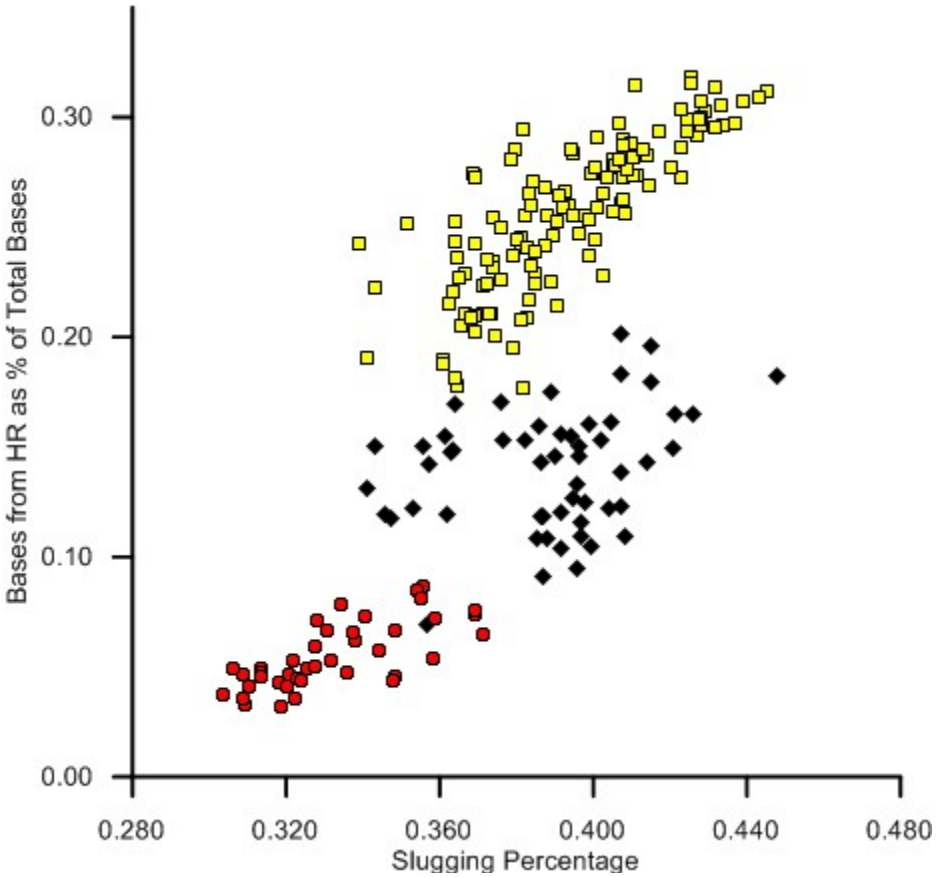
The year baseball changed

by Dave Studeman

August 22, 2013

Here's a graph of baseball data. There are three sets of data: the red circles occurred in the years 1902-1919; the black diamonds occurred in the years 1920-1946; and the yellow squares occurred in the years 1947-2012. All years are separated into the two leagues, so there are twice as many symbols as years. As you can see, the data sets are almost completely separate—there are no black diamonds hiding behind the yellow squares and only one black diamond behind the red circles:



What you see here are three changes in the fundamental relationship between slugging percentage (the bottom, horizontal, "x" axis) and the extent to which home

runs drive slugging percentage (technically, home run bases as a percent of total bases, on the side, vertical, "y" axis). Before 1920, slugging percentages and home run rates were low, though there was a fairly strong relationship between the two. When slugging percentage went up, so did the totals bases contributed by home runs. (I'm trying to avoid cause-and-effect language here, but obviously home runs cause an increase in slugging—not vice-versa).

Between 1920 and 1946, slugging percentage and home run rates were much higher than in the previous era (all the data points are up and to the right), but the relationship between the two was weaker. Take a close look: the points are more spread out and the slope is flatter. During this period, batters increased their slugging percentage in somewhat less homer-centric ways. They hit more singles, doubles and triples. They were more versatile sluggers.

From 1947 on, however, increases in slugging percentages were closely associated with increases in home runs. Look again: the yellow squares are much closer together than in the second era, and the slope is steepest of all. And this is key, too: the overall range of slugging percentage was roughly the same in the second and third eras; it was the role of the home run that changed.

By the way, I just have to point out that slugging percentage isn't a percentage at all. It's total bases divided by at-bats. It's a ratio. But good luck getting anyone to change what they call it.

We all know that home runs have become more important over the years of our game, but many of us (me included) have tended to point to 1920 as the key year of impact; the year that **Babe Ruth** made home runs the weapon of choice and changed baseball forever. Or we've referred to the late 1990s as the time in which home runs became so pronounced that they became caricatures, events almost without meaning because they occurred so often (and, it turns out, under shady circumstances).

Well, we were certainly right about 1920 and Babe Ruth (the one black diamond behind the red dots, by the way, is the 1920 National League, which took a year to catch up to the home run trend started in the junior circuit). But I, at least, had completely missed the impact of 1947. In a way, the home run deluge of the 1990s and early 2000s was just a continuing trend of something that started the same year that **Jackie Robinson** made his major league debut. The yellow squares move up and to the right as the years progress, but the basic relationship between home runs

and slugging—the manner in which the two grow and shrink together—hasn't deviated from how it worked in 1947.

So we have two turning points in the nature of baseball slugging: 1920 and 1947. Let's compare the two.

In the decade before 1920, singles accounted for 59 percent of all total bases. Doubles accounted for 22 percent, triples for 13 percent and home runs for 6 percent of all total bases. Then along came Ruth. In 1920, home runs accounted for a stunning 56 percent of his total bases, lapping the field. Tillie Walker was second at 28 percent.

