

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

12.24.2023

Good morning baseball fans,

Abbreviated Christmas edition.

This week money-money-money--the Dodgers spend a quick \$1 billion on two Japanese stars, highest paid players, luxury tax.

A Longer Read thinking about the Dodgers.

Pour a coffee, buzz through some fun baseball stuff and go enjoy family and friends. Cheers,

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE

(answers at bottom)

Name the country's career HR leader

USA 762

Dominican Republic: 703

Cuba: 569

Venezuela: 511

Puerto Rico (U.S.): 473

Canada: 383

Japan: 175

MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

(from Peter Abraham of the Boston Globe) Merry Christmas to former major leaguers **J.T. Snow, Pedro Feliz, Jamey Carroll, Matt Holliday, Dasher Troy, Dick Rudolph**, and, of course, **Steve Christmas**.

At 19 years and 179 days, **Mickey Mantle** was the youngest Yankee to make his Major League debut as an Opening Day starter when he appeared in manager **Casey Stengel**'s lineup on April 17, 1951.

In 2023, **Anthony Volpe** became the fourth-youngest Yankee to make his Major League debut as an Opening Day starter.

In addition to Volpe (21 years, 336 days), **Ben Chapman** (21 years, 111 days on Opening Day in 1930) and **Frank Crosetti** (21 years, 191 days on Opening Day in 1932) have been the other Yanks to debut as Opening Day starters at age 21 or younger.

Last year the Blue Jays went 21-31 against the AL east—they were 2 wins short of making the playoffs.

Last year's World Series...over 1,500 pitches thrown...zero pitch timer violations.

Former Blue Jay/now free agent righty **Jordan Hicks**' sinker averages 100 mph. He threw the fastest 6 sinkers in MLB last year.

Former Twin/now free agent **Sonny Gray** threw a sweeper 576 times. Batters hit .097 with a .118 slugging and whiffed 41 percent of the time they swung.

One reason the Dodgers were hot to acquire **Tyler Glasnow**-- Batters hit a ridiculous .095 with a .190 slugging percentage off his curve in 2023.

Aroldis Chapman for the Reds in 2014. Of relievers who pitched 50+ innings in a season, tops with 17.6 strikeouts per 9 innings—basically 2 strikeouts for every inning pitched. He struck out 52.5% of all batters he faced, an MLB all-time high.

Looking at the other top 25 reliever seasons (50+ IP/highest % of batters struck out), ranging from Chapman's 52.5% to 41.7%:

Chapman – 5 seasons in top 25

Josh Hader – 3
Craig Kimbrel – 3
Dellin Betances – 2
Edwin Diaz – 2
Kenley Jansen – 2
Andrew Miller – 2

How do finish over .500 with two 20 game losers on your staff?

Be from an era when starters got almost all the decisions and pitched in more games and threw more innings.

Observe if you will, the 1901 Baltimore Orioles.

Finished 68-65 but four starters got 122 of 133 decisions.

Joe McGinnity goes 26-20. **Harry Howell** 14-20.

Mets hit with record \$101 million luxury tax bill

Billionaire owner Steve Cohen is on the hook for a record-high penalty of nearly \$101 million.

A record eight major-league teams will pay the luxury tax. Joining the Mets are the San Diego Padres, New York Yankees, Los Angeles Dodgers, Philadelphia Phillies, Toronto Blue Jays, Atlanta Braves and the World Series champion Texas Rangers. The number would have been nine had the Los Angeles Angels not successfully eked beneath the \$233 million luxury tax threshold, thanks to a flurry of late-season moves to dump salary.

The Mets set off to win their first World Series since 1986. But by the end, the only new title they could claim was for the highest luxury tax payroll of all time: \$374.4 million. That led to a tax bill that more than doubled the previous record of \$43.6 million paid by the Dodgers after the 2015 season.

Of the eight teams to pay a penalty, the three with the highest tax bills missed the playoffs: the Mets (\$100.8 million), Padres (\$39.7 million) and Yankees (\$32.4 million). The Dodgers (\$19.4 million), Phillies (\$7.0 million), Blue Jays (\$5.5 million) and Braves (\$3.2 million) made the postseason.

The Rangers (\$1.8 million) won the franchise's first championship.

The eight teams combined are on the hook to pay \$209.8 in penalties — shattering the previous record from last season, when teams paid a combined \$75.8 million.

The first time the Dodgers signed a player to a record contract in the free-agent era, in February 1989, it was **Orel Hershiser**'s three-year, \$7.9 million deal. The next offseason, his average salary (\$2.633 million) was eclipsed in succession by seven players — **Bret Saberhagen, Kirby Puckett, Mark Langston, Mark Davis, Dave Stewart, Will Clark and Don Mattingly**.

Each step was less than \$400,000 over the previous high, with Mattingly's salary reaching an average of \$3.86 million.

The shock value of **Shohei Ohtani**'s \$700 million had echoes of December 2000, when the Texas Rangers signed **Alex Rodriguez** for 10 years and \$252 million. That was exactly double the value of Kevin Garnett's contract with the Minnesota Timberwolves, which had been the record in professional sports.

Before Rodriguez's deal, the highest average annual salary in baseball had been \$17 million, for **Carlos Delgado** with the Toronto Blue Jays. As a Yankee in 2007, Rodriguez opted out of his contract and got a raise to \$27.5 million per year. It took until January 2014 for a player to reach \$30 million per season, with the Dodgers and **Clayton Kershaw**.

