers might change. There’s an asterisk on each of these arguments that points to future research and more nuanced truths. The collective beliefs of the players engaged in the game should never be discounted fully. Instead, these disagreements should prove that there’s more work to be done here, more research to be explored and that these arguments should continue evolving.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE ANSWERS

Team By Team Career Hits Leader—How many can you get?

Team	Career (entire career, not just with team he is hits leaders)	
Arizona D'Backs	1990-2008	Luis Gonzalez, 1337 hits with Arizona
Atlanta Braves	1954-1976	Hank Aaron, 3600
Baltimore Orioles	1981-2001	Cal Ripken Jr., 3184
Boston Red Sox	1961-1983	Carl Yastrzemski, 3419
Chicago Cubs	1871-1897	Cap Anson, 3012
Chicago White Sox	1930-1950	Luke Appling, 2748
Cincinnati Reds	1963-1986	Pete Rose, 3358
Cleveland Indians	1896-1916	Nap Lajoie, 2047
Colorado Rockies	1997-2013	Todd Helton, 2519
Detroit Tigers	1905-1928	Ty Cobb, 3900
Houston Astros	1988-2007	Craig Biggio, 3090
Kansas City Royals	1973-1993	George Brett, 3154
Los Angeles Angels	1994-2010	Garret Anderson, 2368
Los Angeles Dodgers	1906-1927	Zack Wheat, 2804
Miami Marlins	1996-2010	Luis Castillo, 1273
Milwaukee Brewers	1974-1993	Robin Yount, 3142
Minnesota Twins	1984-1995	Kirby Puckett, 2304
New York Mets	2004-2018	David Wright, 1636
New York Yankees	1995-2014	Derek Jeter, 3383

Oakland A's	1964-1983	Bert Campaneris, 1882
Philadelphia Phillies	2000-2016	Jimmy Rollins, 2238
Pittsburg Pirates	1955-1972	Roberto Clemente, 3000
San Diego Padres	1982-2001	Tony Gwynn, 3141
San Francisco Giants	1948-1973	Willie Mays, 3187
Seattle Mariners	2001-2019	Ichiro Suzuki, 2533
St. Louis Cards	1941-1963	Stan Musial, 3630
Tampa Bay Rays	2002-2016	Carl Crawford, 1480
Texas Rangers	2000-2013	Michael Young, 2230
Toronto Blue Jays	1983-2001	Tony Fernandez, 1583
Washington Nationals	2005-2021	Ryan Zimmerman, 1846

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