Tillie Walker, by the way, is a great study in how hitting changed in the wake of Ruth. When he was an outfielder with the A's in 1918, Walker tied for the league lead (with Ruth) with 11 home runs. Four years later, at the age of 34, he hit 37 home runs, just second in the league. The story is that ***Connie Mack*** *didn't like all the home runs in the game and so moved the fences back at Shibe Park the next year. Walker lost his edge, played in only 52 games, was cut from the team, played six more years in the minors, but never saw major league action again.*

Overall, the percent of total bases contributed by home runs in the 1920s doubled to 12 percent. On the other hand, batters like Ruth and **Lou Gehrig** put up tremendous batting averages, too. For instance, Ruth hit .393 in 1923 and didn't even lead the league in batting. His **career** batting average was .342. He was a combination of **Tony Gwynn** and **Mark McGwire**. Overall, batting average in the 1920s was .285. .285. Average.

In the 1930s, the home run percentage rose to a bit more to 16 percent (by the way, doubles maintained their share of total bases during this time. Singles and triples decreased about the same number of points to offset the increased proportion of home runs). Batting average declined a bit to .279 and slugging percentage basically stayed even at .399. **Jimmie Foxx**, Ott and **Hank Greenberg** were archetypal sluggers of the age; Foxx was similar to Ruth in combining slugging and batting while Greenberg emphasized power a bit more, but their profiles were roughly similar.

Then came war in the 1940s, when the best players played in military bases instead of major league parks. The overall quality of baseball declined during that time, of course. Batting average dropped 20 points and slugging dropped 30 points from the

previous five-year period. Home runs as a percent of total bases declined a bit to 15 percent.

And then came 1947. Players had returned from the war and the overall quality of play resumed. Batting average rebounded a bit, albeit not to pre-war levels. Slugging percentage, on the other hand, made a big jump, powered by the home run.

In the National League in 1946, slugging had been .355 and home run bases as a percent of total bases rose had been 15 percent. In the 1947 NL, they were .390 and 21.4 percent (a six-point jump!). Slugging returned to near-pre-war levels, but now powered by the home run instead of batting average, which remained relatively low at .265.

In fact, the New York Giants of 1947 set a major league record for most home runs by a team (221, now the 48th highest team total ever). They obliterated the previous team total of 182 home runs, set by the 1936 Yankees.

More from The Hardball Times

A Hardball Times Update
by RJ McDaniel
Goodbye for now.

Slugging and home runs never looked back. In 1948 home runs as a percent of total bases fell back a bit to 20.9 percent, but then it increased to 22.5 percent and 25.9 percent in the following years. In four years, the home run rate rose a whopping ten points! For perspective, that rate has been roughly 25 percent for the past decade.

The American League was a little slower to catch on and its jump wasn't as stark. The AL went from 17.0 percent in 1946 to 20.8 percent in 1950, and didn't lead the NL in this regard until Maris and Mantle chased Ruth's record in 1961 (the league rate was 20.6 percent that year; Maris' was 66.7 percent). The American League is the reason you see some of those yellow squares linger with the black diamonds. If I were to graph only the National League, the difference would be more stark.

So I wondered…if 1947 is roughly the equivalent of 1920, is there a rough equivalent of Babe Ruth? Can we point to a singular person and performance that introduced

the Three True Outcome era?

The answer is no, there was no singular character or hero pointing to a new way. Instead, allow me to introduce the following cast of characters—a troupe of batters responsible for this new way of hitting. The time is 1947, the stage is the National League, the scene of the first act is the Polo Grounds.

Revitalized old man: **Johnny Mize** was a great slugger in the '30s. In 1939, he led the National League in batting (.349) and home runs (28). He hit 43 home runs the next year and still batted .316. In 1947, at the age of 34 and playing with the Giants, Mize reached career highs with 51 home runs and 138 runs batted in, leading the league in both categories, but his batting average dropped to .302 and would never be above .300 again. Perhaps the impact of aging, or a harbinger of what was to come?

One-shot star: **Willard Marshall** was a 26-year-old right fielder on the 1947 Giants team. He had reached the majors at the age of 21, showing a rifle arm and impressing manager **Mel Ott**, but then served three years in the Marines. He returned to the majors in 1946 and had a career year in 1947: 36 home runs (third in the league) with 107 RBIs and a .291 batting average. He played for eight more years, but never matched those numbers again.

Sturdy player has his moment: **Walker Cooper** was the catcher on that Giants team, and he set his own career mark with 35 home runs. During his time, Cooper was known as the best catcher in baseball, particularly with the Cardinals in the early 1940s. He had a fine 18-year career with a .285 batting average, but never had another home run year close to 1947.

Waiting for his destiny: **Bobby Thomson** was the Giants' center fielder in 1947, his first full year in the majors. He hit .283 with 29 home runs but, unlike his slugging Giants teammates, Thomson also struck out a lot: 78 times in '47 (Mize, Marshall and Cooper struck out 115 times among them.) Thomson had a fine career, including a moment of destiny against **Ralph Branca**.

The one who came before: Our two leading characters didn't play in New York. Cubs outfielder **Bill Nicholson** led the league in strikeouts in 1947 (with a whopping 83 Ks) while batting .244 with 28 homers (hence his nickname, Swish). Nicholson was only the second player in baseball history to hit more than 25 home runs, bat less than .250 and strike out more than 80 times. (The first was **Pat**

Seerey in 1946. Seerey deserves a bit part in our play.)

Nicholson had led the league in home runs and RBIs in 1943 and 1944 and played on the Cubs' last World Series team. In 1950, after he was traded to the Phillies, it was disclosed that Nicholson suffered from diabetes.