Since the Dodgers rewarded their 1988 World Series MVP, Orel Hershiser, with baseball's top salary in February 1989, 30 other players — some more than once — have held the title of highest-paid player in MLB. (The salary listed is the average annual value for the term of the deal and does not reflect deferrals.)

\$70 million	Shohei Ohtani	Dodgers	\$700M, 10 years	December 2023
\$43.3 million	Justin Verlander	Mets	\$86.7M, 2 years	December 2022
\$43.3 million	Max Scherzer	Mets	\$130M, 3 years	November 2021
\$36 million	Gerrit Cole	Yankees	\$324M, 9 years	December 2019

\$35.5 million	Mike Trout	Angels	\$426.5M, 12 years	March 2019
\$34.4 million	Zack Greinke	Diamondbacks	\$206.5M, 6 years	December 2015
\$31 million	David Price	Red Sox	\$217M, 7 years	December 2015
\$31 million	Miguel Cabrera	Tigers	\$248M, 8 years	March 2014
\$30.7 million	Clayton Kershaw	Dodgers	\$215M, 7 years	January 2014
\$27.5 million*	Alex Rodriguez	Yankees	\$275M, 10 years	December 2007
\$25.2 million	Alex Rodriguez	Rangers	\$252M, 10 years	December 2000
\$17 million	Carlos Delgado	Blue Jays	\$68M, 4 years	October 2000
\$15.45 million	Roger Clemens	Yankees	\$30.9M, 2 years	August 2000
\$15 million	Kevin Brown	Dodgers	\$105M, 7 years	December 1998
\$13.33 million	Mo Vaughn	Angels	\$80M, 6 years	November 1998
\$13 million	Mike Piazza	Mets	\$91M, 7 years	October 1998
\$12.5 million	Pedro Martinez	Red Sox	\$75M, 6 years	December 1997
\$11.5 million	Greg Maddux	Braves	\$57.5M, 5 years	August 1997
\$11.45 million	Barry Bonds	Giants	\$22.9M, 2 years	February 1997

\$11 million	Albert Belle	White Sox	\$55M, 5 years	November 1996
\$8.5 million	Ken Griffey Jr.	Mariners	\$34M, 4 years	January 1996
\$7.29 million	Barry Bonds	Giants	\$43.75M, 6 years	December 1992
\$7.1 million	Ryne Sandberg	Cubs	\$28.4M, 4 years	March 1992
\$5.8 million	Bobby Bonilla	Mets	\$29M, 5 years	December 1991
\$5.38 million	Roger Clemens	Red Sox	\$21.521M, 4 years	February 1991
\$4.7 million	Jose Canseco	A's	\$23.5M, 5 years	June 1990
\$3.86 million	Don Mattingly	Yankees	\$19.3M, 5 years	April 1990
\$3.75 million	Will Clark	Giants	\$15M, 4 years	January 1990
\$3.5 million	Dave Stewart	A's	\$7M, 2 years	January 1990
\$3.25 million	Mark Davis	Royals	\$13M, 4 years	December 1989
\$3.2 million	Mark Langston	Angels	\$16M, 5 years	December 1989
\$3 million	Kirby Puckett	Twins	\$9M, 3 years	November 1989
\$2.97 million	Bret Saberhagen	Royals	\$8.9M, 3 years	November 1989
\$2.633 million	Orel Hershisier	Dodgers	\$7.9M, 3 years	February 1989

**Note: Roger Clemens had signed a prorated, one-year, \$28 million contract with the Yankees in May 2007, but the season had already begun and he was not paid the full amount.*

Albert Belle, who got a five-year, \$55 million contract from the Chicago White Sox in November 1996. The \$11 million average shattered the previous high — \$8.5 million for the Seattle Mariners' Ken Griffey Jr. — and stipulated that Belle always remain among the three highest-paid players in the sport.

Joey Votto may or may not retire this offseason. In my opinion, he should. Not because he is 40 years old and a shell of what he once was performance-wise, but rather because of his one-franchise legacy. The Hall of Fame-worthy first baseman was drafted by the Cincinnati Reds out of a Toronto high school in 2002, and two decades later he's only called one organization home. Much like **Dwight Evans** having closed out his career with the Orioles after 19 seasons with the Red Sox, and Ron Santo spending a year with the White Sox after 14 with the Cubs, it just wouldn't seem right for Votto to retire from another team.

Does Votto have anything left in the tank? Moreover, might he find one last opportunity to finally play in a World Series (hello, Blue Jays?) especially appealing? Regardless of the answer to those questions, his 17 seasons spent exclusively with the Cincinnati Reds is quite a legacy.

Royals may have grabbed a free agent bargain.

Jordan Montgomery is 19-17 with a 3.34 ERA over the past two seasons.

Michael Wacha is 25-6 with a 3.27 ERA. Wacha got 2 years at \$16 million each from Kansas City. You can bet Montgomery will command a whole lot more.

In 1959, Milwaukee Braves right-hander **Lew Burdette** allowed 38 home runs and issued 38 walks. He made 39 starts and threw 289-and-two-thirds innings.

