

# Ten Things I Learned This Year

by Dave Studenmund

Baseball never fails to delight. If you don't feel the same way, well, you probably picked up the wrong book by mistake. Unbelievers complain about the length of baseball games or their lack of action, but true baseball fans understand the importance of pitch sequences and the terrible consequences of the mundane, such as overthrowing the cutoff man. The game is deep and nuanced. As you learn more about it, you realize how much more there is to learn.

On The Hardball Times website, I publish a weekly column called "Ten Things I Didn't Know Last Week." Each week I recount the new and unusual in the baseball world. Sometimes I discuss things statistical, or newsworthy, or I just revel in the game's quirks. And sometimes I wonder about the silly things people repeatedly say and do.

Following is a list of the top 10 things I learned this past year. It's a list of major baseball developments and some baseball insights. You could call it a list of things we learned together in 2005, a very good year for baseball and its fans.

## It's curse-bustin' time.

Are you cursed? Well, now might be a really good time to do something about it because baseball curses are dropping like flies.

Last year, the Boston Red Sox captivated the sporting world by winning their first World Series since 1918, which was a year before they traded Babe Ruth to the Yankees. That trade begat the Curse of the Bambino, by which the baseball gods cursed the Sox for trading the greatest player in history and made their fans suffer through tragic near-misses (think Bucky Dent and Bill Buckner) and incidents (Tony Conigliaro).

At the end of last year, and again at the beginning of this season, there was also talk of a curse in Chicago, the supposed "Curse of the Billy Goat," which had been frustrating Cub fans since 1945. Since the Red Sox had broken their curse, the Cubs were due, too. Or so said the mainstream media.

Right city, wrong curse.

The more compelling curse was the one located in the south side of town, the Curse of the Black Sox. You know, the Black Sox of 1919, who conspired to throw the World Series to make some real money. This was the greatest scandal in the history of the game, and it

created a black cloud that shadowed the White Sox for nearly a century. Although their curse wasn't as dramatic or tragic as the Red Sox's, they suffered years of mediocrity and only made it back to the Series once, in 1959, when they lost to the Dodgers.

The two curses were inextricably linked. The game only truly recovered from the Black Sox scandal in the public's eye when Babe Ruth, with his colorful personality and presence, became an American icon in New York. Perhaps the baseball gods would only allow the White Sox redemption after the Red Sox had earned theirs. Perhaps, in fact, they required it. Perhaps it was karma, as Earl in *My Name is Earl* would say.

White Sox GM Ken Williams didn't care about any silly curse. He just wanted to change and improve a White Sox club that had finished second to the Twins for three straight years. In retrospect, his key moves for 2005 were picking up good solid regular players in the free-agent market, such as Jermaine Dye, A.J. Pierzynski and Tadahito Iguchi, and improving his starting staff by trading for Jose Contreras and signing Orlando Hernandez and Dustin Hermanson. The White Sox sprang out of the gate behind their pitching staff and didn't look back until the Cleveland Indians posted a remarkable late-season surge, almost overtaking the Chicago club.

But like all championship teams, this one would not be denied. After fending off the youthful Indians, the Sox went 11-1 through the postseason against the Red Sox (of course they would have to play the Red Sox), Angels and Astros. When all was said and done, another curse had been reversed and the White Sox were World Champs, the sixth different team to win the World Series over the past six years.

### We're Champions Too

In the spring, the La Cueva Bears of Albuquerque, New Mexico broke the record for most consecutive victories by a high school team by beating Highland 15-1 and 11-0 in a doubleheader for their 70th consecutive win.

The previous record of 68 was set by Archbishop Malloy High of Briarwood, New York in 1963-1966.

Maybe all this curse-breaking is the result of a new curse in the air. Call it the Curse of the Strong Baseball Players. But I'm getting ahead of myself ...

## The Houston Astros are the champions of the National League.

You could never have said that before. Although they've only existed half as long as the White Sox were cursed, the Astros certainly broke their fans' hearts in the postseason many times. In fact, no team had stayed in one city as long as the Astros without making it to the Series. Most notably, they had finished in first place four times from 1997 to 2001, only to lose in the first round of the playoffs each time. Last year, the Astros actually made it to the League Championship Series and led after five games but still lost to the Cardinals. After Carlos Beltran deserted town and the Astros got off to a slow start this year, it looked as though they were going to sink into a curse of their own, the Curse of the Killer Bees.

I'm talking about Craig Biggio and Jeff Bagwell, Hall of Fame-worthy teammates for 14 years, plus Derek Bell or Lance Berkman, depending on the year. Biggio and Bagwell have been two of the finest, most consistent players in the game, yet postseason success had constantly eluded them. Things got so bad, in fact, that Rob Neyer referred to them as "the biggest flop in postseason history" in his *Big Book of Baseball Lineups*. Rob duly noted that this was probably caused by nothing other than luck.

Luck seemed to turn the B's way in this postseason, thanks primarily to a truly remarkable pitching staff led by the ageless Roger Clemens. At the age of 42, Clemens led the league with a 1.87 ERA and produced the greatest pitching year ever by someone over 40. Joined by Andy Pettitte and Roy Oswalt (both healthy for the entire year), the Astros were unstoppable until reaching the World Series. Despite being swept by the Sox in the Series, this was as close as any sweep ever, with no

game decided by more than two runs. I think it is fair to say that the Curse of the Killer Bees was crushed before it ever really got started.

## The divisions are crazy!

There may have never been a more entertaining year to follow division races. This season featured the best and the worst of divisions, as well as some of the better midseason and second-half surges in recent memory.

The National League East was arguably the best, most competitive division ever. For the first time in major league history, every single team in the division finished .500 or better. The last-place team was only nine games behind the first-place team, the closest full-season first-to-last difference ever.

What's more, in little more than two weeks from May 24 to June 15, four of the five teams completely switched positions. The Nationals and Phillies rose from fourth and fifth to first and second, and the Marlins and Braves went from first and second to third and fourth. I don't believe any division has ever experienced such a dramatic crossover so late in the season.

On the other hand, the National League West was arguably the worst full-season division ever, with every team playing below .500 ball until a surge by the Padres in the last week of the season gave them an 82-80 record. No division had ever gone so late in the season without a single team over .500.

The NL West played .368 ball against the American League, .422 against the National League East and .453 against the National League Central. They were even 5-7 against the hapless Kansas City Royals. Thank goodness they were able to win half the time against each other.

Then we had the Oakland Athletics in the American League West, who were 15 games under .500 on May 29, the third-worst record in the majors, yet were tied for first place a little more than two months later. Not the biggest surge in

major league history, but one of the biggest. That they finished second was due less to their talent and character than it was to the fine year turned in by the gentlemen in Los Angeles of Anaheim.

The Orioles led the American League East for much of the first

### That Hurts

A weblog called *Plunk Biggio* (<http://plunkbiggio.blogspot.com>) tracked Craig Biggio's pursuit of the all-time record for being hit by pitches. According to the site, Biggio ended the year 14 short of Hughie Jennings' record with 273.

Among other things, the site noted that Bobby Jenks was the largest pitcher to ever hit a batter in the World Series (plunking Frank Tavares in the third game), five Astros were hit in the Series but none of them scored (a record) and when the Chicago Cubs last won the World Series in 1908, they beat the Detroit Tigers, who were managed by one Hughie Jennings.

### So Close and Yet So Far

Cleveland had the most tough losses of the year. Here are the top five teams ranked by percent of losses by one or two runs:

CLE	67%
STL	58%
LAA	55%
CHA	54%
TOR	54%

half of the season, but The Order eventually asserted itself. Yes, the Red Sox and Yankees both made the playoffs thanks to strong second-half play, though I'm still not sure which one won the division and which one was the Wild Card team. It actually didn't seem to matter.

The two Centrals, American and National, were home to the two best teams of the regular season, the White Sox and Cardinals, respectively. But even those divisions had their drama. For the second year in a row, the Houston Astros put together a second-half drive to take the Wild Card slot in the National League. But the fiercest second-half drive was that of the Cleveland Indians, a young team that suddenly seemed to find itself, going 44-23 after July 22 and nearly overtaking the eventual World Champions.

For an entirely different view of the division races, read Steve Treder's *Night Sky: the 2005 Season in Historical Perspective*.

### There's a hot new trend in baseball: Starting Pitching.

I've mentioned this a couple of times, so I might as well get it over with. Starting pitching is big. Alert the media.

#### Making Himself Useful

On September 22, pitcher Dontrelle Willis batted seventh for the Marlins. The last time a pitcher batted that low in the order was 1973, when Steve Renko batted seventh for the Expos. Thanks to friends from the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) for the factoid, as well as several other factoids mentioned here.

It began last winter, during the free-agent season. Some say it began with the Kris Benson contract, a \$22.5 million deal for a pitcher whose ERA has been below 4.00 only once. Others point to the Yankees' signing of Jaret Wright for \$22.5 million, the

Diamondbacks' deal with Russ Ortiz for \$33 million, and the Reds' \$25.5 million deal with Eric Milton. Your perception is correct; the deals just got crazier.

Very few of these contracts turned out well, as you can read in our "Net Win Shares Value" article. But everyone is still talking about starting pitching, thanks primarily to the two World Series participants.

For a while there, it looked like everybody was going to be talking about Ozzie Ball, the supposed new way of scoring runs in Chicago. Eventually people figured out that the White Sox weren't really scoring all that

many runs and, even when they did, they were doing it the "old fashioned way:" with home runs.

No, the keys to the White Sox's success were their five starting pitchers, all of whom had remarkably good seasons and all of whom stayed healthy. Manager Ozzie Guillen contributed to the trend by allowing his starters to pitch complete games in four consecutive postseason games against the Angels, the first time this has happened in the postseason since 1956 (when Don Larsen threw a perfect game). Gasps were heard across the baseball ether.

But the starting pitching trend was cemented by Houston's Big Three: Clemens, Pettitte and Oswalt. Despite a mediocre offense, Houston was able to ride their three strong shoulders all the way to the World Series, seemingly cementing the observation that nothing matters more in the postseason than dominant starting pitching.

With very few top-notch free-agent starting pitchers on the "market" this year, it will be very interesting to see what happens.

### Evidently, some baseball players used to take steroids.

Including some who swore they hadn't. This was the year the steroids scandal finally, publicly, reared its ugly head. The first shot across the bow was Jose Canseco's book, *Juiced: Wild Times, Rampant 'Roids, Smash Hits, and How Baseball Got Big*. Sorry, but I didn't read it. I was actually more tempted to read *Juicy: Confessions of a Former Baseball Wife*, by Jose's former wife Jessica. Seriously. But I didn't read that either.

Apparently, Canseco (Jose, that is) wrote that he introduced Mark McGwire to steroids and that several other players had taken steroids as well, including Rafael Palmeiro. What's more, he used the book to promote the idea of better living through steroids and predicted that within 10 years all professional athletes will be taking steroids under medical supervision and living better because of it. (Well I did browse through it in the bookstore). Evidently, it was the wrong thing to say.

Congress got involved, McGwire took the fifth, and

#### Title Goes Here

I didn't read Canseco's book, but some of the baseball books we did read and recommend are:

- *Juicing the Game* by Howard Bryant
- *Baseball's All-Time Greatest Sluggers* by Michael Schell
- *Wrong Side of the Wall* by Eric Stone
- *Scout's Honor* by Bill Shanks

Palmeiro told Congress that he had never, ever taken steroids. Major League Baseball and the player's union agreed to tougher testing standards, and Alex Sanchez, Ryan Franklin and Juan Rincon, among others, were suspended for testing positive. In the biggest shock of all, Palmeiro himself tested positive and was suspended toward the end of the year.

The parts played by two of the leading actors in this tragedy, Jason Giambi and Barry Bonds, were also dramatic. Giambi, who had admittedly taken steroids in the past and then struggled with severe health problems last year, had a tremendous season in 2005. Apparently drug-free, Giambi batted .271/.440/.535 with 32 home runs. For the Yankees first baseman, it was a year of redemption.

Bonds had been establishing himself as arguably the greatest player ever when the scandal broke, undermining that claim, and he spent most of 2005 on the sidelines with a bum knee. His status for 2006 is unclear. He is entering his final act, and only when the play is well over will we know what history says of the man and his craft.

Some argue that the steroids scandal is the biggest black mark on the game since the Black Sox. While I don't get quite so worked up about it, MLB obviously has to continue to address the issue head-on. I'm quite sure you'll be hearing more about it for a long, long time.

### Young phenoms grow old and vulnerable.

There's steroid use, and then there's real drug abuse. The spectacle of Dwight Gooden appearing in court for charges of resisting arrest and subsequently fleeing the scene was dismaying. Gooden's drug abuse was obviously out of control; he had lost 58 pounds in the previous six months and looked haggard and lost. Gooden was once the toast of New York, a 19-year-old phenom whose season at the age of 20 was one of the best ever. For me, the spectacle of a wasted Dwight Gooden put the steroid scandal in true perspective.

Dwight Gooden's picture reflected both the dark side of drug use and the other side of the young-phenom looking glass. So it was no small irony that Gooden's brush with the law occurred just 18 days after the major league debut of the hottest young phenom since Gooden: Felix Hernandez.

Hernandez made his debut with Seattle in early August and posted a 2.67 ERA in 12 starts. Not bad for a 19-year-old and, truth be told, he looked even better than that. Hernandez is a strikeout/groundball pitcher,

#### Canes and Cribs

Teams ranked by Win Shares Age

##### Oldest:

NYA	32.8
BOS	32.5
SF	31.8
SD	31.3
HOU	31.1

##### Youngest

TB	26.9
OAK	27.3
CLE	27.4
MIN	27.4
PIT	27.6

a lethal combination. If he stays healthy, he will have a great career.