Leading man: In 1947, **Ralph Kiner** was a 24-year-old Pirates outfielder in his second year in the majors. He had quite a year, batting .313 with 51 home runs (tying Mize for the league lead) and a .639 slugging percentage. He had led the league in strikeouts the previous year with 109, but managed to reduce the number to 81 in 1947.

By today's standards, Kiner's numbers look pretty well-rounded. He was no **Dave Kingman** (of whom Kiner once said "He can hit them out of any park—including Yellowstone") or **Adam Dunn**. Not even a **Harmon Killebrew**. But he, and his cast of characters, set something in motion.

Consider the batting averages of the previous batters to hit 50 or more home runs before Kiner: Ruth did it four times and his batting averages were .376, .378, .356 and .323. **Hack Wilson** did it with a batting average of .356. Jimmie Foxx: .364 and .359. Only Greenberg, at .315 with his 58 home runs in 1938, had a batting average as low as Kiner and Mize did in 1947. Never again; only Mantle (in 1956, when he hit .353 with 52 home runs) would reach those heights again. Slugging had changed and would not go back. Ralph Kiner was the new prototype.

In some ways, baseball has never been better than it is today. The athletes are in terrific shape. The game is executed at a top level. Media coverage is spectacular and division races are terrific. Still, I wish I could have watched baseball in the '20s and '30s.

Dave Studeman was called a "national treasure" by Rob Neyer. Seriously. Follow his sporadic tweets **@dastudes**.

Graphing the Past

by Dave Studeman

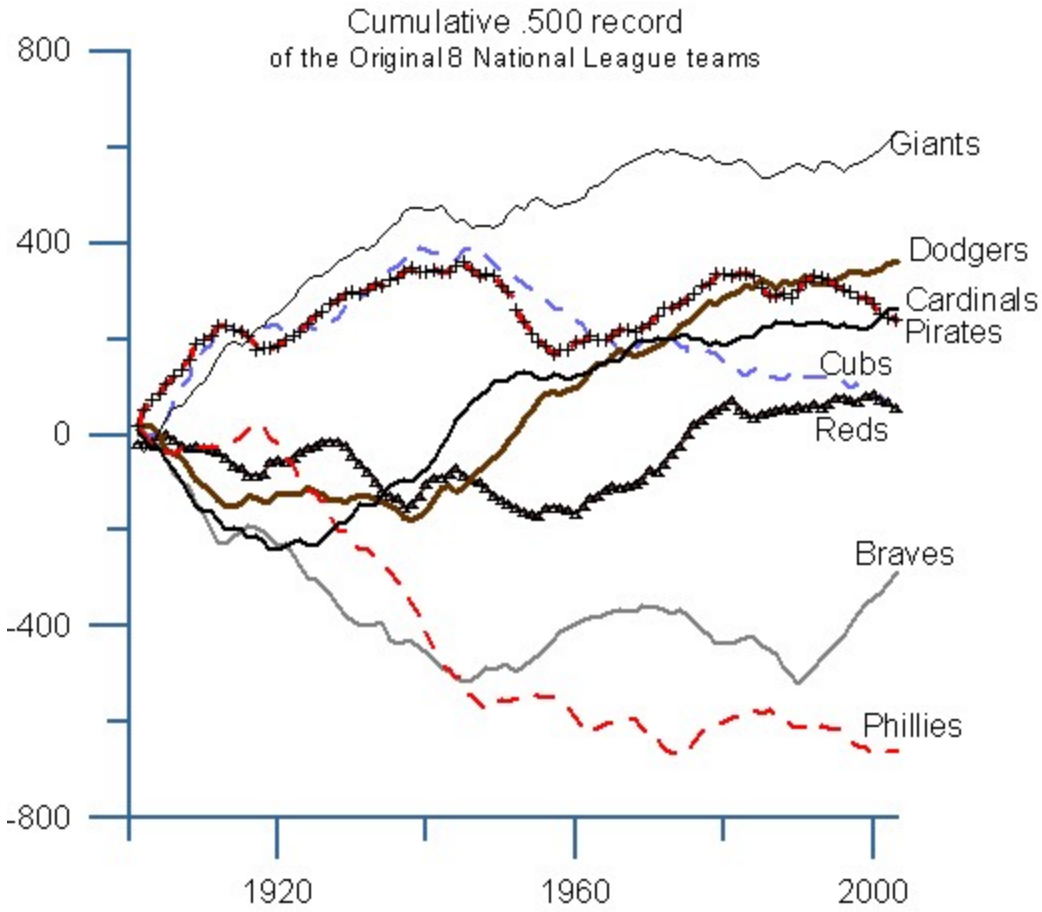
July 19, 2004

We like to **graph the pennant races** here at The Hardball Times. It's a lot of fun to watch the ups, downs and sideway slithers of **each and every team during the year**. Much more fun than a **simple table of standings**. But I've been thinking, why not graph more than a season? Why not graph the all-time races?

Some baseball teams have been around a long time. The history of the National League goes all the way back to 1876. The Cubs and the Reds both began playing that year, in their current cities, with their current team nicknames, **128 years ago**. The Cubs won the league title with a record of 52-14, while the Reds were last at 9-56. A lot has changed since then; for instance, pitchers now throw overhand. Players wear baseball gloves. We stretch during the seventh inning break. We *sing* while we stretch during the seventh inning break.

You might say that modern baseball began in 1900, when the National League **settled into eight teams**, and 1901, when the **American League debuted with its own eight teams**. For over half a century, the overall structure of baseball changed little, though the game on the field continued to **evolve**.