In 1977, California Angels right-hander **Nolan Ryan** allowed 12 home runs and issued 204 walks. He made 37 starts and threw 299 innings.

Willie Horton was a hard swinging outfielder who played 15 of his 18 seasons with the Tigers.

In 1968 he hit 36 HRs for the World Series winners, finished 4th in the MVP race behind 30 game winner **Denny McLain**, teammate **Bill Freehan** and **Ken Harrelson** of the Red Sox.

Facing his former Tigers team on June 5, 1979 Horton belted a ball at the Kingdome in Seattle that disappeared in the roof in left-center field. Initially ruled a HR—the 300th of his career—it was changed to a single when determined it had struck a speaker.

Horton shook it off and the next day in the 1st inning he took a **Jack Morris** pitch over the left field wall. Horton retired after the 1980 season with 325 career HRs.

(leveraging notes from Joe Sheehan newsletter) Scanning the innings pitched leaders – high and low MLB leaders

Pre-1900

1884	Old Hoss Radbourne	678 innings
1900	Joe McGinty	343

1900-1920

1904	Jack Chesbro	454
1919	Hippo Vaughan	290

1921-1940

1923	George Uhle	357
1929	Watty Clark	279

1941-1960

1946	Bob Feller	371
1959	Early Wynn	259

1961-1980

1971	Mickey Lolich	376
1961	Lew Burdette	262

1981-2000

1985	Bert Blyleven	293
1984	Chuck Finley	183

2001-2020

2002	Randy Johnson	260
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2023 league leaders were **Gerrit Cole** 207 and **Logan Webb** 216.

Combined, the top ten starters by innings last year threw 2,013 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings, or an average of 201 $\frac{1}{3}$. There were just five 200-inning pitchers across the entire sport, and remember, we're three years past the shortened season that messed with workloads into 2021 and even 2022.

Ten years ago, the top ten pitchers threw 2,240 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings, an average of 224. That's a drop of 10%, or 1% a year over the course of a decade. In 2013, just ten years ago, 36 pitchers threw 200 innings, more than one a team and seven times the number who did so last year.

Go back 30 years to 1993, which is a key year in baseball history. The league expanded, and offensive levels jumped from Deadball III in 1988-92. The top ten starters averaged 254 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings, and in a league with two fewer teams than we have today, 52 pitchers threw 200 innings.

Now, we can take this exercise back to the 1970s, an odd local blip when starters routinely threw 300 innings in a season, or to the 1880s for maximum absurdity. This isn't a "good old days" argument, though. It's math. The baseball season has been 162 games long and required around 1440 innings pitched for more than 60 years. That's a fixed number. Top starters 30 years ago accounted for 17.6% of those innings, and you could find almost two guys a team carrying a big load. Today, they account for 14%, and there's one pitcher per division carrying that load.

Of course 4 man rotations versus today's 5+ has an impact. And as you look at contracts don't just look at the top line number, think about \$ per inning. The Dodgers just got **Tyler Glasnow** from the Rays. They extended Glasnow as part of the deal—he gets \$137 million over 5 years. Glasnow has had Tommy John. He missed $\frac{1}{3}$ of last season with an oblique injury. The Dodgers will want to manage the workload of their investment and hope to keep him fresh for 35 innings in the post season. So maybe he is good for 120 innings in the regular season. At \$27 million plus per year that's a lot of dollars per inning--\$225K per inning. **Gerrit Cole** gets \$36 million for his 207 innings - \$174K per inning. And he represents 87 more innings that the roster doesn't have to cover (and with a pitcher who is less effective presumably than Cole). There is the value of an elite pitcher who delivers volume.

Thinking back to when I was growing up, stud pitchers:

Gaylord Perry	8 seasons over 290 innings pitched, 6 over 300, high 344
Jim Palmer	7 seasons over 280, 4 over 300, high 323
Fergie Jenkins	10 seasons over 250, 5 over 300, high 328
Mickey Lolich	7 seasons over 270, 3 over 300, high 376
Phil Niekro	11 seasons over 250, 3 over 300, high 342

Wilbur Wood	3 seasons over 300, high 376
Sandy Koufax	3 seasons over 300, high 335
Nolan Ryan	5 seasons over 280, 2 over 300, high 332
Steve Carlton	11 seasons over 250, 2 over 300, high 346
Catfish Hunter	8 seasons over 250, 2 over 300, high 328
Bob Gibson	10 seasons over 240, 2 over 300, high 314
Mel Stottlemyre	9 seasons over 250, high of 303
Whitey Ford	6 seasons over 240, high of 283

Makes Coles \$36 million for 207 innings all the more interesting.

The Royals had the second-worst record in baseball in 2023, 56-106, tying the worst mark in franchise history set in 2005. **Zack Greinke** had the misfortune of being on both teams. In 2005, he went 5-17 with a 5.80 ERA. In 2023, he went 2-15 with a 5.06 ERA. Those two seasons, just those two seasons, lowered Zack's career-winning percentage by almost 50 points and raised his career ERA from 3.28 to 3.49. That's a lotta damage for two seasons.