Hernandez wasn't the only youngster making waves, however. The Atlanta Braves seemed to resemble a Little League team at times, pushing 21-year-olds like Jeff Francoeur, Brian McCann and Kyle Davies into action. The youngsters produced and Atlanta won the National League East (thanks in no small part to Andruw Jones's 51 home runs, too). Francoeur was particularly impressive, batting .300/.336/.549 and evoking comparisons to Bob

"Hurricane" Hazle, who helped lead the Braves to the World Championship in 1957 by batting .403/.477/.649 in 41 games as a rookie. Hazle was barely heard from again; let's hope Francoeur does better.

Still, the Braves' average Win Shares Age (the age of each player multiplied by his Win Shares contribution) was only slightly below the major league average of 29.3 years. That was partly due to Julio Franco, the best 46-year-old batter to ever play the game. Franco batted .275/.348/.451 as a first baseman for the Braves, which are very good figures for guys 10-15 years younger.

With three 70-year-old managers (the Nationals' Frank Robinson, the Marlins' Jack McKeon and the Giants' Felipe Alou), the best 46-year-old batter ever and the most remarkable season for a pitcher over 40 (Clemens, by the way, broke into the majors the same year as Gooden), 2005 belonged to young and old alike.

### Baseball belongs in Washington, D.C.

Steroids weren't the only baseball topic in Washington, D.C. There was a new ball club in town, the first in our nation's capital since the Senators moved to Texas over 30 years ago.

The Nationals had a fine first year in Washington, leading the National League East for several giddy weeks, finishing .500 and drawing 2.7 million fans. Led by Chad Cordero, Nick Johnson, Brad Wilkerson and John Patterson, the Nationals put a competitive team in RFK Stadium and became the hottest ticket in town.



You could tell Washington had become obsessed with baseball when Supreme Court nominee John Roberts compared the role of a judge to an umpire:

*Judges are like umpires. Umpires don't make the rules; they apply them. The role of an umpire and a judge is critical. They make sure everybody plays by the rules. But it is a limited role. Nobody ever went to a ballgame to see the umpire.*

Obviously, the umpires in the postseason forgot about Roberts's remarks. Anyway, it even turns out that the President's nominee for chairman of the Federal Reserve, Ben S. Bernanke, is a Bill James nut who supposedly wrote a dissertation while at MIT on the Boston Red Sox, using advanced sabermetric stats.

### At Least There Were No Filibusters

According to the Baseball Esoterica weblog (<http://baseballesoterica.blogspot.com>), the Nationals had four eerily similar, crazy games in the span of a month.

- 8/20: They were losing against the Mets, 8-0, came back to tie it but lost in extra innings.
- 9/1: Losing 7-1 to the Braves, they came back to tie but lost in extra innings.
- 9/11: Fell behind 6-0 to the Braves, caught up to pass them 7-6, but lost on two homers in the ninth.
- 9/17: For a change of pace, they took a 5-0 lead against the Padres, who scored five in the ninth to tie it up. The Nationals then lost in 12 innings, 8-5.

I briefly visited D.C. in the late spring. While walking along the Mall, I looked to my right to glance at the White House and saw a man playing ball with his son in the foreground. It was a powerful sight, and I thought, "Well, this is just right." Major league baseball has returned to a town it never should have left.

Having said that, there really is no excuse for the way MLB's leadership handled the ownership mess in Montreal. The last years of the Expos, playing without a real owner and under threat of contraction, will be a blight on baseball's history forever.

### It's better to be lucky than it's lucky to be good

Luck was one of the themes of the year, and we've devoted an entire article to the subject in the *Annual*. But I'd like to tell you my favorite luck-related story from earlier in the year.

In April, a Japanese CEO decided he wanted to sell some of his company's art through an auction house. He couldn't decide between the two major auction houses, Christie's and Sotheby's, so he asked them to play a game of "rock, paper, scissors" to determine who would get to auction the art.

According to *The New York Times*, the head of the Christie's division spent the weekend researching strategy for "rock, paper, scissors," asking various experts for the best approach. The best expert turned out to be an associate's 11-year-old daughter, who gave this advice: "Everyone knows you always start with scissors. Rock is way too obvious, and scissors beats paper."

Monday morning, the representatives for the two auction houses (and their accountants) entered a conference room with a long table, sat at opposite ends, and filled in a form with their opening move. The head of Christie's chose scissors. As predicted by an 11-year-old, Sotheby's opened with paper and Christie's won the award.

What I want to know is, why did this guy do this? If he couldn't choose between the two, why didn't he just flip a coin himself? Did he believe there was some inherent worth in having them play the game? Was it better to let fate intervene through rock, paper scissors instead of eenie, meenie, miney, mo?

At the beginning of each season, baseball analysts like to run computer simulations to predict which team is most likely to win. The best known of these is by *Diamond Mind Baseball*, who gave the White Sox an 11% chance of qualifying for postseason play this year. I know some people who have scoffed at the White Sox's pennant, because it wasn't predicted, because it must have been lucky, because it seemed like the baseball gods were just playing eenie, meenie, miney, mo.

Results count. That's why they're called results. I love stats as much as anyone (if you don't believe me, check out some of my other articles in the *Annual*), but I love the game more. In fact, I only love stats because they help me better appreciate the game. Without the games, there would be no drama, no play, no curses. And yes, there would be no luck. In this season alone, we saw a fair share of luck ...

### Two for One Sale

On September 6, Cardinals' right fielder Hector Luna made two errors on two separate plays on the same batter in the same at-bat. Neifi Perez hit a foul fly ball that Luna dropped for an error, and then Perez hit a fair ball that Luna misplayed for another error.

- The Washington Nationals won 12 consecutive one-run games, then lost 13 consecutive one-run games, the longest such double streak in baseball history, according to my friends at SABR.
- The Dodgers were so decimated by injuries that at one point they only had one regular player (Jeff Kent) still playing from their lineup at the beginning of the season.
- On the other hand, the Cardinals' top five starting pitchers started 160 of their 162 games. I'm not sure if that's a record, but it's certainly notable.
- The Diamondbacks won 12 games more than their run differential (Runs Scored minus Runs Allowed) predicted them to. This tied for the second-highest difference ever.

When it comes to baseball, it's better to be lucky than it's lucky to be good. Analysts may gnash their teeth, but that's why they play the games.

### Baseball statistics are growing up.

As they have been for years. As baseball data becomes more accessible, thanks to websites like *Retrosheet.org* and *BaseballReference.com*, as well as companies like *Baseball Info Solutions*, baseball statistics and analysis are becoming more insightful and useful. Baseball clubs are hopping on board, purchasing new data and hiring analysts to produce complex base running and fielding analyses.

Bill James began this trend over 20 years ago when he started using baseball statistics to actually answer common baseball questions. It's safe to say that you wouldn't be reading this book today if James hadn't written his Baseball Abstract series in the 1980s. So when James printed an article in SABR's *Baseball Research Journal*, it got some attention.

The article was called *Underestimating the Fog*. The "fog" to which James referred is the fog of data analysis and sample size, when baseball analysts sometimes conclude something doesn't exist when they really just can't find it. James listed nine findings that he felt were victims of the fog, including "clutch hitters don't exist" and "winning or losing close games is luck."

#### Mr. Consistency

Albert Pujols' seasonal at-bat totals:

2001: 590  
2002: 590  
2003: 591  
2004: 592  
2005: 591

As a result, statisticians started openly talking about these issues again, particularly the issue of clutch hitting. I don't know if many of them changed their minds, but it's always good to question your assumptions, and the baseball stats community is richer for it.

Baseball statisticians are learning how to better assess fielding and base running skills all the time. James Click, of *Baseball Prospectus*, and our own Dan Fox have published in-depth studies of how often runners advance around the base on base hits. They've looked at how often this differs by ballpark, and Click even published an article examining whether runners advance more often on hits by certain batters.

#### He Works Hard For His Money

On September 14, Gabe Kapler ruptured his Achilles tendon running the bases on Tony Graffanino's home run and had to be removed for a pinch runner in the middle of the play. Graffanino waited on the basepaths for nearly 20 minutes while Kapler was tended to. Eventually, Alejandro Machado was inserted as a pinch runner and the home run trot resumed.

It was Machado's first appearance in a major league game. Two days later, Machado was inserted as a pinch runner for Graffanino and subsequently scored the winning run when Manny Ramirez was plunked by a game-ending HBP.

Fielding analyses such as Mitchel Lichtman's Ultimate Zone Rating have also added to our understanding of who the best fielders are, and how much impact they have on a game. And commentators continue to make subtle modifications to Voros McCracken's findings a few years ago that pitchers have virtually no impact on balls that are batted off of them. In this very *Annual*, David Gassko and J.C. Bradbury add more insight in *Do Players Control Batted Balls?*

The last interesting area of current baseball analysis is the idea of "win assignment." On The Hardball Times' site, we track Bill James's Win Shares for the year, and we've also published articles and books that focus on a system called "Win Probability Added." The two systems differ substantially, but the basic idea is the same: to give the right amount of credit to each player for his contribution to each win. It's a fascinating subject to me, and you'll find examples of both systems in this *Annual*.

### The business of baseball has probably never been better.

Baseball set attendance records in both the major and minor leagues this year. Major league attendance reached 75 million thanks to the Nationals' move to Washington. The Yankees became only the third franchise to attract more than 4 million folks to its games. Minor league attendance topped 41 million.

## Ten Things I Learned This Year

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Toward the end of the season, MLB signed a new deal with ESPN worth \$337 million a year, in addition to MLB's current deals with media outlets such as Fox and XM Radio. Major League Baseball Advanced Media (MLBAM), which manages the awesome video capabilities of [www.mlb.com](http://www.mlb.com) is generating profits of \$130 million a year and would reportedly be worth \$3 billion on the public markets. All of these developments are covered by Brian Borawski and Maury Brown in the book you're holding, so I won't go into details here.

But in a nutshell, baseball is swimming in cash, just like Scrooge McDuck used to do.

You have to give MLB credit for this. MLBAM, in particular, is an impressive operation that shows what is possible when businesses embrace the Internet. Remember, however, that too much money can cause its own problems, as people fight over the spoils.

Of course, not everything is perfect in baseball land. To name just a few of my pet peeves, they really should cut back on the interleague games. One round is enough. The umpiring was awful in the postseason and needs to be addressed. Why do we keep that silly dropped third strike rule, anyway?

And there is that steroids thing.

But overall, 2005 was a great year. Especially if you live in Chicago.

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I would be remiss if I didn't mention some of the real-life lessons of this past year. For instance, we've learned once again the terrible devastation that nature can inflict. We witnessed 225,000 deaths by tsunami, a hurricane that ravaged the south and turned a beautiful city into a toxic swamp, and an earthquake in Kashmir that has killed as many as 100,000. I don't mean to finish this article on a downer, but it's always worth remembering that baseball is not life and death. Life and death are.

For many of us, baseball provides solace in the ruin of the routine, protection in the tumult of the everyday world. It is both comforting and surprising, this intense game played in parks. It allows us to glide on its whims, renew our sense of wonder at the subtle and obvious, and return to the real world with a new sense of what's possible. That is, anything.

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From [www.HardballTimes.com](http://www.HardballTimes.com)...

### *Five Questions: Chicago White Sox*

by Dave Studenmund

March 28, 2005

*"Last year was a disappointing one for the Sox, but they made a number of excellent moves to improve the team:*

- They upgraded the offense by acquiring players who can get on base and into scoring position. If they hadn't done that, they would have seen a huge fall in their offensive production this year because their BA with runners in scoring position will plummet.*
- They probably upgraded the fielding somewhat, now featuring an outfield of Podsednik, Rowand and Dye, plus Uribe replacing Valentin at short. Iguchi and Pierzynski are question marks, however.*
- They definitely upgraded the bullpen.*
- They tried to address their starting pitching, though it remains the biggest question mark going into the season.*

*Admirably, Kenny Williams made all these improvements without giving up too much, except for Lee. I expect the Sox to stay in the race most of the year, barring injuries, and they have a chance to win it all if their rotation matches its potential."*

<http://www.hardballtimes.com/main/article/five-questions-chicago-white-sox/>

# Ten Things I Learned This Year

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Every baseball season has its own character. Some seasons are remembered for their great pennant races, others for their exceptional individual performances, while a few are just remembered for their oddities. 2006 is likely to go down in the record books as, well, an odd duck.

The drama of division races in the AL Central and NL West was diluted by the Wild Card safety valve. Barry Bonds' new National League home run record was diluted by the specter of steroid use. And even the Cardinals' World Series victory was considered less than significant because they had the worst regular season record of any World Champ ever.

Still, there was much that was new in 2006, much that we learned and enjoyed. Allow me to list 10 things that caught my eye.

## It's not the National Pastime anymore.

We Americans used to call baseball the National Pastime, but that quaint, parochial label no longer fits. The World Baseball Classic, played in March before an enthusiastic international audience, proved that players and fans from countries around the world take a back seat to no one, including us "North Americaners."

In a way, you can't blame us for being confused. The Olympics kicked baseball and softball out in 2005, supposedly because they were too "American" for the world stage. The WBC, a concept that had been bandied about for many years, seemed like a weak response to the Olympic rejection. A lot of folks probably figured that it would be a humdrum affair. The games were being held in the middle of spring training, so it was natural to think of the WBC as a bunch of international exhibition games. We were wrong; they were much more.

What we didn't understand was how passionate many countries are about their baseball, and how a tournament that consists of the best major league players differs from past international competitions. When Japan and Cuba agreed to play, joining Latin American powerhouses such as Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, a great time was guaranteed for all.

Many of the games reached a fever pitch worthy of the World Series. Fans from countries such as the

Dominican and Venezuela, with their national pride at stake, took to the games in huge, boisterous numbers. Their enthusiasm carried through to the product on the field.