Those original sixteen teams are still with us today, though many of them have moved to different cities. Many of them have had long stretches of success, while others have had very little success in the intervening century. Let's take a look at the race among the original eight National League teams, presenting total wins above .500 over time (years):

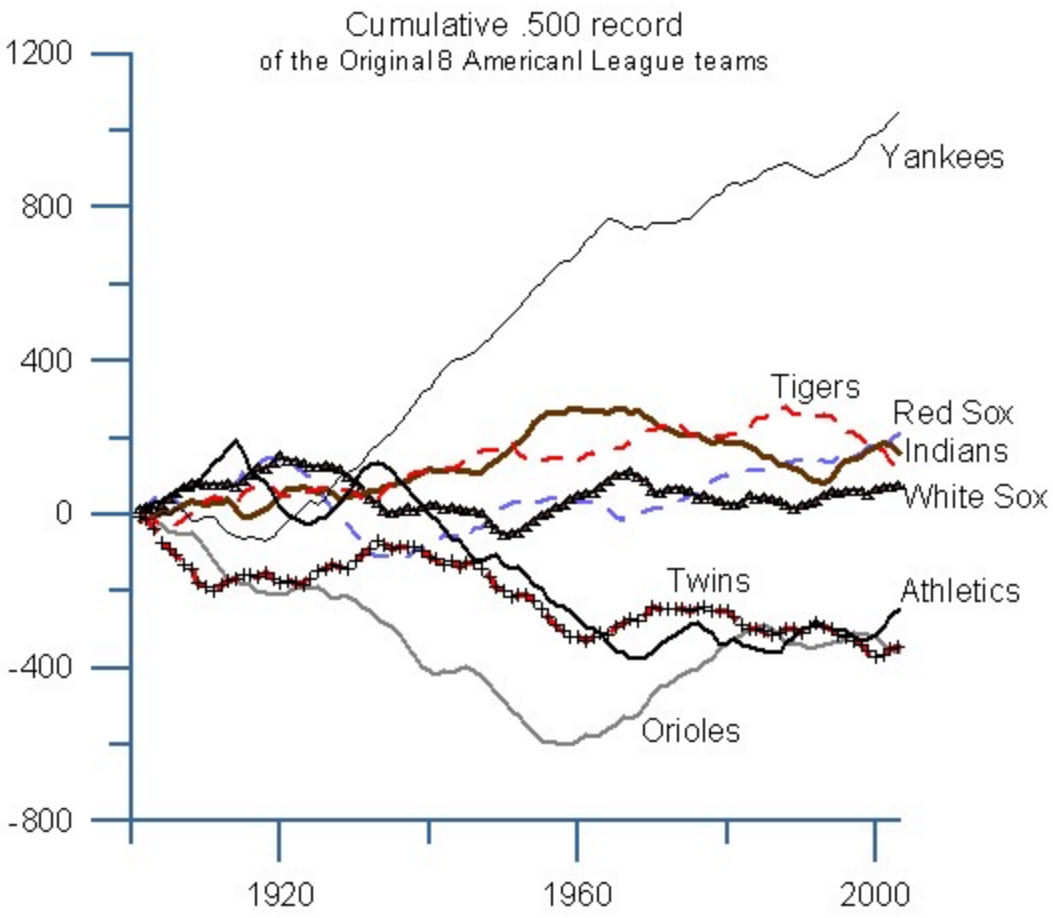


Three teams — the **Giants**, **Cubs** and **Pirates** — competed for first in the first two decades. The Pirates and Cubs subsequently fell off the pace, while the Giants continued their winning ways. Notice the most recent swing in the Giants' record, which analysts call the "Bonds uptick."

It was right around 1940 that the Cubs' winning ways changed. In fact, they are the losingest team in baseball since then, which brings to mind many a **Steve Goodman song**. The early 1940's also proved to be the **Dodgers'** turnaround time, as they went from sixth to second in the league during the next eighty years.

You can see other period standouts on this graph, such as the **Big Red Machine in the 1970's** and the phenomenal **Braves' record during the 1990's**. The Braves are leaving the **Phillies** in the all-time NL cellar. Really, Phillie fans have had very little to cheer about. For the last 104 years. Even the Cubs were once successful.

Now for the American League race, presenting total wins above .500 over time (years):



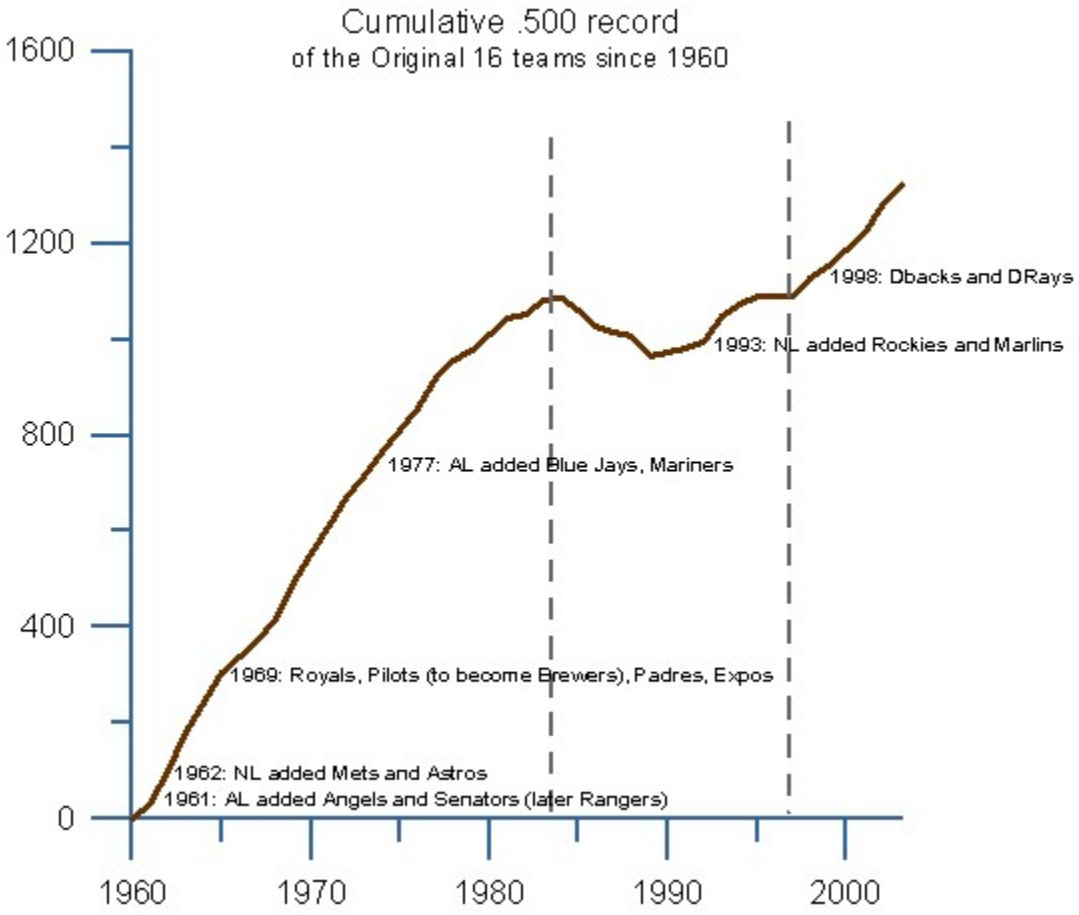
Well, no surprise here, right? The **Yankees** are good, and have been good for most of the century. Yankee haters can take solace in the years between 1965 and 1976 as well as the early '90's. But that's about it.