At least the Royals are spending in an attempt to get better:

- Starter **Michael Wacha**: two-year, \$32 million deal, including a player option
- Starter **Seth Lugo**: three-year, \$45 million deal, including a player option
- Outfielder **Hunter Renfroe**: two-year, \$13 million deal, including a player option
- Reliever **Will Smith**: one-year, \$5 million deal with performance bonuses
- Reliever **Chris Stratton**: two-year, \$8 million deal, including a player option
- Swiss army knife **Garrett Hampson**: one-year, \$2 million deal with performance bonuses

That's a bowlful of ... well, I don't exactly know. The Royals will be shelling out at least \$47 million on those six players in 2024. On the one hand, that's quite a bit less than the Mets will be paying **Max Scherzer and Justin Verlander**, and neither of those guys are even on the team. On the other hand, these are the Royals, and \$47 million is a bite. That's not THAT much less than the A's and Orioles spent on their entire teams in 2023.

Never underestimate the impact of an energetic coach. The Chesapeake Bay area had become a baseball hotbed in the 1990s after a high school coach named Marvin (Towny) Townsend — a former minor leaguer in the Red Sox chain — founded the area's first Amateur Athletic Union program for advanced players aged 10-15. Within an eight-year span, the program produced

five first-round major league picks: **Michael Cuddyer** (ninth overall to the Twins in the 1997 draft), **David Wright** (38th overall to the Mets in 2001), **B.J. Upton** (second overall to the Devil Rays in 2002), **Justin Upton** (first overall to the Diamondbacks in 2005), and **Ryan Zimmerman** (fourth overall to the Nationals in 2005). The group would remain close as they attained major league stardom, working out together in the offseason.

2005. Yankees switch hitter **Mark Texiera** hits 25 HRs before the All-Star game. He hit them all left handed, all off right handed pitchers. In the All-Star game batting right handed Texiera homers off lefty **Dontrelle Willis**.

Teixeira homered from each side of the plate in a major league game 14 times in his career, the 14th coming on July 31, 2015. His MLB record was equaled 3 weeks later by former teammate **Nick Swisher**.

Home runs from both sides of the plate have happened 363 times in MLB history. Some other notables—**Carlos Beltran** 11, **Chili Davis** 11, **Eddie Murray** 11, **Mickey Mantle** 10, **Jorge Posada** 8, **Bernie Williams** 8, **Jose Ramirez** 7, **Chipper Jones** 6, **Bobby Bonilla** 6, **Reggie Smith** 6,

The single season record for hitting home runs from each side of the plate in the American League **was** three set by **Tony Clark** (1998), Nick Swisher (2007, 2009), and Mark Teixeira (2009). In 2022, **Anthony Santander** broke the tie and is the player in American League history with four switch-hit home run games in the same season. In the National League it's also four, set by **Ken Caminiti** in 1996.

There have been four post-season times when a player homered from both sides of the plate (all playoffs, never been done in the World Series). **Bernie Williams** did it twice, **Milton Bradely** and **Chipper Jones** are the other two.

The record for youngest player in baseball history to ever switch homer in a game belongs to **Jose Reyes** who was 20 years, 78 days old when he did it on August 28, 2003, in the National League. The youngest to do it in an American League game was **Ruben Sierra**, at 20 years, 342 days old, on September 13, 1986.

The record for oldest player in baseball history to ever switch homer in a game belongs to Victor Martinez who was 39 years, 250 days old when he did it on August 30, 2018. The oldest to do it in a National League game was Tony Clark, at 36 years, 295 days old, on April 6, 2009.

Carlos Beltran and Nick Swisher have each accomplished the feat with a Major League record five different teams. Beltran: Mets (5x), Cardinals (3x), Royals (2x), Astros (1x), Yankees (1x). Swisher: Athletics (5x), Yankees (5x), White Sox (2x), Indians (1x), Braves (1x).

There have been only three instances in Major League history where players — **Carlos Baerga** of the Cleveland Indians on April 8, 1993 (7th Inning / versus **Steve Howe & Steve Farr**), **Mark Bellhorn** of the Chicago Cubs on August 29, 2002 (4th Inning / versus **Andrew Lorraine & Jose Cabrera**) and **Kendrys Morales** of the Los Angeles Angels on July 30, 2012 (6th Inning / versus **Roy Oswalt & Robbie Ross**) — hit home runs from both sides of the plate during the same inning.

Interesting observation of the Dodgers. They've quietly gotten old. **Mookie Betts** is 31, **Freddie Freeman** is 34, **Will Smith** is 29, **Max Muncy** is 33. **Shohei Ohtani** is 29. Parallel to this, the Dodgers haven't turned their highly rated farm system products into inexpensive young replacements who might have kept them from needing to commit so much to thirtysomethings.

Five years ago, by age-weighted playing time, the Dodgers had an average age of 28, exactly the league mean. Last season, the Dodgers' average age was 31, the oldest team in baseball by 18 months. That figure is not going down in 2024.

Dodgers 2040 Payroll = \$84,000,000

Freddie Freeman - 50 Years Old - \$5,000,000

Mookie Betts - 47 Years Old - \$11,000,000

Shohei Ohtani - 45 Years Old - \$68,000,000



Hall of Fame slugger **Josh Gibson** was born on Dec. 21, 1911. His career batting average was **.373**. While MLB has acknowledged the Negro Leagues as major leagues and included those stats in all-time record books, **Ty Cobb** is still MLB's official career batting average leader at .367. That's because MLB sets a minimum of 3,000 career plate appearances for the leaderboard. Gibson had 2,526 plate appearances. He is the only player in big league history with at least 2,000 plate appearances to have a batting average over .370.