In the end, the United States team didn't even make it to the semifinals. The final four teams—Japan, Korea, Cuba and the Dominican Republic—all made fine showings in the tournament, and the games proved to be a great draw in their home countries and in the U.S., where 126,000 fans turned out for the final three games in San Diego's PETCO Park.

The next WBC will be played in 2009 and every four years thereafter. They promise to be thrilling affairs. For more about this year's WBC, read Jeff Sackmann's coverage a little later in this *Annual*.

## The American League is better than the National.

Once we moved onto the regular, there was another revelation waiting for us: the American League is way better than the National League. How do we know? Because interleague play, which began as a marketing ploy in 1997, was a lopsided affair in 2006. The American League busted the National in interleague competition, 154-98, which was a full 18 wins better than the previous high win total.

The junior circuit's rout was thorough and embarrassing. Only one NL team—the Rockies—had a record substantially above .500 in Interleague Play (they were 11-4; the Giants had a 8-7 record and no other team was above .500). The AL scored almost a full run more per game (5.3 to 4.4) and dominated the close games (one- or two-run margins) with a 64-41 record.

### Nice Start

On September 2, the Indians' Kevin Kouzmanoff hit a grand slam in his first major league at bat. That's happened twice before, but according to SABR's David Vincent, Kouzmanoff was the first player ever to hit a slam on his very first major league pitch.

Interleague play even played a role in the pennant races. The Red Sox had their best first-place run by going 16-2 against the NL (only to fall spectacularly against the Yankees in August), and the Twins seemed



## Ten Things I Learned This Year

to pick up steam while playing against the other league, also gong 16-2 and eventually overtaking first place from the Tigers on the very last day of the season.

The AL cemented its superior position with a win in the All-Star game, guaranteeing home field advantage for the league representative in the World Series. Never mind that the Midseason Classic was a close 3-2 victory, with the deciding hit a two-out, two-run double by Texas' Michael Young in the ninth inning. It still "counted."

The lopsided interleague tally cast a season-long pall over the NL division winners (no one believed an NL team would win the World Series), and even screwed up a number of individual performances. For instance, Washington's Alfonso Soriano, who had a spectacular year for the Nationals, batted only .182 against his old league. As Soriano shops for a new team this offseason, he'd be well advised to seek out a National League one.

I don't expect the balance between the two leagues to be so severe in 2007, but for one brief period, the AL was just plain better. Until the World Series, that is.

### Youth has been served.

Gone are the days when older players like Barry Bonds, Randy Johnson and Curt Schilling dominated the field and headlines. A new generation of ballplayers officially took center stage this year.

Nearly every statistical or dramatic angle in 2006 had a player under 30 in the lead, and it was often

#### Not so fast, there, son.

On September 10, the Mets' Julio Franco was a "defensive substitute" for third baseman David Wright, who wasn't even born the last time Franco played third.

a rookie or second-year player. 23-year-old catcher (catcher!) Joe Mauer led the majors in batting average. 26-year-old Ryan Howard led the majors in home runs and RBIs. Jered Weaver became the first American League rookie since Whitey Ford

to win his first nine decisions. Francisco Liriano was only the second rookie to ever go into the All-Star break with an ERA under 2.00 and at least 10 wins (Jerry Koosman did it in 1968).

The Dodgers turned to youth to save their season. When players such as Eric Gagne, Dioner Navarro, Kenny Lofton and Bill Mueller were injured, their replacements weren't just adequate, they were better. Russell Martin, Andre Ethier and Jonathan Broxton were just some of the youngsters who made a

splash in LA and helped propel the Dodgers to the playoffs.

The American League champion Detroit Tigers displayed some of the finest young arms in the game, including rookies Justin Verlander and Joel Zumaya. Two of the best players on the best regular-season National League team (the Mets) were also virtually kids: Jose Reyes and David Wright.

And the Florida Marlins seemingly played no one but youngsters who were born after Julio Franco first played in the major leagues. Their rookie starter (okay, one of many rookie starters) Anibal

Sanchez, pitched a no-hitter against the Diamondbacks on September 6, more than two years since the last major league no-hitter. Even milestones were set by the kids.

The cast of youth took on biblical proportions when Jered Weaver's ascendancy prompted the Angels to designate his brother, Jeff, for assignment. Jeff, of course, redeemed himself with an outstanding postseason for the Cardinals.

In Tampa Bay, the kids provided a different sort of drama. Delmon Young was suspended 50 games for throwing his bat at an umpire during a minor league game and B.J. Upton was arrested on suspicion of drunken driving. A *USA Today* article, on the first page of the sports section, highlighted the discontent of the Devil Rays' youth with Young saying "I don't know what they're waiting for. They're, what, 30 games out of first place? They think they're going to mess up their clubhouse chemistry. B.J. should be up there. What are they waiting for? They always have excuses."

Hey, Delmon, just because you're young doesn't mean you have to act immature.

What happened to the old guys? Nothing bad, really. They just continued to get old. Randy Johnson struggled in New York; Barry Bonds struggled with his knees but still had one of the best over-40 seasons in

#### Detroit Turnaround Facts

The American League champion Detroit Tigers, who finished 95-67, were 43-119 just three years ago. That's the biggest three-year turnaround in baseball history, eclipsing even the 1914 Miracle Braves.

On August 2, the Tigers posted their 72nd win of the year. Detroit was 71-91 in 2005. This was the earliest date on which a team coming off a season of at least 60 wins surpassed its victory total from the prior year.

baseball history; Roger Clemens returned to the Astros again (this time for \$22 million) and pitched very well, but not as well as in 2005; Julio Franco continued to be an ageless wonder but didn't match his production of 2005.

A few pages in, Rich Lederer covers the rookie class in more detail, but let's just say that 2006 will be viewed in history as the year in which a new breed of stars emerged. Book it.

### **Negro Leaguers (and pre-Negro Leaguers) who belong in Cooperstown.**

Bruce Sutter was inducted into the Hall of Fame this year. As rightfully controversial as that selection was, it was nothing compared to the brouhaha that erupted when the Hall announced its Negro League selections earlier in the year.

To its credit, the Hall recognized that great players from the pre-integration era were still underrepresented in its ranks, and asked Negro League historians to fix the situation. A five-person committee chose an initial list of 39 potential candidates for the Hall, and then a 12-person committee, chaired by non-voting former commissioner Fay Vincent, met early in 2006 to vote for Hall inclusion. Seventeen of the 39 candidates received at least the 75% minimum required for induction into the Hall.

The result was an extraordinary list of early pioneers in baseball history; players and owners who would receive their just recognition in Cooperstown. But their moment in the sun was eclipsed by the omission of Buck O'Neill, who had become the face of Negro League baseball to many baseball fans.

In fact, this is what commentator Keith Olbermann had to say about O'Neill's snub:

*Just to twist the knife a little further into Buck O'Neil, the special committee elected Alex Pompez, owner of the New York Cubans team... Also an organized crime figure... Part of the mob of the infamous '30s gangster Dutch Schultz... Indicted in this country and Mexico for racketeering.*

*He's in the Hall of Fame. For all time. Buck O'Neil is not. It is not merely indefensible. For all the many stupid things the Baseball Hall of Fame has ever done... This is the worst.*

The situation isn't so clear to me. Based on his playing career alone, many Negro League experts feel that O'Neill wasn't qualified for the Hall. Presumably, Olbermann's outrage was based on the significant work O'Neill did to keep the memory of those times alive. Perhaps that sort of consideration was, or should have been, included in the committee's charge. But who knows?

Buck O'Neil spoke at the Hall of Fame ceremony, saying "This is quite an honor for me." He showed class every time someone asked him about the Hall, refusing to express any regret. But Buck O'Neil passed away two months later, losing a chance to see his own plaque in the Hall.

Unfortunately, the O'Neill controversy eclipsed the achievements of the 17 inductees, great historical figures who deserved more. Here is a partial list of those who were inducted:

- Jose Mendez, who played in Cuba and the Negro Leagues until 1926, was called "The Black Diamond" and was generally recognized as the greatest black pitcher of his era. Sometimes, people would stand and clap when he walked into a restaurant.
- Pete Hill, a star outfielder who played mostly before the Negro Leagues were organized, hit over .300 eight times and over .400 twice with Cuban teams and some of the loosely organized pre-Negro League teams.
- Ray Brown was an outstanding pitcher in the Negro Leagues, and one of five players recognized as major-league caliber in a 1938 Pittsburgh Pirates memo. The other four were Satchel Paige, Cool Papa Bell, Josh Gibson and Buck Leonard, all already members of the Hall.
- Cum Posey, an outfielder and then owner of the Homestead Grays, who was one of the most powerful executives of the Negro Leagues.

Space forces me to stop here, but I urge you to read about the newest Hall-of-Fame inductees at the Negro League Baseball Professional Association website (<http://www.nlbpa.com/index.html>).

### **It's not just steroids anymore.**

Steroids continued to be the story that sizzled in 2006. Stronger drug testing was introduced. For the first time, testing could occur anytime during the season, not just during spring training. Tougher penalties were included (50 games for the first offense, 100 for the second and a lifetime ban for the third) and amphetamine testing was also included.

## Ten Things I Learned This Year

A book entitled *Game of Shadows*, by two *San Francisco Chronicle* reporters, chronicled alleged steroid use by Barry Bonds in great detail. Former Senator George Mitchell was asked by Bud Selig to conduct an independent investigation into steroid use and abuse in recent baseball history. And former Red Sox pitcher Paxton Crawford admitted in a story in *ESPN the Magazine* that he used steroids during his career.

### Recommended Reading

There were a lot of baseball books published this year. We didn't read them all (not even close!), but we can recommend the following:

- *Feeding the Monster* by Seth Mnookin
- *John Dewan's Fielding Bible*
- *Rob Neyer's Big Book of Baseball Blunders*
- *The Echoing Green* by Joshua Prager
- *Fantasyland* by Sam Walker
- *The Only Game in Town* by Fay Vincent
- *The Book* by Tom Tango, Mitchel Lichtman and Andy Dolphin

Well, it turns out that this focus on steroids may be a little bit shortsighted. In fact, someday we may fondly recall the days of Congressional investigations and grand jury leaks; Jose Canseco, Rafael Palmeiro and, um, Alex Sanchez.

The landscape shifted early in the season when Arizona pitcher Jason Grimsley

was busted for receiving a package of Human Growth Hormone (HGH). Immediately, our umbrella of concern spread from just steroids to a host of potential performance-enhancing drugs, or PEDs. Because many of us don't really understand the difference between all of these chemicals and their effects, we may have to settle on PEDs (if you say it real fast, it sounds like Pez) as the description of everything we're likely to hear about in the future.

The upshot of these acronyms is that drug use and abuse is never going to go away. Current drug tests don't adequately test for HGH use, and players can be expected to search for new chemical edges in their pursuit of athletic excellence and outrageous salaries.

Meanwhile, Barry Bonds' new National League home run record was greeted with suspicion and indifference everywhere but in San Francisco. And future feats of athletic derring-do, such as Ryan Howard's prodigious home run total this year (58, which used to be a really, really big number) will be forever tainted by unwar-

ranted suspicion. And that may be the most damaging aspect of PED use of all.

### Satire and reality. What's the diff?

The excellent satirical humor newspaper *The Onion* started a sports section this year, and there were times when it was hard to tell the difference between what was happening on the field and what the *Onion* was "reporting." Half of the following stories were real-life events this year, and the other half were *Onion* headlines. See if you can tell the difference:

- David Wright endorses faith healer in a TV ad: "Hi, I'm David Wright. I invite you to the 'Salvation Miracles Revival Crusade' with Dr. Jaerock Lee, at Madison Square Garden, July 27, 28 and 29."
- Alfonso Soriano regrets joining 40-40 club after meeting other members.
- Blue Jays forced to disinfect clubhouse after two players are placed on the DL.
- MLB to place asterisk, pound sign, exclamation point, letter 'F' next to Bonds' name in record books.
- Orioles return shipment of Brian Roberts bobble head dolls because Roberts isn't really black.
- Ozzie Guillen fined \$10,000 for what he just thought.
- Pete Rose signs baseballs saying "I'm sorry I bet on baseball." When the purchaser sells them on eBay, Rose decides to sell his own on his website.
- Pete Rose caught trying to get inducted into Hall of Fame under assumed name.
- Giant frog mascot for the Class-A Greenville Drive arrested for fondling woman at game.

We've asked Will Leitch, the editor of the excellent baseball site ("with an edge") Deadspin ([www.deadspin.com](http://www.deadspin.com)) to contribute his own take on 2006 in this year's Annual. All of the events in Will's article really happened.

### Nothing works in the postseason. Nothing.

"My shit doesn't work in the postseason." Ever since Billy Beane famously muttered that self-assessment in Michael Lewis's *Moneyball*, baseball writers and analysts have spent a lot of time and energy looking for the keys

to postseason success. Before this year's postseason run, some even felt they had found it, citing hot pitching, starting pitching and success against top pitching as the real keys to a championship run.

But all the head scratching and stat-adding didn't help predict this year's postseason. In fact, only one of the postseason series ended with the favorite actually winning—the Mets' win over San Diego in the first round—and the St. Louis Cardinals made history by having the worst regular-season record of any World Series winner ever (their 83-78/.516 record was worse than even that of the 1987 Twins, who were 85-77/.525). This was the year that commentators returned to that old saw, "The postseason is just a crapshoot."

Even the new fad of Wild Card teams winning the World Series didn't pan out. The Cardinals actually did finish first in the NL Central, despite being the first team to ever blow a five-run lead (or greater) three different times during the season and despite losing nine of their last 12 games and almost allowing the Astros to grab the division title at the last minute. There was nothing in a book or spreadsheet that would have led you to choose the Cardinals as the eventual World Series champion.

Yet win it they did. In the end, spreadsheets and theories mean nothing. Only head-to-head competition matters and the Cardinals, particularly their reborn starters and reconstructed bullpen, beat the best. The postseason isn't constructed to make baseball analysts feel better about their formulas. It's simple head-to-head competition between the teams. The Cardinals won that competition fair and square.