There are essentially two other races in the league: the race for second place and the race out of the cellar. The **Red Sox** just recently inched past the Indians for second place, while the **Tigers**, who seemed firmly planted in second a mere decade ago, have slipped to fourth.

Meanwhile, in the other race, the **Orioles** were firmly in the cellar until **Earl Weaver** pulled them out in the 60's and 70's. However, they have recently returned to their losing ways and taken back the bottom rung. **Oakland's** recent surge has left the **Twins** (who spent the first half of the race in Washington) and O's to fight it out. The A's line is interesting, by the way. They've certainly seen a lot of swings in fortune along the way.

Of course, other teams have joined the race in the last half-century. I could include them in the graph, but they all had the heartache of their startup years and really, the original sixteen teams had a whopping head start.

But there is one thing we can look at: How have the original sixteen teams performed, cumulatively, since the beginning of the expansion era? Have they always beaten up on the newcomers, or what? Here's a graph of their record since 1960, with expansion events, a couple of lines added, and again, presenting total wins above .500 over time (years):



The two dotted lines are meant to separate the original teams' record into three distinct periods:

- The first two decades in which they beat up on the expansion teams.
- A decade in which the original teams basically held their own against the new guys, and
- Ever since, as the original sixteen have beat up on the expansion teams again.

What happened during the mid 1980's to the mid 1990's? Well, this record is partly due to the success of several expansion teams during that time, including the **Mets**' mini-dynasty, the **Astros**, **Blue Jays**, **Royals**, **Angels** and even a bit of the **Padres** and **Expos**. Also, there was a sixteen-year period with no expansion, which

gave the new kids time to catch up.

In fact, the 1980's and early 1990's were, in retrospect, a blissful period of competitive balance, in which the Padres or Royals were just as likely to win the division as the Yankees or Giants. If you scroll back up, you'll see that the Giants essentially played .500 ball during this time, and the Yankees were good but not great. Since the mid 90's, however, the Yankees have been on a steep uphill climb, as have several of the other original teams.

More from The Hardball Times

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Goodbye for now.

In **May the Best Team Win**, Andrew Zimbalist's fine book about baseball economics, the author found that the correlation between payroll and wins started to rise significantly around 1993. Before that time, the R-squared between payroll and wins floated between 0 and .3. Since then, it has floated between .2 and .6. In other words, the ability of teams to buy the pennant has really jumped during the last decade.

Since the original teams tend to be the ones in the major markets, they have been the ones to benefit the most from the returned competitive imbalance of the game. Teams in major markets can afford higher payrolls, and higher payrolls are more likely to lead to wins than in the past.

Zimbalist does a nice job of listing the major events that have led to the return of imbalance. These include the loss of significant revenue from the national television contracts, leading to a greater emphasis on local revenue and the power of the revenue-producing ballpark. Also, the incestuous relationship between media companies and baseball teams has exacerbated revenue disparity between teams, and the leveling effect of the amateur draft and free agency has been undercut by the differences in player development budgets between teams, international free agents and **Scott Boras**.

So you see, the record of baseball's original sixteen franchises can be turned into a

story of the woes of major league baseball's business. Woes that still linger, despite the quality of the product on the field.

References & Resources
I totally took the idea for these graphs from **this guy's website**.

Also, I botched up some of my historic facts. Instead of correcting them in this article, I'll just point you to the **baseball primer thread** in which my mistakes are uncovered. The posters at Baseball Primer are probably the best baseball editors in the country.

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Comments are closed.

Ten Times We Changed the Way We Watch Baseball

by Dave Studeman

July 14, 2005

I watched the All-Star game on television last night, while also spying on the pitcher's mound, home plate and first base from my laptop computer on **Major League Baseball's website**. In a few days, I may watch highlights of the game, or I may check out highlights of Miguel Tejada from the regular season. I can almost literally watch anything I want, whenever I want. I watch baseball games: hear me roar!

When I was a kid, the only way you could watch most World Series games was to skip school. They didn't play World Series night games, and we didn't have videotape, DVD players or TiVo. I didn't even get to watch the game that I consider the highlight of my youth: the Mets' 1969 World Series clincher.