Gibson played 14 professional seasons, but because Negro League teams played fewer games per year, he played only 602 games over that time. That makes it somewhat difficult to contextualize his stats. But one way to understand his incredible power at the plate is to take his 166 career home runs and calculate what that would translate to over 14 full-length (154-game) AL/NL seasons: 595 home runs.

Lou Gehrig scored 163 runs and drove home another 185 in 1931. If we subtract his 46 homers, we're left with a total of 302, a record that should be immortal, but actually is unknown.

This year's scoring champs were **Marcus Semien** of the Texas Rangers in the American League and **Ronald Acuna Jr.** of the Atlanta Braves in the National League.

Semien scored 122 runs and drove home precisely 100. Subtract his 29 homers, and we've got his scoring total of 193.

Acuna's respective numbers were 149 runs scored, 106 runs batted in, and 41 home runs. The result was a scoring total of 214. **Matt Olson**, Braves, 212 and **Freddie Freeman**, Dodgers, 204 were the only other 2023 players over 200.

MLB Announces Rule Changes for Pitch Clock, Mound Visits, More for 2024 Season

Scott Polacek, bleacher report

While Major League Baseball will not see rule changes that are as drastic in 2024 as they were in 2023 when it introduced the pitch clock, there will reportedly be some differences during the upcoming campaign.

Bob Nightengale of *USA Today* shared some of them, including the reduction of the pitch clock from 20 seconds to 18 when runners are on base. What's more, teams will be given four mound visits per game instead of five:

It should be noted teams that do not have any mound visits remaining in the ninth inning will be given an extra one. What's more, pitchers can step off the mound twice without penalty to reset the pitch clock.

MLB also decided to widen the runner's lane so batters can more directly approach first base and still not worry as much about interference.

Yet the pace-of-play rule tweaks stand out the most.

"MLB proposed minor changes to the Pace of Game Regulations to address an increase in game time as the season progressed," the announcement read. "The average nine-inning game time increased seven minutes from April to September (five minutes after controlling for the number of pitches, breaks and runs scored)."

However, the MLBPA was not thrilled with the proposals:

"Players strongly feel that, following last season's profound changes to the fundamental rules of the game, immediate additional changes are unnecessary and offer no meaningful benefits to fans, players or the competition on the field," MLBPA executive director **Tony Clark** said in the statement.

Ken Rosenthal of The Athletic reported in November that players are primarily concerned that reducing the pitch clock could lead to more injuries with less time to recover. Yet the league said there is no evidence suggesting the reduced clock will lead to more pitcher injuries.

This comes after the average time of nine-inning games last season was under two hours and 40 minutes. That stands in stark contrast to 2022 when the average game was three hours and four minutes or 2021 when the average time was three hours and 10 minutes.

What's more, MLB drew a total attendance of 70,747,365 last season, marking the first time it broke the 70 million mark since 2017.

The Phillies will pay **Aaron Nola** \$172 million for his age 31 to 37 seasons. The Dodgers will pay **Yoshinobu Yamamoto** \$189 million for his age 30 to 36 seasons. The Dodgers, though, also get Yamamoto's 25-29 seasons in the deal. Yamamoto will be a year younger at the end of his deal than Nola at the end of his.

The Angels never had a winning record with **Shohei Ohtani** and went through four managers. But they twice finished second in the American League in attendance and had so many reporters covering the team that two press boxes were required.

Back on Nov. 2, new Red Sox chief baseball officer Craig Breslow described “an unwavering commitment” by ownership to improve the roster. “Full throttle in every possible way,” team chairman Tom Werner said.

Nearly two months later, the Sox have spent \$1 million in free agency, a mere \$1,024,000,000 less than the Dodgers.

Red Sox attendance declined 8.6 percent from 2019 to 2023. They continue to raise the highest prices in baseball. Another last place finish with a boring roster may would not be pretty.

HALL OF FAME

Continuing our series of Hall of Fame reviews by prominent sports writers—this week Joe Sheehan

Over time, though, as Hall conversations became less about players’ careers and more a rehashing of the steroid wars, I lost interest. Even outside that, fully qualified Hall of Famers sat on the ballot for years as the voters failed to update standards for modern player usage. The combination meant I was mostly writing the same articles every winter, and getting more frustrated doing so.

Finally, in 2017, one of the veterans committees elected Bud Selig to the Hall, and that was the end for me. Bud Selig was an architect of the blatantly illegal collusion scheme from 1984-87 that eventually led to an arbitrator awarding \$280 million in damages against the owners. Hardly chastened, Selig then crafted a labor strategy that led to the loss of the 1994 World Series and the embarrassment of MLB using replacement players in 1995. That strategy was deemed illegal by a federal court. It took years for baseball to recover from Selig’s avarice.

From 1984 to 1995, Bud Selig did more damage to baseball than anyone since Chick Gandil. Giving him baseball’s highest honor was a farce, and it remains so today.

That ended my interest in the Hall. I now cover it as news and that’s about it. I even skipped doing a mock ballot last year. (I don’t belong to the gatekeeping guild, so while I have been a baseball writer in America for almost 30 years, I won’t ever have a real ballot. In fairness, I have pretty good company in that.) If you can get to the Hall, and I hope to do so again this winter, it is a wonderful trip. The museum is a treasure, and Cooperstown is wonderful. The plaque room, though, can be skipped.