So if you're upset that the Cardinals won the World Series, I have three words for you: Get over it.

### Maybe curses never really go away.

Imagine that you're lost on a desert island. You're a doctor, and you've helped your fellow survivors make it through many terrible ordeals. Unfortunately, you've been captured by Others who want you to cooperate with them on something that's not yet quite clear.

How do you suppose they gain your cooperation? Do they threaten or torture you? Promise to make you rich? Not in the television show *Lost*. *Lost*'s protagonist, a diehard Red Sox fan named Jack Shephard, was stuck on that island when the Sox won it all in 2004, so he never knew that the Sox had broken the "curse." So when the Others showed Jack the videotape of the Sox winning the Series and finally ridding themselves

of the Curse of the Bambino, he fell apart, putty in their hands, realizing that he had missed the one thing of real meaning in his life.

Unfortunately, if Jack ever does return to Boston circa 2006, things will feel remarkably similar. The Sox had a typically great run in May and June (thanks partly to the interleague bloodbath) and were only a game and a half out of first when the division-leading, ever-reviled Yankees came to town for a five-game series in mid-August. Five-game series are rare in this day and age, and East Coast fans were ready for battle.

What they got was a massacre. The Boston Massacre, it was quickly called: a destructive five-game Yankee sweep by tremendously high scores (such as 12-4, 14-11, 13-5 and 8-5) and the Red Sox subsequently plummeted in the standings, eventually finishing as low as third place for the first time in nine years.

Everything went wrong for the Sox. Former Golden Boy Theo Epstein seemingly lost his Midas Touch when he traded Bronson Arroyo for Wily Mo Pena. That trade may eventually turn in Boston's favor, but Arroyo had a sensational year for the Reds and Pena was injured part of the year for the Sox.

Worse, the Sox had to trade for a catcher they initially traded away—Doug Mirabelli to and from the Padres. One of the principals they gave up to get Mirabelli back was the sensational rookie Cla Meredith, who was a key contributor to San Diego's pennant-winning season.

Then Jason Varitek had arthroscopic surgery on his knee in August, and the Sox acquired Javy Lopez from the Orioles to replace him. Lopez batted .191 in 18 games before being released just one month later. The transactions just didn't go Boston's way this year. Have I mentioned Coco Crisp?

Even worse, long-time Boston correspondent Peter Gammons suffered an aneurysm, promising rookie starter Jon Lester was diagnosed with cancer late in the year, and David Ortiz suffered heart palpitations. Yes, the Curse seemed to return in full force this year. But it didn't stop at the New England borders.

The curse turned fickle and also turned on its long-time beneficiary, the Yankees. Alex Rodriguez, the American League's Most Valuable Player in 2005, endured catcalls and media sniping as he slumped

#### That's just eerie

On June 25, Baseball Musings ([www.baseballmusings.com](http://www.baseballmusings.com)) noted that "after giving up six runs in four innings to the New York Mets, a pitcher named Towers owned an ERA of 9.11."



through several months of the season and hit his personal nadir in the postseason. In the first round of the playoffs against the Detroit Tigers, A-Rod went 1-for-14 and was dropped to eighth in the order.

And true tragedy struck the Yankee organization when pitcher Cory Lidle's plane crashed into a Manhattan apartment building—killing Lidle and his flight instructor—just days after the Yankees were eliminated from the postseason.

Obviously, this is a new curse with new victims. Perhaps we should call it The Curse of the Others.

### Now we know who's probably winning

In 1970, Eldon and Harlan Mills published a little book called *Player Win Averages*. It was a review of the 1969 season using brand new computations spit out by new-fangled things called computers. It didn't provoke a revolution in baseball watching, but it should have.

We now call the Mills' brothers' approach Win Probability Added or Win Expectancy, and 2006 was the year it started to really seep into the public's consciousness. OK, I'm overstating the point. WPA may never really make it into the general public's eye or the mainstream media, but it did come a long way in 2006.

- It was highlighted in *The Book*, a fantastic mathematical review of baseball field strategy.
- Daily WPA updates for every player and game were made available at Fangraphs ([www.fangraphs.com](http://www.fangraphs.com))
- The *Washington Post* posted live WP graphs of National games on its Internet site.
- Fan sites such as Soxwatch (<http://soxwatch.blogspot.com/>) and Lookout Landing ([www.lookoutlanding.com/](http://www.lookoutlanding.com/)) posted daily updates and game graphs.

WPA isn't so much a new baseball statistic as it is a new way of following the game. As such, it's different from any other recently introduced baseball calculation. I've got an in-depth look at 2006's Win Probability Added in the Analysis section of the book. As you read it, keep an open mind. You may not watch the game quite the same way again.

### There will be no player strike for the next five years.

While the postseason was still being played, negotiators for Major League Baseball owners and the player's union were hammering out a new Collective Bargaining Agreement in the hopes of averting another long, drawn-out public spat. The good news is that they succeeded. There really isn't any bad news.

The new agreement tweaks the system in terms of revenue sharing, free agent and draft compensation and salaries. You can read about some of the key provisions in Brian Borawski's Business of Baseball report, and we'll report more details on our website as they become available during the offseason.

That they succeeded is a sign that owners and players have reached a point of relative equilibrium, at least for now. It's not as though things couldn't be better (Hello? World Series in the snow?), but things are pretty darn good right now, and no one wants to mess with success.

After the trauma of the 1980s and 1990s, we baseball fans deserve it.

#### Double Threat

Chad Cordero recorded the last defensive out of the season for the Nationals, and then in the bottom of the 9th he struck out, making the final offensive out of the season, too.

# Ten Things I Learned This Year

by Dave Studenmund

For sheer highs and lows, milestones and millstones, heroics and devilry, the 2007 baseball season ranks among the best ever. This past year featured the breaking of baseball's most cherished record, a great season from its best player on the cusp of deciding whether to take the money or run, the most-lopsided regular season game and World Series of all time, and season-ending winning and losing streaks that rank among the best, and worst, ever.

With so much going on, baseball proved once again to be the sport you can't pin down and that always teaches you something new. Some of the year's insights that top my list are...

## **We don't have to feel bad for Red Sox fans any longer.**

In 2004, most of us joined in the jubilation of Red Sox Nation, feeling that an unjust and tragic baseball curse had been revoked at last. This year, with their second World Championship in four years, the Sox have joined the Yankees in that part of our moral landscape we reserve for over-privileged, overpaid and overhyped baseball teams. In the world of baseball, that's a backhanded compliment.

This was the Red Sox' year from start to finish. Boston managed to grab headlines and the biggest free agent prize of the offseason when the Sox bid \$51,111,111.11 just to be able to negotiate with Daisuke Matsuzaka of Japan. The Sox approached the negotiation with agent Scott Boras skillfully, eventually signing the pitcher to a six-year, \$52 million deal. In the current free agent market, that is quite a good deal, and it made the \$51 million bid a little less nonsensical.

Signing Matsuzaka allowed the Red Sox to return Jonathan Papelbon to the bullpen, where he was once again unhittable. Add a fantastic season from Josh Beckett, who managed to remain injury-free all year long, a find in Japanese import Hideki Okajima, depth (Curt Schilling, Tim Wakefield, Javier Lopez) and youth (Jon Lester, Clay Buchholz) and you have one of the best pitching staffs in recent memory.

The Sox started strong, going 36-16 and leading by 10.5 games by the end of May. The rest of the AL East, most notably the Yankees, couldn't make up the difference and the Sox reestablished their dominance in the

postseason, running into severe competition from only the Cleveland Indians.

With such a dominant season, and the semi-breakup of the Yankees after the season, this could be the beginning of a dynastic run by the Sox. No, we don't have to feel bad for Red Sox fans any longer. They should be feeling bad for us.

## **There's a difference between a milestone and a record.**

Most of us happen to have 10 fingers on our hands and 10 toes on our feet. As a result of this seemingly random assignment of digits, we count in tens, and we put special emphasis on numbers that end in a couple of zeroes, like one hundred, one million and one googol. We call them milestones.

However accidental the setting of the standard, a number of players achieved historic career milestones this year.

- Tom Glavine won his 300th game
- Craig Biggio smacked his 3,000th hit
- Sammy Sosa hit his 600th home run
- Trevor Hoffman recorded his 500th save—the first player to do so
- Alex Rodriguez, Frank Thomas and Jim Thome hit their 500th career home runs—A-Rod was the youngest player to hit 500
- Pedro Martinez recorded his 3,000th career strikeout

We even saw a rare seasonal milestone in 2007, when Jimmy Rollins and Curtis Granderson both hit 20-20-20-20, those being a minimum number of doubles, triples, home runs and stolen bases in one season. Only two other players had hit those milestones before—and Rollins and Granderson did it in the same year.

A number of records also were broken in 2007. For instance, Hoffman's 500th save was both a milestone and a record at the time, but his career saves total at season end, 524, is the current record—not really a milestone. It doesn't have a couple of zeroes at the end of it. Still, records are cool, too.

## Ten Things I Learned This Year

Bobby Jenks, the White Sox closer, tied a record by retiring 41 batters in a row over 13 appearances, briefly resuscitating the profile of Jim Barr, who set the record in 1972.

On Sept. 27, Ryan Howard set a record for strikeouts in a season, breaking Adam Dunn's previous high and finishing with 199 Ks. The next day, teammate Rollins broke Willie Wilson's single-season record for most at bats in a season, finishing with 716.

Perhaps the second-most impressive career record set in 2007 was Bobby Cox's 132nd ejection from a game, breaking the legendary John McGraw's record. Among the many facts culled from the colorful history of Cox's ejections is the fact that he's been thrown out of games with the Phillies most often—13 times—and the Braves have won only one of those games.

Perhaps the biggest disappointment of the season was the record that wasn't broken. Biggio came within two painful fastballs to the body of tying Hughie Jennings' career record for being hit by a pitch (287). He seemed to lose his "touch" this year, getting hit by pitches only three times, after totaling as many as 34 HBPs in previous years. Biggio retired at the end of the season, meaning that Jennings' record will stand for the foreseeable future.

Biggio's pursuit of the record even became the subject of a satirical piece from *The Onion*, headlined: "Craig Biggio Blames Media Pressure For Stalling At 285 Hit-By-Pitches."

*With over 50 games remaining, Biggio has ample time to break the record, though there are several tangible factors that can be blamed for his recent stall. Most significant is the simple fact that the closer he gets to the immortal mark, pitchers around the league have been throwing to, instead of at, Biggio.*

### Streaky records

- Greg Maddux became first pitcher to win at least 10 games in 20 straight seasons.
- Albert Pujols became first player to hit 30 HR and 100 RBI in first seven seasons.
- Ichiro had 200 hits for the seventh straight year; Wee Willie Keeler holds the record at eight.
- Moises Alou set hitting streak for batters over the age of 40: 30 games.
- Placido Polanco has played second base a record 182 straight games without an error.

*"No one wants to be the guy who throws that record 288th bean-ball," New York Mets pitcher Tom Glavine said. "From this point on, when Craig comes up to bat, he is only going to get pitches he can hit. Still, I am sure some pitcher will make a mistake, and serve up a wild pitch on a silver platter. When that happens, Craig will definitely know to lay into it."*

It didn't happen. But another player did survive intense media scrutiny to break a hallowed career mark.

### A very few numbers are both milestones and records.

The most important career record of all was set by the bay in San Francisco, where Barry Bonds hit his 756th home run on Aug. 7, breaking Hank Aaron's record of 755—a number that had come to represent both a record and a milestone, just as Babe Ruth's 714 stood as a hallowed number before Aaron broke it.

Before the season even began, a favorite pastime of baseball pundits was guessing which date Bonds would break the record, with most estimates in August or September. Bonds seemed to make all the guesswork irrelevant, however, when he blasted eight home runs in April. It seemed that the record might fall before the All-Star break. But his bat cooled as the weather warmed, and the accompanying media circus seemed to last forever.

Or as Steven Colbert said on *The Colbert Report*: "The media continue to wait for Barry Bonds to break the home run record, continuing baseball's proud tradition of waiting for something to happen."

Bonds tied the record in San Diego on Aug. 4, then came home to San Francisco to break it. The San Francisco fans cheered, but the rest of the nation was torn between loathing and confusion. No one represented the attitude of those fans more than commissioner Bud Selig, who personally witnessed the 755th home run, stood when it was hit, didn't applaud, and released a curt press release after the event. He didn't attend the 756th, sending a representative instead.

The issue, of course, was Bonds' alleged use of performance-enhancing drugs, particularly steroids. "Alleged" is the legal term, though very few people actually would use it in normal conversation. That Bonds took steroids is almost a certainty. And Bonds' self-centeredness has fanned the flames of loathing further.

The ultimate testament of how fans feel about Bonds was conducted by fashion designer Marc Ecko, who bought the 756th home run ball and ran a poll on the Internet to determine what should be done with it. More than 10 million people voted:

- 47% voted to brand the ball with an asterisk and donate it to the Hall of Fame
- 34% voted to bestow it to the Hall of Fame without an asterisk
- 19% voted to launch it into space forever, banishing it from our earthly realm

Lost in the brouhaha was the fact that Bonds, who turned 44 in July, had the greatest season of anyone over the age of 42, as measured in Win Shares. He accrued 27 Win Shares in 2007, blasting the previous record, 44-year-old Jack Quinn's 18 in 1928.

### The era is dead. Long live the era...not.

There is more than just antipathy towards Bonds at work here. There is anger over something we've lost. When Babe Ruth set the original record—that-is-also-a-milestone, it came to represent a Golden Age of baseball, when play was pure and players heroic. When Aaron set a new mark, he represented the best of baseball's Grand Experiment—integration of the national pastime—as well as personal courage in the face of life-threatening hostility. At the time, many rued the end of an era (as people always do), but over time most came to appreciate the institutional and personal courage Aaron's mark symbolized.