Baseball coverage has come a long, long way in my lifetime, and "watching" the All-Star game made me a bit nostalgic and very curious about how people used to follow baseball games they couldn't attend in person. Based on a lot of not-really-exhaustive research, I present the following 10 events, trends and changes that impacted how we follow baseball games:

Newspapers covered baseball like a blanket.

Newspapers and baseball were natural business partners in the early days. Even before professional baseball leagues were formed, newspapers were covering the games played between local teams. There were over a dozen newspapers in New York in the 1850s and many more baseball teams. Baseball provided something newspapers needed: news. Not only news, but news that changed every day. The more games were played, the more newspapers would be sold. It was a natural symbiosis from the start, and in many ways newspapers made baseball the "national

game."

In fact, *The New York Mercury* coined the phrase "the nation's pastime" in 1857. And Joseph Pulitzer of *The New York World* formed the first newspaper sports department in the 1880s as a recognition of the role sports played, and would always play, in the news business.

Henry Chadwick standardized the box score and baseball statistics.

Henry Chadwick was a baseball journalist who covered his assignment with religious zeal. Through the 1850s, printed statistical results were similar to simple cricket box scores, listing just runs and outs. But in 1859, *The New York Clipper* presented Chadwick's new version of a box score—an essential, sublime format that would remain the standard to this very day.

In 1860, Chadwick also published the first baseball annual, *Beadle's Dime Base Ball Player* which would do more than any other publication to standardize a set of baseball statistics that are also used today—to the chagrin of many sabermetricians. But Chadwick's groundbreaking work and influence standardized the "language" of baseball coverage, which would be critical to its future popularity and integration into other media.

Telegraphs, saloons and scoreboards

Games in progress were broadcast by telegraph to saloons as early as the 1890s. Until radio came along in the 1920s, telegraphic accounts were the only way for fans outside the ballpark to track a game in progress. In the 1890s, these evolved into baseball "scoreboards," which converted the telegraphic messages into something that engaged the local fans.

At the Atlanta Opera House, for instance, young men wearing the names of specific players would run the bases in front of an audience to represent the game's progress. The "Compton Electrical System" was a 10-by-10 scoreboard used in the 1890s that tracked the game closely and featured lineups on the side. By the 1900s, entire theaters would be rented out to display the progress of games through scoreboards, baseballs held by invisible wire and "mechanical athletes." During a World Series, hundreds and thousands would gather in town squares or outside newspaper offices to follow the local game on a scoreboard. For many, many baseball fans, this was the way they experienced a game.

Radio Changed Everything.

Commercialized radio had its beginnings in Detroit in 1920, and the first major-league baseball game was broadcast by KDKA of Pittsburgh in 1921. In 1922, sportswriter Grantland Rice broadcast the first two games of the World Series over WJZ, and as many as 5 million people listened, the "greatest audience ever assembled to listen to one man" according to the *New York Tribune*.

But the real turning point for radio came in the 1923 World Series, when more American households had radios. AT&T transmitted the feed over more stable telephone lines and Graham McNamee, a former concert singer, announced the game. Unlike Rice, McNamee understood how to convey the drama of a situation, and he became the first star baseball announcer. According to Heywood Broun, McNamee "individualized and particularized every emotion. He made me feel the temperature and tension. The wind hit him and it deflected off to me… McNamee allowed you to follow the ball on the wing."

Incredibly, baseball owners were leery of this new technology, fearing that fans would stay home if they could listen to the game on the air (a fear that has appeared with the introduction of virtually every new media technology since). William Wrigley decided to transmit all Cubs and White Sox games in 1925, and the Cardinals soon followed. But it wasn't until 1939 that all baseball teams broadcast all their games on the air.

Baseball Under the Lights

In 1935, Larry McPhail of the Cincinnati Reds held the first major-league baseball game at night. Night baseball had been discussed for many years and successfully implemented in the minors and Negro Leagues. Although many major-league owners (and Commissioner Landis) opposed the idea, McPhail managed to get just enough votes for permission to try it out at Crosley Field.

Twenty thousand fans (many more than the typical weekday draw) showed up on May 24, and the Reds played six more night games that year. In all, 124,000 fans attended the night games, and the Reds turned a profit for the first time in several years. When he moved on to the Dodgers in 1938, McPhail held night games there, and other teams started to follow the trend in 1939 and 1940. It wasn't until the late 1940s, however, that **most teams had played at least one night game at home**.

Although Tiger owner Frank Navin claimed night games would be the "ruination of baseball," just the opposite occurred. Night baseball made games more available to fans and arguably increased the "entertainment value" of the game. What's more, night baseball would be critical to the success of televised baseball games later in the century. The first night World Series game was broadcast in 1971, too late for my beloved Mets and me.

Television and The Game of the Week

Larry McPhail was also responsible for the first television broadcast, of a Dodgers' game in 1939 (the first year that all teams broadcast their games on radio). The experiment was so successful that he arranged for weekly broadcasts in 1940. The war years intervened, however, and the first televised World Series wasn't until 1947. Just like radio, Major League Baseball was reluctant to embrace this new technology, afraid of keeping fans away from the ballpark.

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TV baseball really came of age in the 1950s and, once again, baseball's popularity boomed as a result. The first televised Game of the Week was broadcast in 1953, with Dizzy Dean at the microphone. Dizzy's style and malapropisms made the Game of the Week a centerpiece of baseball media, and it would be the television staple of baseball fans for many years.

It was during the 1940s and 1950s that teams increased the range of their fan base, as better cars, roads and public transportation made it easier to get to the ballpark from farther away. Instead of undermining baseball's popularity, broadcasting increased its reach immensely.

I remember Curt Gowdy, Tony Kubek and Joe Garagiola with a special affection, but major-league teams never embraced television as much as they should have until cable TV forced their hand.