I recognize that a Hall ballot is a beat a ball writer has to hit each year, so let’s take today to work the ballot. There are 26 players on the ballot, 14 carryovers and 12 new ones. I have long

felt that appearing on a Hall ballot is, in itself, an honor. The practice of giving a token vote to clearly unqualified players on the ballot always seemed redundant to me, and it was a particular problem when there were so many fully qualified Hall of Famers on the ballot. In 2023, that group of respectable but unqualified nominees includes **Jose Bautista, Bartolo Colon, Adrian Gonzalez, Matt Holliday, Victor Martinez, Brandon Phillips, Jose Reyes, James Shields, and David Wright**. These are all among the top 2% of players in baseball history, and they gave countless fans joy.

Returning to the ballot, but in my opinion not qualified for the Hall, are **Francisco Rodriguez, Omar Vizquel, Jimmy Rollins, Torii Hunter, and Mark Buehrle**. Vizquel's spot in this group is based on his playing career; his actual vote total reflects credible accusations against his character that derailed his candidacy. As with the first group, these are all great players, just not Hall of Famers.

That leaves 12 players whose cases should be debated to one degree or another. Of those, I have **Bobby Abreu** and **Billy Wagner** below the line. Abreu is the stathead **Harold Baines**, a player who looks better in WAR than he ever did on the field. I was a fan of Abreu's, and he's certainly better than many of the corner outfielders who have gotten through the front door over time. That's not a good enough reason to elect him. Similarly, **Trevor Hoffman's** presence in the Hall isn't enough for me to put in Wagner, who like so many in his role got the job he did because he wasn't able to do the more valuable job of being a starting pitcher. The line for short relievers stops at **Mariano Rivera**.

I've wavered on both **Andruw Jones** and **Todd Helton**, two players whose statistical cases rest on how you weight specific elements. Jones, by some metrics, is the best defensive outfielder in baseball history. Helton played his entire career for the Rockies, all his home games in the best offensive environment in baseball history. As with so many players on this ballot, they fall into a Hall gray area WAR-wise, where players with lesser careers have skated in and those with more substantial ones have been left out. We don't use these terms much anymore, but I used to consider myself a "small Hall" guy, erring on the side of exclusion. Jones and Helton are players I would not vote for, but whom I also can't see building a case against. Helton, based on recent trends, will surely get in this year or next.

Recognizing that so many Hall cases are 55/45 in one direction or another, with the gray area between "in" and "out" widening each year, makes this process both easier and easier to ignore.

The most difficult case on this year's ballot is that of **Chase Utley**. While he was active, Utley seemed like a Hall of Famer, a do-it-all second baseman who was built for the new evaluative methods. WAR recognized his walks and his doubles and his defense and his stolen-base percentage, the building blocks of a player who was one of the best in baseball at his peak. Utley, though, got a late start as a regular, not playing a full season until he was 26, and he wasn't a good player after 35. In those ten years, though, he averaged six WAR.

In the end, it ends up a very short career for a Hall of Famer. Utley didn't reach 2000 games played or 8000 PA or 2000 hits. As with Jones, you have to buy into Utley's exceptional defensive numbers during his peak to even get him into the mix. As someone who advocates for valuing postseason contributions from 1995 on, Utley's 68 playoff games with a .224/.364/.410 line carry a lot of weight for me. That includes a fantastic 2008 postseason in which he helped the Phillies win the World Series.

Utley gets my vote, though it was closer than I would have expected. He's one of eight players on this ballot I consider to be Hall of Famers:

Adrian Beltre
Carlos Beltran
Joe Mauer
Andy Pettitte
Manny Ramirez
Alex Rodriguez
Gary Sheffield
Chase Utley

Adrian Beltre is one of the greatest third basemen in baseball history, fully qualified by every known standard, and a lock to be elected on the first ballot.

Carlos Beltran is a fully qualified Hall of Famer who, in his first year on the ballot, seems to have been dinged for his involvement in the Astros' sign-stealing scheme. Beltran is a better version of Utley, a player whose ability to draw walks and steal bases efficiently and play great defense is captured in WAR in a way that would likely have been missed by prior generations of fans or voters. Lou Whitaker could have used WAR.

There is no question that **Joe Mauer** had a short career for a Hall of Famer and, within that career, was only a regular catcher for six to eight seasons. Those six to eight seasons, though, were monsters, and it's not as if Mauer was a bad player outside of them. In 15 years, Mauer's lowest WAR total was 1.3. I'm fascinated by careers like this, where the player hit the ground running and never had those rough years at the end where he slipped below replacement level. I don't think Mauer gets in on this year's ballot; I also think he'll be inducted before Buster Posey, another short-career case, reaches the ballot himself.

My **Andy Pettitte** vote is admittedly unusual, and comes down to me weighting 276 innings of 3.81 ERA ball in October more than most. I didn't make the rules. The playoff expansion of 1995, and subsequent ones of 2012 and 2022, changed how we evaluate teams, and it certainly changed how we judge players. If October is all that matters to a broad swath of fans and media, then that has to be reflected in Hall voting. Pettitte, a Hall of Very Good pitcher based on his regular season work, gets over the line because of his playoff record.