Bonds' new mark represents a great athletic achievement, but much less, too. It represents a new era in baseball, one in which the millions and millions of dollars thrown at players has goaded them into looking for every competitive edge, including illegal ones. Underneath our rage is a sorrow that the reality we now face isn't going to disappear in the face of more stringent drug testing or legal proceedings.

New undetectable drugs will be invented; new pharmaceutical ways will be found to gain an edge. And some players will try them, no matter what penalties are at risk, putting those who don't try them at a competitive disadvantage (and potentially costing them millions). This is baseball now, an ethical quagmire. We wish we could banish it to the moon, but we can't. And so we mourn, and we boo, and we seethe.

More than any other sport, baseball once served as a refuge from sordid affairs like politics and capitalism. But it is no longer the game of purity, heroes and innocence. It is now a professional game, with no illusions. This isn't Barry Bonds' fault, but he is the icon of our loss.

### It was also the year of the A-Rod

In a weird parallel, another great ballplayer, the one most likely to break Bonds' new home run mark, had his best year ever in New York. Yankee third baseman Rodriguez set career highs in runs scored (143), runs batted in (156), on-base percentage (.422) and slugging percentage (.645). He led the league in home runs (54, including his 500th career homer) and will almost certainly be voted the league MVP when the award is announced after this book goes to press. Yet, in a way, A-Rod continued to be almost as controversial a presence as Bonds.

#### In the 1990s, Craig Biggio ranked:

- 1st with 147 hit by pitch
- 2nd with 1,515 games played
- 2nd with 1,042 runs scored
- 2nd with 362 doubles
- 3rd with 1,728 hits
- 8th with 319 stolen bases
- 12th with 730 walks

A-Rod doesn't have Bonds' egomaniacal personality, but he does seem to be lacking something ("fire in the belly?") that sportswriters like to see. Combine that with the intense New York media atmosphere, the largest contract in baseball history (which almost bankrupted the Texas Rangers), some questionable behavior on the field

(such as slapping a ball out of Bronson Arroyo's hand in a playoff game in 2004) and a lack of production in the postseason, and you've got a combustible situation.

A-Rod's laidback manner didn't jibe well with aggressive New Yorkers, and constant comparisons to Derek Jeter didn't help either. And his contract, which paid \$252 million over 10 years—by far the largest contract in baseball history—added suspense to the proceedings because it contained a clause that allowed A-Rod to opt out at the end of the 2007 season.

Imagine. The guy has the largest contract ever, and he plays for the Yankees. And he might opt out? Yes he might, and he did. At the end of the season, A-Rod decided to walk away from a guaranteed \$81 million over the next three years, in the hope of finding a better deal, or perhaps just a more welcoming atmosphere, somewhere else.



Incredibly, agent Boras announced Rodriguez' decision during the fourth game of the World Series. This was during the Red Sox' clinching world championship victory, and the news was covered by Fox television as the Rockies were scrambling to stay in the ballgame and the Series. A satiric *Onion* headline said it best: "Slow Month In Baseball Saved By A-Rod."

### Single Digits

Jon Rauch led the Nationals with eight wins and Matt Chico had the most losses among Nats hurlers: nine. This was the first time in major league history that a team didn't have a pitcher break double digits in either wins or losses.

*The unusually slow month, the only interesting point of which was a seemingly unending array of baseball games—some of which even went past their usual nine-inning limit—was very nearly a complete disappointment for the league. Now, however, the clutch statement by Rodriguez has inspired fan interest once again and has many fans and members of the baseball media calling Rodriguez "a contemporary Mr. October."*

It was a sad, pathetic attempt by Boras to upstage baseball's main event, and a true insight into how classless he is. And it isn't going to help A-Rod establish a new image. He isn't Barry Bonds, but he remains an enigma, someone who is not likely to restore baseball to its fans' good graces.

### Teams can set records and milestones too.

There was a significant milestone attributed to a team this year. On July 15, the Phillies lost to the Cardinals, 10-2. It was the 10,000th loss in Philly history, making them the losingest franchise in not only major league history, but in the history of professional sports everywhere.

This year's Phillies turned out to be winners, however, when they overcame a seven-game deficit with 17 games to play. The Phillies went 13-4 in those final contests, the Mets went 5-12, and the Phillies finished in first place on the final day of the season. By some measures, it was the greatest come-from-behind streak in baseball history.

But the greatest season-ending streak was Colorado's. Sporting a 76-72 record on Sept. 15, the Rockies won 13 of their last 14 regularly scheduled games to tie San Diego for the National League Wild Card slot. They beat the Padres in a classic tiebreaking game, qualifying for the postseason, and then swept series from both

the Phillies and Diamondbacks to qualify for the World Series. Their 21 wins in 22 games was the greatest streak ever heading into the World Series.

Never a franchise encumbered with great expectations, the often-overlooked Colorado squad captured the hearts of many baseball fans with their wildly improbable run. In a year characterized by a lack of heart from its major protagonists, the Rockies displayed heart a-plenty for all of baseball. In a small way, they may have saved baseball from itself—at least for now.

### The guard is changing.

Last year, one of our 10 lessons was "youth has been served." This year, we recognize that something a little more substantial is going on: The popular face of baseball is changing from the old—all those players who reached milestones this year—to the young. This generational changeover could not have come at a better time for the game.

Over the past 30 years, the average age of baseball players has been rising fairly steadily, as medical advances and new training techniques (cough) have enabled players to stay in the game longer. Obviously, the lure of free agent money has provided the motivation to do so.

But in the past two years, the average age of baseball players has trended downward to an extent not seen since the early 1960s, when expansion and the full fruits of integration produced a stellar group of young players. As Bill James points out in this

year's *Bill James Handbook*, the 1964 class of youngsters included Pete Rose, Carl Yastrzemski, Gaylord Perry, Tony Oliva, Dick Allen, Lou Brock, Ron Santo, Willie Stargell and many, many other notable talents under the age of 25.

It will be interesting to see who among today's youngsters eventually will rank in the same class of baseball greats as Rose, Yaz and Allen. Felix Hernandez, David Wright, Grady Sizemore, Ryan Howard, Scott Kazmir, Hanley Ramirez, Fausto Carmona, Ryan Braun, Prince Fielder and Jose Reyes, to name a few, all could be there when their careers are over.

### Positive Buc Facts

- The Pirates hit 45 home runs in August; highest monthly total in club history
- 322 doubles for season also a team record
- Also set club records in fielding percentage, most errorless games and fewest errors in a season

Most importantly, these players are providing a breath of fresh air and personality at a time when baseball sorely needs it. Let's hope they fulfill every expectation we have of them, and that they can establish a new, more vibrant and ethical era in baseball.

### Even individual game records were set.

The Rockies and San Diego solved their differences in a classic tiebreaking game, but history was also made in an Aug. 22 game, when the Rangers beat the Orioles, 30-3. It was the most lopsided game and the most runs scored in a game since they started counting foul balls as strikes. A memorable game in so many ways...

- The Orioles actually led, 3-0 after three innings. Their win probability at that point was 82%.
- Yes, the Rangers scored 30 runs in the last six innings. In fact, they scored 30 runs in just four separate innings.
- Wes Littleton earned a save for the Rangers, illustrating how ridiculous saves are.
- Texas' team batting average rose five points, from .253 to .258.
- Baltimore's ERA sank from seventh in the league (4.39) to 11th (4.60).
- The player with the longest last name in major league history, Jarrod Saltalamacchia, tied for the most RBIs on the team, seven.
- The bottom three Rangers hitters were 13 for 19, with four homers and 16 RBIs.
- One of them, David Murphy, swung at 14 pitches and missed only once.
- Baltimore pitchers threw 120 more pitches than Ranger hurlers.

The clincher: it was only the first game of a double-header. The Rangers won the second game as well, 9-7.

### The Internet is bringing us closer to the game.

How great is the Internet? It has not only brought you *The Hardball Times*, but a wealth of other pretty cool baseball stuff, too. For instance, many baseball players now

**How to turn around a season**  
The Cubs went 21-10 (.677) in their last 31 games decided by one run after starting the season just 2-12 (.143) in those contests through May 27...overall, Chicago went 23-22 (.511) in one-run games in 2007.

have their own blogs, in which they talk directly to fans (sometimes immediately after games are over), without any media or publicity middlemen.

It's now easier for fans to hear an insider's perspective. Schilling (who had the most entertaining and widely read blog this year) told us how you file for free agency: "So this huge thing,

free agency, was accomplished by doing the following: Place a phone call to the MLBPA, tell them you want to become a free agent, hang up."

No bureaucratic forms to fill out? Who knew? Other players, such as Granderson and Todd Jones, posted frequently on their blogs and MySpace pages. This is a positive development for major league baseball, bringing the game and its personalities closer to its fans.

The Internet even changed a pitcher's pitching strategy. Dave Cameron, of *U.S.S. Mariner* ([www.ussmariner.com](http://www.ussmariner.com)) posted an "open letter" to Felix Hernandez's pitching coach and, well, you can read all about what happened in David's review of the Seattle season, "The Year of the Improbable."

Baseball statistics took a giant leap forward when Sean Forman added new features to his site, [www.baseball-reference.com](http://www.baseball-reference.com), at a hair-raising pace. As I write these words, you can now look up detailed game logs, performance breakouts, minor league records and a gazillion other statistics from baseball's past. *Baseball Reference* has become the ultimate baseball resource.

This development was triggered by *Retrosheet's* release of play-by-play data for nearly every game since 1957 early in the year, a stunning accomplishment for the nonprofit site ([www.retrosheet.org](http://www.retrosheet.org)). As they say, "God bless Retrosheet."

*Fangraphs* ([www.fangraphs.com](http://www.fangraphs.com)) started posting live Win Probability graphs of all major league games on its site. Tracking games is perhaps the best use of Win Probability Added, as discussed in my *Annual* article, "The Story Stat." Having live WP graphs adds to your enjoyment and understanding of what's happening during a game.

But probably the biggest statistical breakthrough was MLB.com's rollout of its Pitch f/x system across most major league ballparks. Pitch f/x is an addition

### How to turn around a career

Carlos Pena had a big year, with 45 home runs for the Devil Rays, after hitting just one with Boston in 2006. That's the third biggest increase in baseball history, behind Mark McGwire (3 in 1986 to 49 in 1987) and Harmon Killebrew (0 in 1958 to 42 in 1959).

## Ten Things I Learned This Year

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to MLB.com's popular Gameday application, in which you track a live ballgame on a pitch-by-pitch basis over the Internet.

The Pitch f/x system uses video cameras to measure the speed, trajectory and spin of each pitch at 30 frames a second. The results are posted on the Gameday application, and saved in XML format, for any baseball fan with the requisite technical skills to download.

This has led to a wealth of new information on the Web, such as John Walsh's article in this *Annual* about platoon advantages. Other major contributors to the Pitch f/x dissection have been THT's Josh Kalk, Joe Sheehan of *BaseballAnalysts.com*, Mike Fast's *Fastball* blog (<http://fastballs.wordpress.com>), Dan Fox of *Baseball Prospectus* ([www.baseballprospectus.com](http://www.baseballprospectus.com)) and Professor Alan Nathan's Pitch f/x resource page (<http://webusers.npl.uiuc.edu/~a-nathan/pob/pitchtracker.html>).

Thanks to these analysts, we now have a much deeper feel for how well umpires follow the prescribed strike zone, the pitching performance of some high-profile pitchers like Pedro Martinez and Schilling, and when pitchers throw certain types of pitches and what happens when they do. The subjects are seemingly endless, and writers and bloggers are stepping up to the challenge.

### **Still, baseball has its real-life tragedies and heroes.**

Baseball is still just a game played by a bunch of grown boys. But every once in a while, something happens in the baseball world that suddenly gives you real-life perspective.

One such instance was the death of minor league first base coach Mike Coolbaugh, when he was struck in the head by a line drive. Such a needless death; you're likely to see more coaches wearing batting helmets in the future.

In St. Louis, pitcher Josh Hancock died in an automobile accident while driving under the influence of alcohol. St. Louis was the scene of many dramatic incidents during the year, and Cardinal fan Brian Gunn has contributed a review of the Cardinals' highs and lows to the *Annual*.

Not all human interest stories in baseball were tragic, however. Some were inspiring. Zach Greinke overcame horrible bouts of depression and social anxiety, which caused him to walk away from baseball a year ago, to perform admirably for Kansas City this year.

And Cincinnati's Josh Hamilton, unwanted a year ago, picked up in the Rule 5 draft by the Cubs and subsequently sold to the Reds, had a breakout season (batting .292/.368/.554 in 337 plate appearances). Hamilton overcame his own demons and an addiction to crack to become a model of courage and redemption for baseball fans everywhere. As he observed in *ESPN The Magazine*:

*A father will tell me about his son while I'm signing autographs. A mother will wait outside the players' parking lot to tell me about her daughter. They know where I've been. They look to me because I'm proof that hope is never lost.*

In spite of everything, baseball still has its heroes. Baseball still gives hope.

# Ten Things I Learned This Year

by Dave Studenmund

As I write these words, the regular season has been extended by at least one day, just as it was in 2007. The tarps have been permanently pulled over the fields in two New York ballparks. The Rays have qualified for the postseason—the last of MLB’s 30 teams to make it to October. The Cubs, having posted their best winning percentage in over 60 years, will try to break their 100-year postseason curse.

By the time you read these words, you’ll know the outcome of the postseason and the final destiny of the Rays and Cubs, among others. Actually, given how long it usually takes me to write, I’ll probably know the World Series champ by the end of this piece, too. Still, this was a typical baseball season, filled with surprising plays, games and insights. There’s a lot to talk about while we wait for the postseason drama to play out.