Ball Four

Jim Bouton's *Ball Four* was published in 1970, and it caused an immediate sensation. Besides the insider revelations about Mickey Mantle and other baseball heroes, it made a folk hero of Steve Hovley ("Billy Graham is a cracker") and most importantly, it changed the relationship between the media and baseball players.

Before *Ball Four*, baseball reporters treated players with respect in print, much like newspaper reporters treated politicians with respect before Watergate. In both cases, the respect was not always deserved. After *Ball Four* the media became more likely to report the true feelings and attitudes of major leaguers, humanizing them in the process. Some might say that we lost something as a result, but baseball established a more "personal" relationship with its fans after *Ball Four*, which suited the more personal medium of television.

Cable television

Although cable television has been around for quite awhile, cable broadcasts began to have a real impact in 1977. Superstations like TBS, WGN and WWOR made their local teams' games available around the country every day, creating Cubs' fans in Macon and Braves' fans in Decatur. Then ESPN made its debut in 1979. ESPN hosted its cornerstone program, SportsCenter, from the beginning, scrolled scores on the bottom of the screen and introduced *Baseball Tonight* in 1993. And this made baseball games and baseball players more available everywhere, 24 hours a day.

Cable increased its reach over time. In 1982, cable television was in 35% of homes. In 1987 it passed the 50% mark, and it now reaches 70% of homes. Unfortunately, it doesn't reach all households, and the conflict between free broadcast games and games broadcast over cable only has yet to be resolved in many markets.

National newspapers

When I was a kid, spending my summers in Cooperstown, I traipsed down to the Hall of Fame every morning to see the game results from the night before, posted on a scoreboard by the main entrance. Because we didn't get a newspaper, this was the only way I could get the latest scores.

Even if you did buy a newspaper back then, it probably only covered the local major-league team and gave cursory coverage to other teams. Most of the time, you had to wait for your weekly edition of *The Sporting News* to devour the box score of each

game.

USA Today changed that. *USA Today* was founded in 1982, and although serious journalists thumbed their noses at it, serious baseball fans welcomed it with open arms. That's because the paper covered every major-league team equally and ran the boxscore of every game every night. They used the sports section as a hook for readers, much like the newspapers of the 1850s, and strived to "cover every game, every score, and every statistic," according to in-house historian Peter Prichard.

On top of that, they published the best statistics you could find on a weekly basis. Even when not traveling, I bought *USA Today* every Wednesday and Thursday so that I could read their league stats. For fantasy players, *USA Today* replaced *The Sporting News* as their favored source of stats. And other newspapers were forced to expand their own sports coverage to keep up with this new competition. In the late 1980s, a national sports-only newspaper, *The National* was introduced, spurred by the innovations wrought by ESPN and USA Today. It failed, but it would probably have been more successful if it had just waited a few more years for a new medium.

The Internet

The Internet was first developed in the late 1960s as a decentralized network of computers to support the military in case of an emergency. It became a public medium in the early 1990s with the adoption of HTML and the Mosaic web browser. And nothing has been the same since.

For baseball fans, the Internet served as a vehicle to connect fans with common interests as never before, allowing us to bypass traditional media for our news and gossip. Also, many of us used the Internet to read the online version of *USA Today's* stats and box scores. But new game accounts and statistics soon developed, from sites such as **ESPN** and **CBS Sportsline**. And innovations like ESPN's Gamecast gave us a whole new way of watching baseball games, with more information than ever before. With the Internet, we could even "watch" games at work.

It took them several years, but to their credit, Major League Baseball has embraced the Internet. Major League Baseball Advanced Media (MLBAM) was formed in 2001 to manage the online operations of all 30 teams. The design of the site is still atrocious (overwrought and poorly mapped), but MLBAM moved quickly to consolidate the content and video operations related to MLB games. On the one hand, MLBAM runs the risk of strangling innovation if they control MLB's content too strongly. On the other hand, their offerings so far have been terrific.

Imagine the near future, in which your TV, computer and TiVo have converged into one baseball-watching appliance. You can watch any game on a big screen anytime you want. You can rerun plays from any angle you choose. You can call up stats, scouting reports and other information that only announcers see today. You can watch big plays by favorite players in games past. The possibilities are infinite.

I watch baseball games. Life will only get better.

References & Resources

Jules Tygiel's **Past Time: Baseball as History** was the resource for much of what I've presented here. Here is **a link to his first chapter**. It is a wonderful book.

My copy of **Total Baseball** includes Paul D. Adomites' *Baseball on the Air*, which proved invaluable, as did Leonard Koppett's **Concise History of Major League Baseball**.

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Comments are closed.

Oh Lucky Men!

by Dave Studenmund

Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.

- Lou Gehrig, who had nothing on Lucky Lohrke.

Lucky Lohrke died this year. Lohrke was a relatively nondescript middle infielder in the late 1940s and early 1950s who totaled about 1,000 plate appearances in seven seasons and batted .242 for the Giants and Phillies. Yet the story behind those numbers is one of the most remarkable in baseball history.

As chronicled by Craig Wright's excellent "A Page from Baseball's Past," Lohrke just missed being involved in the greatest tragedy in the history of professional baseball. It involved the Spokane Indians, who were run off the road by an oncoming car en route to Bremerton on June 11, 1946. Six people were killed and several others severely injured when their bus crashed through a guard rail and plummeted 300 feet into a canyon.

Fifty minutes earlier, Lohrke had been with the team during a pit stop in Ellensburg when he received some happy news: He was being promoted to the Pacific Coast League San Diego Padres. Since he had to report to San Diego immediately, Lohrke decided to hitchhike back to Spokane and grab a plane. When the bus resumed its fateful journey, Lohrke headed in the opposite direction.