Manny Ramirez, Alex Rodriguez, and Gary Sheffield are all fully qualified Hall of Famers based on their play, three of the best right-handed hitters in baseball history. Sheffield's case is slightly more complicated by his being a terrible defender, but he's still over the line. Obviously, all three of these players are being held back by their links to sports drugs, whether rumored, the result of positive tests, or discovered via witch hunts. In all cases, I simply don't care. We have been celebrating cheaters in baseball for 150 years and bronzing them for nearly 90. We have certainly put sports-drug users in the Hall already.

Eventually, some committee is going to be formed that puts the legends of the 1990s and 2000s into the Hall. Time will pass and the moral panic will fade and the drivers of that panic will die off, and all that will be left is the absurdity of some all-time greats being left out of the Hall. I hope, when that happens, all these players tell the Hall to go to hell.

Chase Utley, we covered above.

I'm mad at myself for spending this many words on the Hall of Fame ballot. As I say, go for the museum, because the museum is incredible, but the Hall has lost its ability to honor anyone due to the choices it's made over the last 15 years.

Jay Jaffe comments from FanGraphs

David Wright is the greatest position player in Mets history, a face-of-the-franchise player who holds the team leads in plate appearances, hits, runs, RBI, total bases, walks, and WAR. A first-round pick out of high school in 2001, the Virginia native spent his entire career with the team, making seven All-Star teams, winning two Gold Gloves, and helping the club to a pair of playoff appearances, including their 2015 pennant.

he had already missed substantial chunks of two seasons due to injuries when he was diagnosed with spinal stenosis — a narrowing of the spinal canal — in 2015, his age-31 season. He played just 77 games after the diagnosis, though not for lack of trying; he rehabbed endlessly, undergoing a trio of surgeries on his right shoulder, neck, and back in a 16-month span. Inevitably, the Mets found a new way to shame themselves and connect their superstar to controversy when they dragged their feet in activating him, preferring to collect the insurance money for the latter years of his franchise-record eight-year, \$138 million extension over giving him a dignified exit. Ultimately they relented, and Wright got the sendoff he deserved via a two-game cameo at the end of the 2018 season.

Wright's short career prevented him from accumulating the full resumé that would give him a real shot at election to the Hall of Fame, whether it comes to traditional milestones or advanced stats. He's well shy of 2,000 hits.

Because he played in just 77 games after his age-31 season, Wright wound up with fewer games played (1,585) and plate appearances (6,872) than any post-1960 expansion era position player in the Hall of Fame; he has 91 fewer games and eight fewer plate appearances than 2022 Golden Days Era Committee honoree **Tony Oliva**, the low man in both of those categories. He's got a higher OPS+, WAR, JAWS, and relative ranking at his position than Oliva, who wasn't elected until he was (maybe) 83 years old, 46 years after his final game. Wright isn't as close to 2,000 hits as Oliva (1,917) or even this ballot's **Chase Utley** (1,885), the focal point of my case for short-career, high-peak players.

I do believe Wright was on a Hall of Fame path before the injuries destroyed his career. He was certainly one of the elite players of his era; his 44.4 WAR from 2005–13 is tied with **Robinson Canó** for sixth behind **Albert Pujols**, Utley, **Miguel Cabrera**, Beltré, and **Alex Rodriguez** (just 0.2 behind him) and ahead of Joe Mauer and Beltrán, both of whom will be on my ballot. That's good company, PED infractions notwithstanding.

In 22 big league seasons, **Gary Sheffield** played for eight teams, including the Marlins, Yankees and Braves; he made nine All-Star appearances; and he collected 2,689 hits, 509 homers, 1,676 RBIs and 253 stolen bases. As a member of the Padres in 1992, Sheffield almost won the Triple Crown, took the batting title with a .330 average and finished in the top five in home runs (33) and RBIs (100).

Sheffield played in an era when strikeouts were acceptable, but he never had a 100-strikeout season and finished his career with more walks than strikeouts (1,475 to 1,171). Sheffield has been in the postseason numerous times, and his only World Series title came with the Marlins in 1997.

LONGER READS

JOE POSNANSKI ON THE DODGERS

On Thursday, the Dodgers signed Japanese super-ace **Yoshinobu Yamamoto** to a 12-year contract worth \$325 million. Let's take a brief look at the Dodgers' signings the last few years.

— In July of 2020, the Dodgers gave **Mookie Betts** a 12-year, \$365 million extension.

— In March of 2022, the Dodgers signed **Freddie Freeman** to a six-year, \$162 million contract.

— Back 10 days or so ago, the Dodgers gave **Shohei Ohtani** a 10-year, \$700 million deal. All but \$20 million of it is deferred to 2034.

— At around the same time as the Ohtani deal, the Dodgers traded for **Tyler Glasnow** and then extended his contract for five years and \$136,542,400 (they threw some odd numbers into his player option).

— Yesterday, as mentioned, they signed Yamamoto for 12 years and \$325 million.

That's five players they have signed through at least 2027 (Freeman) but most are signed into the 2030s.

The cost: \$1.69 billion, rounding up from Glasnow's player option.