## Youth is Rampant

Major league baseball is getting younger. This isn’t exactly news; the average age of major league players has been heading down the last two years. But MLB took a major turn toward adolescence in 2008. In fact, the change from 2007 to 2008 was the biggest one-year age decrease in major league history.

Here’s a table of the biggest one-season changes in Win Shares age since 1900. Win Shares age is simply the average age of major league players, weighted by the number of Win Shares each player accrued. (Win Shares is a metric that measures overall player impact. You can read more about it in our Glossary.)

Year	Age	Previous Year’s Age	Diff
2008	27.7	28.8	-1.08
1909	27.4	28.4	-1.01
1946	29.4	30.2	-0.80
1948	28.7	29.1	-0.39

I included only four years in the table because the top two years, maybe three, blow away the competition. Of course, 1946 marked the return of World War II veterans to the national pastime; the only time you might say that “veterans” made anything younger. Even so, 1946 is pretty far behind the top two years. For sheer impact,

only 1909—the year that featured the emergence of Eddie Collins and Tris Speaker building on the recent successes of Ty Cobb and Walter Johnson (perhaps the greatest emergence of top talent ever in one short period)—compares to 2008.

One of the biggest factors behind the 2008 youth movement was the retirement (forced or otherwise) of some of the game’s greatest talents: Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens, Mike Piazza, etc. In fact, these simultaneous exits will make the Hall of Fame voting five years from now *very* interesting, a topic Joe Posnanski explores a little later in the *Annual*.

As the old guys faded into the figurative Iowa cornfield, the youth of America took over. Of course, the Rays helped lead this charge of youth by winning 97 games with an average Win Shares age of 25.8 years, making them the third-youngest team in the majors. But the trend was ubiquitous: 24 of the 30 major league teams got younger this year. In fact, the Giants turned 3.5 years younger in 2008 (compared to 2007), thanks to Bonds’ exile and the great success of Tim Lincecum.

The Twins won 88 games with an average age of 25.5 years (the youngest team in the majors), a decline of 2.6 years from 2007. The Cardinals, Dodgers and Red Sox all “de-aged” 1.9 years. It was just an all-out youth movement. Good teams, bad teams and mediocre teams all got younger in 2008 at a pace unprecedented in major league history.

## Yet No One Seems to Believe in Young Teams

In the beginning of the season, everyone was charmed by the Rays, but it seemed like people kept expecting the Yankees to reclaim their usual high ranking in the division and, when that failed to happen, they expected the Red Sox to take over. The Rays were fun, but they didn’t gain full respect. Many baseball writers and commentators seemed to think they eventually would fold in the competitive AL East.

Didn’t happen. The Rays rolled and rolled and nothing stopped them on their way to a 97-65 record and the AL East title. Why did the “mainstream media” (whoever they are) take so long to recognize the Rays were real?

Well, first of all, teams with great records early in the year tend to do worse in the latter part of the year. That’s



called “regression to the mean” when statisticians talk. You can see it in this table of all teams’ records since 1960, in which I’ve grouped teams by their record as of July 1:

7/1 Win%	Teams	Average Winning Percentages		
		1-Jul	End of Year	Diff
.250-.350	32	.323	.372	.049
.350-.450	220	.412	.433	.021
.450-.550	525	.502	.502	.001
.550-.650	247	.589	.568	-.021
.650-.750	24	.680	.624	-.056

Under “Average Winning Percentages,” the July 1 is the average winning percentage of all teams in that category as of July 1 (duh). The End of Year column is their record over the entire year (including games before July 1) and “Diff” is the diff between the two. As the table shows, the best records get worse, the worst records get better and the average stay average.

The story becomes more telling when you take each team’s record from the previous year into account. After all, the Rays were 66-96 in 2007—a 31-game improvement from one year to the next isn’t impossible, but it’s not very common. Only three teams have posted bigger one-year gains in 162-game seasons.

That kind of changes the statistical dynamic. Here’s a table of teams that were playing at a .543 clip or better as of July 1 (.543 is the winning percentage of an 88-win team over a full season, which seems to be the going rate for playoff teams), grouped by their winning percentage the previous year:

Previous Year Win%	Teams	Average Winning Percentages		
		1-Jul	EOY	Diff
.350-.450	32	.576	.539	-.037
.450-.550	156	.587	.556	-.031
.550-.650	113	.600	.588	-.012

As you can see, teams that did poorly in the previous year had a bigger drop in the second half of the year than teams that had performed well the previous year.

So this was the extra-damning thing about the Rays. They were playing well (good records tend to get worse) and they had a bad year in 2007 (teams that played poor-

ly in the previous year really tend to get worse). Yes, the Rays were young, and young teams tend to improve, but there were a lot of other factors to overcome in the minds of the masses.

So I guess I can’t be overly critical of those Tampa Bay critics. There was some underlying rationale behind their disbelief. But the Rays have put all doubts to rest in the postseason, defeating the White Sox and Red Sox. The word is out: They belong.

### The Angels Made Recording History

The best regular season record in 2008 belonged to the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, the only team to hit the magical, and very round, number of 100 wins. A remarkable record, really, because the Angels’ offense managed to score only 765 runs—a little less than the average American League team.

Yes, ‘twas pitching that drove the machine. The Angels allowed only 697 runs all year, the lowest total ... no, the second-lowest ... no, um ... well, let’s see. Actually, four American League teams had better pitching (and fielding) than the Angels; the Blue Jays, Rays, Athletics and Red Sox all gave up fewer runs than the Angels.

So how did LA of A manage to win 100 games? Well, one of the “luck” stats that people tend to cite is a team’s record in one-run games. The Angels were 31-21 in one-run games last year. Good, but not great; five teams were better.

But if you expand your definition of close games to include two-run contests, you find that the Angels were 61-28 (in one- and two-run contests), which was the best record last year and (get this) the 10th-best record in major league history. The Angels won 30 two-run ballgames last year, the most in major league history (the 1992 Braves also won 30, but they lost 11; the 2008 Angels lost just seven).

Of course, one of the keys to the Angels’ success was the guy in the bullpen, name of Francisco Rodriguez, who managed to save 62 games and blow away Bobby Thigpen’s previous record of 57. A strong bullpen is one of the key ingredients for winning close ballgames, but the weird thing is that bullpen success isn’t *predictive* of success in close games. It’s a baseballian enigma.

Baseball analysts like me calculate something called the “Pythagorean formula,” which is a fancy way of saying we estimate the number of games a team “should” have won based on the number of runs it scored and allowed. Published by Bill James in the

## Ten Things I Learned This Year

1980s and enhanced by several statisticians since, it's a pretty accurate tool.

The Angels outperformed their Pythagorean formula by almost 12 wins, which is the second-biggest variance in major league history. The record for Pythagorean variance (12.9 wins) was set by the 1905 Tigers.

Four of the 10 largest Pythagorean variances of the last 108 years have been set in the last four years. Are we just feeling "lucky" these days, or is something else going on?

### Bullpen Usage Rant No. 2,478

Rich Lederer has penned an article in the *Annual* about the bullpen, the save statistic and Francisco Rodriguez's new record. I don't have much to add to Rich's insights, but I do want to point out the sort of thing that drives me nuts.

Tom M. Tango has developed a wonderful stat called Leverage Index (LI), which measures the relative criticality of each game situation. An average situation has a Leverage Index of 1.0, but it can vary quite a bit. As an example: In the top of the seventh, with a runner on first and a tie score, the LI is 2.4. The same situation in the top of the ninth has an LI of 3.4. Two innings add a point of impact, because the home team will have less time to respond to, say, a home run by the batting team.

Turns out that an LI of three (three times more critical than the average situation) is a pretty good cutoff point for "critical situations." About 3 percent of all plays last year had an LI of 3.0 and above. Sixty percent of games had at least one play with an LI of 3.0 or higher.

So who faced the most batters when with an LI of at least three? It was that Angels reliever.

Pitcher	Team	LI>3	Save Ops
Rodriguez, F	LAA	100	69
Wilson, B	SF	84	47
Torres, S	MIL	83	35
Gregg, K	FLA	81	38
Cordero, F	CIN	71	40

There is a nice correlation between appearances in high leverage situations and save opportunities. In general, pitchers who have the most save opportunities also face the most batters when LI is three or more.

There are a few exceptions on some teams, however. Here are three teams on which the leader in save opportunities wasn't the leader in high-leverage appearances:

Team	Pitcher	LI > 3	Save Ops
Detroit	Rodney, F	42	19
	Jones, T	26	21
San Diego	Bell, H	53	7
	Hoffman, T	30	34
NY Mets	Heilman, A	47	8
	Wagner, B	31	34

If you're like me (and why wouldn't you be?) you're probably not surprised to see that Trevor Hoffman and Todd Jones didn't lead their teams in high-leverage situations.

But check out the Mets. Aaron Heilman faced more high-leverage situations than closer Billy Wagner! That's Aaron Heilman, of the 5.21 ERA. Yes, I know that Wagner was on the disabled list for virtually all of August and September, but Heilman led Wagner in high-leverage situations even prior to Aug. 1 (28-25).

Heilman has been a fine pitcher in the past, but he fell apart in 2008. The Mets were slow to realize this, but they didn't have a lot of other options and Wagner's lack of flexibility handicapped them further. When closers can't pull out of their one-inning-with-a-lead-only rut, as Wagner seemingly can't, the team is crippled.

### The White Sox are Heavy, Man, Heavy

David Gassko has a great article in the *Annual* about the size of players in major league history, and how short and tall players have performed relative to each other over the years. But if you take a look around any major league spring training camp these days, my guess is you'll see a lot of great big guys.

David does a smart thing in his analysis. He uses height as a proxy for size. That's smart, because weight statistics are very unreliable, even for players in the recent past. Weight statistics for players in the 1920s? Fuggedaboutit.

Or not. Damn the statistics, I say, full spreadsheet ahead. I was curious about weight trends, so I tallied up the weight data from Retrosheet and Baseball Info Solutions (for the last three years) to see if I could figure out the heaviest team in baseball history. To

calculate my BMI (Baseball Mass Index), I used the weight of each player and, um, weighted it by the number of at-bats he had each year (as a percentage of team at-bats).

According to my very loose translation of bad data, the heaviest batting team of all time has been (drum-roll, please) ... the 2008 Chicago White Sox.

Yep, the ChiSox averaged 220 pounds—and that’s including the Cuban Beanpole, Alexei Ramirez. The Big Sox included Jim Thome (255 pounds), Jermaine Dye (245) and AJ Pierzynski (240). Even infielder Juan Uribe weights 225, and I didn’t include 275-pounder Bobby Jenks because he’s a pitcher.

The second-largest batting team of 2008 (and the team that initially got me interested in the subject) was the Washington Nationals, who averaged 215 pounds. Unfortunately (or not), 298-pound Dmitri Young and 268-pound Willy Mo Pena didn’t get enough at-bats to vault the Nats to the top of the list. That’s right. They didn’t pull their weight.

As I said, these data are deeply untrustworthy (case in point: Walt Goldsby, who played in the 1800s, reportedly weighed 1,658 pounds), so take this with a grain of salt. But Dmitri Young appears to be the second-heaviest player of all time, behind 322-pound Walter Young (who played first base for the Orioles several years ago). And don’t forget 295-pound Jumbo Brown, a reliever from the 1930s, who ranks as the third-heaviest player of all time.

Last trivia point before you go totally insane: the Orioles of 1991 and 1992 were mighty heavy too, ranking at the top of the list of teams before 2000. Remember Chris Hoiles, Randy Milligan and Sam Horn? The shortstop was a pretty big guy, too.

### Albert Pujols is an Incredible Hitter

Remember that hot start by Chipper Jones? Three months into the season, he was batting .394/.485/.630 and Atlanta fans (and others) were on a .400 watch. He didn’t make it, of course, but he sure sizzled through June.

And remember how Manny sizzled for LA? During his time on the left coast, he batted .396/.489/.743. Amazing numbers, although spread over only 229 plate appearances.

So let’s do this: let’s combine Chipper’s stats through the end of June and Manny’s stats from the beginning of July until the end of the season (Manny wasn’t too shabby in Boston the month of July, either). Then, let’s compare that line to a single player, say, the first baseman of St. Louis, Albert Pujols. Take a look at the bottom of the page.

Virtually the same number of runs, RBIs and home runs, though Pujols has more doubles. The only thing separating King Albert from our merged superstar is 13 singles. Manny and Chipper were great for half seasons and received a lot of publicity for it. Albert was great all year long. That’s called perspective.

Confession: I totally stole this idea from The Book Blog ([www.insidethebook.com](http://www.insidethebook.com)).

### Streaky Teams

Which team would you guess was the streakiest last year? Perhaps the Dodgers, who had to click off a number of September wins to take the division title? Or the Indians, who were white-hot at the end of the year? Maybe Houston, with that August surge?

Wrong. The streakiest team last year was the Kansas City Royals. Don’t believe me? Take a look at their game graph in the back-of-the-book statistics. They lost 12 games in a row in late May (that tends to happen when you play the Red Sox, Blue Jays and Twins in a row), then won 11 of 12 against National League competition in June. Lost a bunch in August; won a bunch in September.

By the way, there were three 12-game streaks last year—all losing streaks—by the Royals, Nationals and Mariners.

Using some simple probability theory, a team with KC’s record is expected to have about 82 “runs”—a switch from a win or loss in the previous game to the opposite in the next game—during the season. KC had only 68. As statisticians say, that is significant at the 95 percent probability level.

The least streaky team in the majors last year was the Florida Marlins. Probabilistically, the Marlins “should” have had 81 runs last year, but they actually had 92 (once again significant at the 95 percent level). Their only real streak came in September, when they were drifting out of the NL East race. Nine wins in a row against the

	AB	R	H	2B	HR	RBI	BA	OBP	SLG
Manny/Chipper	516	102	200	32	37	115	.388	.485	.665
Albert	524	100	187	44	37	116	.357	.462	.653

## Ten Things I Learned This Year

Phillies, Astros and Nationals put them 4.5 games out of the wild card slot, but they lost the next four games to effectively end their pennant chances.