There is no easy way to describe how much money that is. I mean, you could say that John Sherman bought the Kansas City Royals for less than that, but I'm not sure that gets us there. You could say it's roughly equal to the Gross Domestic Product of the Solomon Islands, but what do we know about the export business of the Solomon Islands?*

You could say that the 2024 Porsche 911 S/T is priced at \$291,650 (including destination charges!) and that with \$1.69 billion you could buy 5,794 of them, which would be a neat trick, since Porsche is not even building half that many.

**The Solomon Islands, apparently, were hit hard by a collapse in the tropical timber market and have since relied on palm oil, which is a whole controversial thing that will probably be a topic on "Last Week Tonight" before long, so, you know, maybe it's best if we just leave this whole thing Solomon Islands GDP alone.*

You could say that if there were a million-dollar coin, and it weighed, say, 35 grams (roughly the weight of the \$20 eagle gold coin available at the turn of the century), then \$1.69 billion of those coins would weigh more than gymnast Simone Biles holding a male Icelandic Sheepdog.

That probably doesn't get us there, either, but it's fun to think about.

The point is that while we know \$1.69 billion is a lot of money, we probably don't have the capacity to understand JUST how much money it is. The Dodgers have gone multi-Steinbrenner here, and I don't think Justin Halpern will mind me quoting his text to Michael Schur, since I imagine it's pretty representative of many baseball fans: "I'm not even a Padres fan anymore. I'm a fan of every single team that is playing the \$@#\$(Dodgers."

The funny thing about this is: I STILL don't know that the Dodgers are the best overall team in the National League. The Braves still look better to me, assuming their players don't wake up one morning and wonder why the heck everybody else is getting paid so much more.

BUT, there's actually something else I'm thinking about now ...

Look, we all know that Dodgers GM Andrew Friedman is a really smart guy. The guy figured out how to win in Tampa Bay, when winning should have been impossible. He came to the Dodgers in 2015, and since then, the Dodgers have not only had the best record in baseball, it's a runaway:

Records since 2015:

Team W L W% GB

Dodgers 845 512 .623 --

Astros 801 555 .591 43.5

Yankees 771 585 .569 73.5

Guardians 744 610 .549 98.5

Rays 739 617 .545 106.0

If you had told me that the Guardians had the fourth-best record in baseball since 2015, well, no, I wouldn't have believed that. But that's not the point here. The point is that Andrew Friedman is really smart, and the Dodgers have won 100-plus games five times in the last seven years, and he and that Dodgers front office seem to know stuff that other people don't know.

With that in mind, I can't help but wonder: Are these signings specifically designed to make the Dodgers a postseason killer? See, here's the thing: The Dodgers have already been the best team in baseball. That simply doesn't mean as much as it once did, not with the expanded playoffs and short series. The Dodgers, everybody knows, have won just the one World Series since 2015, and that one in the bizarro pandemic season. Just as a reminder:

2015: Lost to the Mets in five games

2016: Lost to the destiny Cubs in six games

2017: Lost to the trashcan Astros in seven games

2018: Lost to the Mookie Red Sox in five games (later signed Mookie)

2019: Lost to the destiny Nationals in five games

2020: Won the World Series by winning four playoff series, including a tense seven-gamer with Atlanta.

2021: Lost to the Freddie Freeman Braves in six games (later signed Freeman)

2022: Lost in four games to a Padres team that they beat by 22 games in the standings

2023: Swept in three straight by a Diamondbacks team that they beat by 16 games in the standings

You can see the pain there. And it seems to me that, ever since Moneyball, we have sort of given really good teams that lose in the playoffs something of a pass by talking about how short-series are crapshoots. I totally believe that to be true—short series *are* crapshoots—but I also believe that it's Andrew Friedman's JOB (and the job of his front office) to change that dynamic and take some of the chance and luck out of winning those short series.

You might say: That's impossible! Baseball doesn't work like that!

But it isn't impossible. There are ways to give your team the best chance to win a short series. And because I think Andrew Friedman is a smart guy, I'm guessing that he is spending not just a lot of his time but pretty much ALL of his time trying to unlock that mystery. Losing short series is the Dodgers' core problem, the *only* problem that matters. If they spend \$1.69 billion on five players, and win 115 games, and promptly lose to an 84-78 Rockies team that they beat by 31 games in the standings, well, almost nobody is going to think the signings worked.

What I'm thinking is that by signing two potentially dominant pitchers in Yamamoto and Glasnow (and, you would hope, eventually a third in Shohei), Friedman is betting that those guys, along with the return of Walker Buehler and the continued development of Bobby Miller and so on, will make them *invincible* come playoff time. What I'm thinking is that he and his folks have pored over all the data they can find about what wins in the playoffs, and they have developed countless secret theories, and then they acted and spent all the money in the world to build an October Death Star.

Of course, only time will tell. For now, right, I can't wait to see how good Yamamoto will be and what it will look like to have Mookie-Freddie-Shohei hitting back-to-back-to-back. But I'm also looking to see if the Dodgers unlocked something to do with the postseason.

THIS WEEK'S TRIVIA CHALLENGE ANSWERS

Name the country's career HR leader

USA 762

Barry Bonds

Dominican Republic: 703

Albert Pujols

Cuba: 569

Rafael Palmiero

Venezuela: 511

Miguel Cabrera

Puerto Rico (U.S.): 473

Carlos Delgado

Canada: 383

Larry Walker

Japan: 175

Hideki Matsui

Please remember to check out

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