Among the postseason qualifiers:

Streaky: White Sox, Brewers

Not Streaky: Red Sox, Angels

Average Streakiness: Rays, Cubs, Phillies, Dodgers

There's no particular pattern here. Successful teams can be streaky or not. Just thought you'd like to know.

### The Astros' Streak

Really, I told you all that just so I could write about the most awesome streak of the year. On July 26, the Houston Astros were languishing in the National League Central basement and roundly criticized for picking up pitcher Randy Wolf in a trade. Well, guess what. From July 27 (Wolf's first start with his new team) until Sept. 11 (forever a chilling date, even in a baseball column), the Astros went 33-11, the best 44-game streak in the majors last year.

Unfortunately, Hurricane Ike struck land on the 12th, postponing a couple of key games against the Cubs (which eventually were played in Milwaukee, just up the lake from Chicago) and the Astros' pennant chances were blown away.

Houston was only three games behind Milwaukee on the 11th, but the Brewers turned it on and the Astros were 6-8 the rest of the month. Regardless of the final outcome, it was a remarkable run by Houston.

These are the heroes of the Houston streak, ranked by WPA (that's Win Probability Added—read about it in the Glossary) contribution to the team during the 44 games:

Lee, Carlos	1.76
Oswalt, Roy	1.68
Berkman, Lance	1.63
Valverde, Jose	1.53
Hawkins, LaTroy	1.21
Blum, Geoff	1.11

Yeah, Carlos Lee led the Astros in WPA during this streak even though he didn't play after Aug. 9. Lee was seriously hot at the time of his injury, and his broken pinky was a significant blow to the Astros' season.

The Wolf transaction made the Houston headlines, but the Astros' pickup of LaTroy Hawkins from the Yankees on July 30 was quite a steal for the 'Stros.

Hawkins posted a 0.43 ERA in 21 innings for Houston and picked up 1.2 WPA during their streak.

And Geoff Blum? The erstwhile infielder batted only .261/.302/.539 as Houston surged, but he delivered three of the six biggest blows of the streak:

- Sept. 2: Blum hit a two-run home run in the top of the 11th off Kerry Wood to beat the Cubs.
- Aug. 2: Blum hit a pinch-hit two-run single in the bottom of the ninth off Billy Wagner (Wagner's last game) to tie the game. The Astros won in extra innings.
- Aug. 19: Blum hit a two-out, three-run home run in the top of the sixth to break up a tie game with the Brewers. Houston went on to win, 5-2.

You probably knew about Oswalt's and Berkman's contribution to The Streak—they're the Astros' stars, after all. But give Hawkins and Blum some love, too.

### The Clutchiest Batter of the Year

Wouldn't you like to know how other batters performed in the clutch last year? Since we've already picked apart pitcher performance using Leverage Index, let's turn around and do the same thing for batters. Turns out there were two batters who stood out last year when the game was critical.

The Phillies' Pat Burrell had 21 plate appearances in high-leverage situations (LI over 3) and he rose to the challenge, particularly in the first three months of the season. Altogether, he hit three singles, four doubles and a home run. He also walked four times and was hit by a pitch, winding up with a .500 batting average, .620 OBP and .938 slugging percentage in the most critical situations.

But our award for clutchiest player of the year goes to the Dodgers' Andre Ethier. Ethier came to bat 26 times when the game's Leverage Index was higher than three. Here's what he did:

- Singled seven times
- One double, two triples and a home run
- Five walks and a HBP
- Made nine outs, including six strikeouts

That's a .550 batting average, .653 OBP and .950 slugging percentage. His biggest blow might have been a triple in the top of the eighth against the Padres to tie the game. The Dodgers eventually won the game and increased their NL West lead to 2.5 games at a critical time in the pennant race.

Special credit goes to Mark Teixeira, who had eight plate appearances in high-leverage situations during his



brief time with the Angels. He was splendiferous, with three singles, three home runs and a sacrifice fly. There was more than one reason the Angels won all those close games.

### **In the End, it was the Phillies' Year**

But once you got past all the trends, the drama and the angst (have I mentioned the Cubs?), there was one team left in major league baseball, one team standing tall in the cold rain. The Phillies conquered the high-profile Mets, CC Sabathia's Brewers, Manny's Dodgers and the hot young Rays to take home the Commissioner's Trophy (can't they come up with a catchier name for the trophy that goes to the World Series winner?).

The postseason was sort of a coming-out party for Cole Hamels, who proved on the national stage that he is an ace, winning both the NLCS and World Series MVP trophies. But the real story to the Phillies' season, the biggest difference between this year's team and last year's, was their bullpen ace Brad Lidge.

K-Rod may have gotten the record and all the hype, but Lidge was the best reliever in baseball this past season. He didn't blow a single save, didn't lose a game. His WPA (5.37) led all major league relievers and he continued to dominate in the postseason, with seven

saves in nine games, yielding only six hits and one run in nine innings.

Not too long ago, Lidge was a pariah in Houston, giving up a huge home run to Albert Pujols in the 2005 postseason, temporarily losing his closer role in 2007 and being subsequently traded to the Phillies. To add injury to insult, he tore his knee in Spring Training. I don't know if Brad Lidge is haunted by the ghosts of his past, but his exorcism of those ghosts was the Phillies' triumph.

You wonder, however, if the lasting image of this year's World Series will be the sight of players bundled against the cold and "hydroplaning" when they slid into second base. All year long, baseball tried to fight the elements. MLB moved a game to Milwaukee to avoid Hurricane Ike. They played a minor league game in Des Moines even though the town was evacuated due to flooding. There was literally no one there.

Give it up, guys. You can't fight Mother Nature. Either shorten the season or require every team to build a domed stadium. We aren't interested in snowballs and soaked uniforms. It's baseball we love, played on green grass on a sunny day.

# Ten Things I Learned This Year

by Dave Studenmund

Time goes on, baseball is played and wonders never cease. Okay, maybe not wonders—even I don't take baseball that seriously—but curiosities, insights and new things jump out of the sports page nearly every day of a baseball season. When there are 15 games, 135 innings and 600 plays every day, something new and unexpected is bound to happen.

The 2009 term was no different. We think we know this game, those of us who watch it and ponder it obsessively. But we don't, and that is what keeps bringing us back, and keeps supplying fodder for these Annual articles of mine.

For the third year in a row, there was a thrilling one-game playoff to determine the postseason's final contestants. Two new ballparks opened, Derek Jeter became the all-time Yankees hit leader, Manny Ramirez was suspended for 50 games and Joe Mauer had a season so superb he may never replicate it.

That's a good place to start.

## Joe Mauer Had A Really, Really Good Year.

A lot of players had big years. Albert Pujols, obviously. Zack Greinke, too. But it was the Twins' Mauer who most captured my imagination. Consider...

- 23 percent of Mauer's batted balls were line drives. That figure didn't lead the majors, but it was in the top 20. The major league leader, Jason Bartlett, was at 26 percent and the major league average was 19 percent.
- He hit only **one** infield fly, one percent of all his flies. Didn't quite lead the majors, but was very close to the guy who did, Ryan Howard (also at 1 percent). The major league average was 11 percent.
- 21 percent of his outfield flies were home runs, another top 20 figure. The major league average was 11 percent.
- He struck out in only 10 percent of his plate appearances, yet another top 20 figure. The major league average was 18 percent.
- He walked in 13 percent of his plate appearances, above the major league average of 10 percent and not quite in the top 20.
- He hit .279 on his ground balls. The major league average was around .250. Not a top-20 figure, but not exactly chopped liver, either.

This is a remarkable batting profile, with no below-average traits. Most of this year's great batters had at least one flaw.

- You can't really say Pujols has hitting flaws, but his line drive rate was 16 percent and his infield fly rate was 12 percent. Not Maueresque.
- Ryan Braun is an outstanding hitter, but he had a 17 percent infield fly rate last year.
- Prince Fielder had a superb year but he isn't a line drive hitter.
- Miguel Cabrera is a solid all-around hitter, with strong batted ball fundamentals, but he didn't match Mauer in a single one of the batted-ball categories I just mentioned.
- Chase Utley? Mauer Lite.

When you go down the list of great major league hitters, the only one who might match Mauer in all-around awesomeness is Hanley Ramirez. But ground-ball batting average is the only batted ball category in which Ramirez bested Mauer. That's it.

One other thing: Mauer is a catcher. We all know what the tools of ignorance do to the knees and the bat—they wear them down. The standard for batting greatness for catchers is much lower than that for any other position, which makes Mauer's year even more remarkable.

I spent the season researching and writing about batted-ball hitting and pitching. In fact, one of the benefits of purchasing the *2010 THT Annual* is that you can download all of my weekly Batted Ball Reports in one master PDF file. Read through them, if you'd like, because there were a number of new things I learned and shared during my research.

But perhaps the most significant thing I learned was the awesomeness of Mr. Mauer of Minnesota.

## They Still Hit Ground Balls In Cleveland

Park effects were the big topic early in the year, thanks to a simultaneous home run deluge and drought in New York.

In the new Yankee Stadium, 15.7 percent of the Yankees' and their opponents' outfield flies were home runs. On the road, that figure was 11.8 percent. The difference (3.8 percentage points) was by far the

largest in the majors; the second-highest difference was 2.2 percentage points in Cincinnati.

There's a trade off in this sort of thing. Shorter fences, or funky wind currents or whatever, make for home run havens. But they also make it easier to catch in-play fly balls for outs. In Yankee Stadium, outfield flies that weren't home runs were caught for outs 85 percent of the time. On the road, they were caught for outs 80 percent of the time. That difference was also the largest in the majors (once again by a wide margin; second largest spread was Washington's three percentage points).

The net effect was that teams created .021 more runs per fly ball in Yankee Stadium than on the road. That's something, but not compared to some other ballparks such as Fenway (.061 more runs per fly) or Cincinnati's Great American Ballpark (.029 more runs per fly).

Overall, the Yankees and their opponents scored .10 more runs per game at home than on the road. A hitter's park, but not overwhelmingly so.

Meanwhile, across town in the new Citi Field in Queens, something more bizarre was happening. The Mets' offense seemed to disappear into the heights of the Jackie Robinson rotunda as they (and their opponents) scored .32 fewer runs per game at Citi than on the road.

Actually, the Mets' offense disappeared everywhere. The new field didn't help, but its overall impact might surprise you.

As your favorite obsessive-compulsive TV detective might say, here's the thing: Despite Citi's well-publicized impact on home runs, the Mets and their opponents actually scored 0.15 *more* runs per fly ball at home than on the road. Citi Field's impact on fly balls was almost as positive as the new Yankee Stadium's!

Later in these same pages, Greg Rybarczyk, of the fantastic Hit Tracker Website takes a closer look (actually, a *very* close look) at both new New York ballparks. He finds that Citi did indeed rob Mets batters (and their opponents) of many home runs. But most of those unhomers fell in for extra-base hits and other Citi flies fell for hits too. The net result on all of the Mets' outfield flies was about the same.

I know these are totally counterintuitive results, perhaps unlikely to be repeated next year. We shall see. And they still hit more ground balls in Cleveland (45 percent) than on the road (42 percent)—a phenomenon we first noted about four years ago. I still have no idea why.

## Relievers Are Fickle

Relievers are inconstant bedfellows, aren't they? Seriously.

Let me put this in Biblical terms: Relievers are not patient; they are not kind. Relievers are jealous, they put on airs, they are snobbish. They are rude, self-seeking, prone to anger; they brood over injuries.

Relievers fail.

Okay, perhaps I'm being a bit dramatic (not to mention sacrilegious), but have you considered Brad Lidge?

- On May 23, Lidge entered the bottom of the ninth with the Phillies leading 4-2 against the Yankees. He gave up three runs, including a two-run homer to A-Rod.
- On June 5, he inherited a 3-2 lead in the bottom of the ninth, loaded the bases and then gave up a game-winning double to Andre Ethier.
- Aug. 15, with a 3-2 lead over the Braves, he gave up two runs in the bottom of the ninth again. The key play was his own error handling a bunt.

I could go on, but you get the picture. At the Hardball Times and Fangraphs we like to use something called WPA to judge relievers. WPA, which stands for Win Probability Added, is defined in the glossary at the back of the book. It tracks the impact of each play on the team's probability of winning and assigns the difference in probability to the players involved in each play.

As games progress, probabilities increase, which makes late-inning plays big events. And that's where relievers come in. For instance, when Lidge entered that May 23 game against the Yankees, the Phillies had a 89.5 percent probability of winning. Since Lidge gave up the game, his WPA for that game was -.895. In WPA terms, he lost the game all by himself.

Thirty-three times in 2009 a "closer" pitched the ninth inning for his team and gave up a lead such that he received a WPA score of -.80 or worse. Five of those times it was Lidge. No other closer did it more than three times.

Overall, Lidge posted a WPA of -4.54, the worst mark of any player in the majors last year. That figure is in stark contrast to 2008, when he seemed to lead the Phillies to their World Series title with his magical closer arm, posting the second-highest WPA in the majors: 5.37.

The bottom line is that Lidge's fall from the grace of 2008 to the hell of 2009 was record-breaking. No other pitcher in the history of Fangraphs' WPA records

(from 1974 to now) has ever lost so much WPA from one season to the next. Starting pitchers and position players who play the entire season just aren't likely to post pronounced differences like that. Only relievers are given the "opportunity" to reach such highs and lows.

Sometimes relievers just don't justify our faith in them.

### Maybe There Is Such A Thing As A Clutch Hitter

One of the best things about WPA is that it has birthed a second stat—a descriptive stat, really—called Leverage Index. The stat measures the importance of a situation by examining its potential impact on the outcome of the game. Leverage Index is set so that an average situation equals 1.0, but late-inning situations of close games can reach an LI of eight or nine—10, even. Last year, there were 20 plays with an LI of 10 or more.

Leverage Index is a natural way to measure clutch hitting (and pitching). You may be familiar with the concept of clutch play—its existence, predictability and usefulness have been debated in sabermetric circles since before Bill James was a security guard in a bean factory.

I like to use LI as a tool for judging clutch play and clutch impact. My measure of choice is performance in situations with an LI greater than 3.0. About 3.5 percent of all situations had an LI of 3.0 or more last year, which makes it the right combination of rare and important.

Last year, we anointed the Dodgers' Andre Ethier the best clutch hitter in the majors based on his performance in high-LI situations. We've run the numbers again this year and the winner is ... Andre Ethier.

This year, the Dodgers right fielder came to bat 41 times with an LI of 3.0 or more. That was the second-highest figure in the majors; only Aaron Hill came to bat more often in high-leverage situations (43 times). It seems that no matter what list you put together, there will always be a Blue Jay there to surprise you.

Anyway, in those 41 appearances, Ethier...

- Homered three times
- Doubled twice
- Singled four times
- Walked or was hit by a pitch 13 times
- Made an out 18 times.
- Reached base on a dropped third strike once

Ethier made an out less than half of the time he batted in high-leverage situations. Other batters had

better batting averages in 3.0-plus LI plate appearances (Raul Ibanez batted an impressive .500 in 12 high-leverage plate appearances, with three home runs), but Ethier gets credit for performing better in more clutch situations than anyone.

That's two years in a row for Ethier, Clutch King. Think he can make it three in a row? I'll bet a lot of sabermetricians out there are chomping at the bit to take that bet.

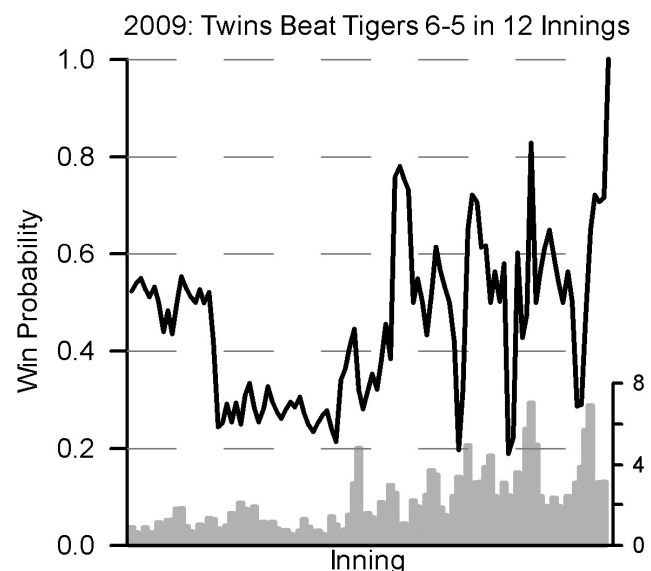
### I Love Playoff Games

We've not only witnessed three consecutive years with playoff games, we've witnessed three consecutive years of exciting playoff games. I have a simple method of judging a game's excitement: I tally up the total changes in win probability that occurred during the game. The more swings in win probability between the two teams, the more exciting the game.

Running the figures, this year's final game between the Twins and Tigers was right up there. In fact, on a "real-time" basis, it was not only the most important regular season game, it was the third-most exciting. Only two other games had more swings in win expectation between the two teams.

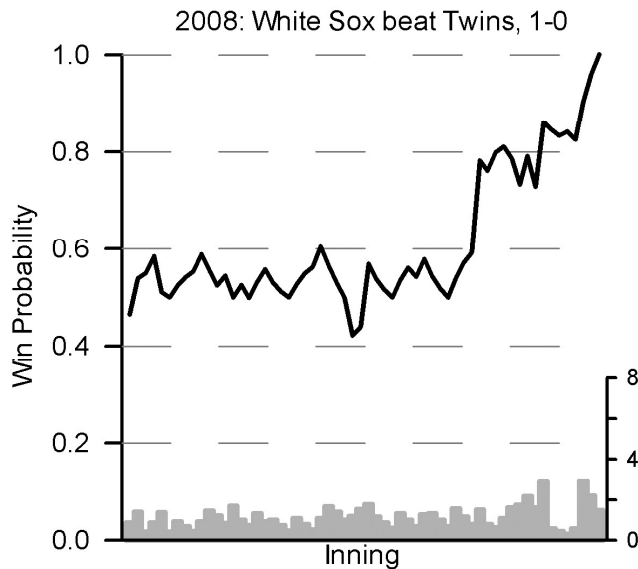
Oddly, the most exciting game of the year was also played between the Twins and Tigers, back on May 13. That game was a crazy 14-10 slugfest in Minnesota, won by a two-out Joe Crede grand slam in the 13th.

In case you've forgotten how much fun we had, I've included a graph of the swings in win probability, as well as the Leverage Index (that gray bar at the bottom with the scale on the right) of each play from the fabulous 2009 playoff game.

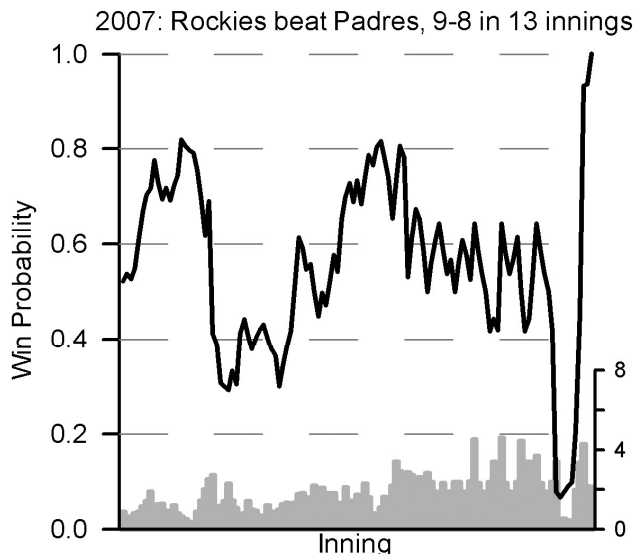




Of course, the 2008 playoff game between the Twins and the White Sox wasn't exactly humdrum either. Although 1-0 contests don't have many swings in probability, they're just as memorable. You can literally see Jim Thome's seventh-inning home run leap up the line.



And let's not forget 2007's whopper between the Padres and Rockies. That game had the wildest swing of all, from feast to famine, in the 13th (or famine to feast, depending on your perspective).



Even with that wild 13th inning swing, 2007's playoff game doesn't equal 2009's in win probability swings. In 2009, importance and excitement merged at the end in a way very few games do.

## What Leverages Championships

Last winter, Sky Andrecheck, a writer for Baseball Analysts, and I developed and published a similar idea. I called mine the Drama Index and he called his Championship Leverage Index, but they amounted to the same thing. We both took the notion of Leverage Index (the "real-time" importance of a play during a game) and applied it to the season (in other words, the "real time" importance of a game during the season).

We both found that playoff games, like the ones above, had about 20 times as much "leverage" as the average game. Things that occurred during those games were magnified 20 times in terms of their "real time" importance.

We then applied each game's Leverage Index to its WPA outcomes for each player and tabulated the "ultimate MVP stat," which calculated how much each player contributed to his team's chances of making the postseason based on the criticality of each situation all year long.

It was a great idea carried to its logical extreme, and it did what all good ideas do in the extreme: It started to fall apart.

I'm not going to go into all the hoary details. You can read them on the web or, even better, you can read them in Sky's article entitled "Championship Leverage Index" in this very Annual. He explains much better than I could.

And, like WPA, there are some very salvageable ideas that came out of our exercise. In particular, Sky's Championship Leverage Index is a great measure of how important each game was and how dramatic each team's season was. We've included it in each of our team graphs in the statistics section.

## What WAR Is Good For

If you're like me, you're probably tired of new-fangled baseball stats. It seems like everyone has a new version of how runs are created or how pitchers rely on their fielders—or not—or how players contribute to wins. I'm not sure I need to see any more stats. There are plenty of numbers on my plate, thank you.

But I'll make an exception for WAR. Wins Above Replacement is kind of a generic name, but it's a singularly good stat. The basic methodology was developed by Tom Tango and friends at the Book Blog the past couple of years, and a couple of sites have implemented their version of it.

Fangraphs posted WAR totals for 2009, and they have also graciously donated their WAR totals to us, and you. Sean Smith has also developed WAR figures for every player in baseball history, and his WARs are particularly useful for the “Retrosheet era.”

In this very Annual you hold in your hands, there are two articles that make fantastic use of WAR: Sean’s review of the evolution of relief pitching and John Walsh’s analysis of the players of the past 40 years we most “under-appreciated.” Plus, you can download a spreadsheet that contains many of the cutting-edge “win stats” available today: WPA, WAR and Bill James’ Win Shares.

There are other “win stats” out there, such as Baseball Prospectus’ WARP and Pete Palmer’s Total Player Rating. John Dewan is developing a new system called Total Runs.

But the sabermetric blogosphere, including most of us at THT, are converging around WAR as the win stat of choice, with a nod to WPA, which really measures something different. (In fact, Sean’s article about relief pitching is a great example of how WAR and WPA can be combined for a fuller story).

So stay tuned to WAR and watch it grow.

### **The Doubles Record Is Going To Fall**

Bill James had this to say during the year: “I wanted to go on record ... the career record for doubles will be broken within 20 years.” I wasn’t sure about Bill’s proclamation at first, but now I’m convinced.

Bill’s rule of thumb for this sort of thing is pretty straightforward. If a career record represents 15 to 18 years of league-leading performance, the record is vulnerable. If it represents less than 15 years of league-leading performance, it will almost surely be broken.

According to Bill, his rule has held true for many career marks, such as home runs, stolen bases and strikeouts. And now, it seems, doubles are due. I won’t go into the details—you can read them in a couple of articles in Bill James Online which, unfortunately, requires a paid subscription—but his logic is certainly interesting and, as usual, insightful.

The record for most doubles in a career is held by Tris Speaker, who finished his spectacular play in 1928 with 792 doubles. Over the past 10 years, the average league leader has hit around 51 doubles a year, or 15.5 years of Speaker’s total. That is right on the line of doom.

But who, among today’s players, is likely to break the record? The closest batter among today’s players is Manny Ramirez (531 doubles through the age of 37). He hit 36 doubles last year, 24 in two-thirds of a year this year—36 a season seems like a reasonable rate for Manny. He’ll have to produce at that level for more than seven more years to break Speaker’s record at the age of 44. Doable, but a huge stretch.

Other than Ramirez, other close candidates seem unlikely. Ivan Rodriguez has 547 doubles, Griffey Jr. has 522, Garret Anderson has 516.

But there is someone else on track to crack the career doubles record. He holds the record for most doubles through his first three years. Also his fourth, fifth and sixth years. And he just set the record for most doubles through his ninth year.

I’m talking about Albert Pujols. You know that he is a great hitter, but you probably didn’t know that he had this bit of intrigue going. Most of us pay attention to records such as most home runs or hits. Pujols won’t break those, but he may take the doubles crown.

Still, that is a long way away. Pujols hit 44 doubles last year and 45 this year. If he keeps swatting 45 doubles a year, he’ll tie Speaker’s mark at the age of 38, in nine years. If he drops to 40 a year, it will take him 10 more seasons to make it. A lot can happen in 10 years.

To underscore the point, the man with the second-most doubles through the first nine years of his career was another famous Cardinal, Ducky Medwick. Medwick was beamed in his 10th year, after being traded to the Dodgers, and he never hit as many as 40 doubles again.

Still, this is a record to watch and, to quote Yoda, “there is another.” Guess who hit the third-most doubles through his first nine years? The Rockies’ Todd Helton, that’s who. Helton just finished his 13th year, and injuries have curtailed his playing time a bit. Still, he hit 38 doubles during his 2009 renaissance and now has a career total of 509.

As an added bonus, Helton plays in Coors Field—a haven for doubles. If healthy, the guy is good for 40 doubles a year, maybe more. That puts him seven years away from matching Speaker’s mark.

I’m thinking Bill James is a little off base here. The career record for doubles may be broken in 10 years.

## Sometimes I Make Mistakes

This is the fifth “Ten Things” column I’ve written for the THT Annual. When I write it, I like to stretch for things that I think are interesting but relatively unknown. I thought I had a good one last year when I found that the major leagues had gotten younger in 2008 by over a year — a record for a one-year age change in the majors. I led off the column with it and even got a little press out of it.

Well, I was wrong. Turns out that one obscure cell in one of my spreadsheets (not so obscure now!) had a bad year reference and all players were calculated to be one year younger than they actually were. Really, that’s a terrible mistake and I should have caught it. No excuses.

I’d like to make it up to you by reproducing a graph that shows the average “Win Shares Age” of all major leaguers throughout major league history. As you can see below, the major leagues have been getting younger (a trend that continued this year) but not as much as I

thought. The average Win Shares hasn’t even declined a full year since it reached its peak back in 2004.

Win Shares age, by the way, is simply the weighting of each player’s age by the number of Win Shares (another win stat!) he contributed to his team. It reflects playing time and production, probably the best way to measure each year’s relative age.

I don’t mean to end on a downer, but not everything we learn is pleasant. Speaking of which, I managed to stay away from the “S” word this year, although there is still plenty to say about the subject. In fact, you’ll find more said in the Annual.

As we send this book to press, the World Series has not yet concluded and I’ve learned it’s hard to write a column like this when you don’t know the season’s ultimate winner. In fact, I’ve left the 10th item for you (fill in the blank: “The World Champions are BLANK!”) because you know something that I don’t yet know.

Which means that I’m luckier than you. I still get to watch baseball.