Lohrke had returned from the service in World War II the previous November. He originally was going to return home on an Army transport plane from New Jersey to California, but a colonel pulled rank at the last minute and took his place. That colonel was killed along with 19 other returning soldiers when the plane crashed outside Kansas City. Lohrke made it home a little later, alive.

Lohrke had been in some of the fiercest battles of the war, including Normandy and the Battle of the Bulge. It is said that, on two occasions, soldiers on either side of him were killed in battle while he remained alive.

It is also said that Lucky Lohrke didn't like his nickname. Perhaps you can see why.

His real name was Jack and, as Craig has pointed out, Jack's luck manifested itself on the baseball field as well.

Lohrke batted .303 in his half-season at San Diego and the Giants drafted him to be their third baseman. The Giants had gone 61-93 in 1946 but with Lohrke on board in 1947 they finished fourth in the National League with a 81-73 tally. Lohrke actually helped—his offense was an improvement over the previous third baseman, Bill Rigney—but the Giants also had big seasons from Johnny Mize (51 home runs), Walker Cooper, Willard Marshall and newcomer Bobby Thomson.

The Giants won 78 games in 1948, though Lohrke lost his regular third base job to Sid Gordon. Foolishly, the Giants sent Lohrke to the minors for part of the 1949 season and their win total decreased to 73.

Lohrke returned to the big club in 1950 and stayed on the roster all season, though he played in only 30 games. Still, Lohrke's luck held and the Giants bounced back to win 86 games and finish third. That team had turned over significantly from the Giants of a few years earlier. Alvin Dark was the shortstop and Eddie Stanky the second baseman (Stanky batted .300 with 144 walks). Hank Thompson, Whitey Lockman, Monte Irvin and Don Mueller were all young players who had recently joined the team.

You may be familiar with the Giants of 1951. A kid named Willie Mays was brought up to the big club after batting .477 in 139 at-bats for Minneapolis, Sal Maglie and Larry Jansen both won 23 games and Lohrke stayed with the club all year long, though he played in only 23 games. The Giants won 98 games, including a three-game playoff against the Dodgers, and lost the World Series to the Yankees, 4-2. Lohrke was hitless in two World Series at-bats.

It is well known that Mays was on deck when Bobby Thomson hit the Shot Heard 'Round the World that won the series against the Dodgers. It is less well known that Lohrke was warming up to take over third base if the game had gone into extra innings.

The Giants traded Lohrke after the season (predictably, the Giants finished second the next year). He went to the Phillies, who had finished 73-81 in 1951. Naturally, the Phillies improved to 87-67 with Lohrke on board, though he played in only 25 games. The next year, with Lohrke on the roster again, they were 83-71.

Unfortunately, during the year Lohrke again was shipped to the minors, where he batted only .194. His baseball skills had seemingly deteriorated to the point

at which he wasn't even a useful utility player anymore. The Phillies let him go after the season.

They didn't have another winning season for the next eight years.

There is one last postscript to Lohrke's story, courtesy of Craig Wright. The next year (1954), Lohrke tried out for the Pirates and didn't make the club. He was assigned to their Triple-A team, the Hollywood Stars. Quoting Craig, "Without Lohrke, Pittsburgh finished in last place with 101 losses. Jack spent the whole year with the … Stars, and they won 101 games!"

Jack Lohrke may have been the luckiest man in baseball history, both on and off the field.

Or was he? Being curious, and having lots of baseball data at hand, I decided to search for the luckiest and unluckiest major leaguers ever. What follows are several investigations into the players most favored by Lady Fortune on the field. Even if we don't settle on the Luckiest Player Ever, we're sure to find some interesting quirks of fate.

There are many ways to define and quantify luck. You may be familiar with the concept of a team's "Pythagorean Record." That's the record a team could be expected to post based on its runs scored and allowed.

Teams' actual records tend to be close to their Pythagorean records, but there are some famous exceptions. The 1905 Detroit Tigers, for example, allowed 90 more runs than they scored, but they still managed to finish above .500 with a 79-74 record. That's a remarkable achievement—a "Pythagorean variance" of 14 more wins than expected, the greatest in baseball history—and I have no idea how they did it.

Most Pythagorean variances are the result of things that players and teams (and managers) can't consistently control. The team's record in close games, for instance, or clutch hitting. Clutch pitching. Losing a lot of blowout games but not winning any blowouts. Luck, actually. When baseball analysts like me find things that tend to be random instead of predictable, we call that luck.

We've looked into baseball's past and chronicled which teams have been the luckiest and unluckiest with their Pythagorean variances, but what about the players? Are there some player who played on more teams with favorable Pythagorean variances than not?

The answer is yes, of course. And the winner of our first "You can be lucky like Lohrke" search is Ruben Sierra. It helps to have played for nine different teams over 20 seasons, sometimes playing for more than one team in a year. But give Sierra some "credit." When you add up all the Pythagorean variances of the teams that Ruben Sierra played for, you find that they finished 59 games better than "expected." That is eight more than the second-luckiest player.

The interesting quirk is that Sierra came into this talent late in his career.

Sierra played his first six years with the Rangers, who finished a total of 10 games above their Pythagorean records during that time, although they never won the division. In his seventh year, he started with the Rangers but was traded to the first-place A's in August. The Rangers finished three games above their projected record and the A's finished seven above theirs. A double hit worth 10 "lucky wins" in one year.

That was a pretty good start. Sierra had a few ups and downs in the middle of his career, occasionally displaying his talent for Pythagoras and hitting sometimes too. But his last five years, for the Yankees, Rangers and Twins, was when he made his mark. Those teams combined to finish a staggering 26 games better than their Pythagorean records. The 2004 Yankees, in particular, were nearly 12 games better than their projected record, the fourth-best variance ever.

Sierra played on first-place teams (mostly the Yankees) the last four years of his career, including the Twins in his final year when he batted only .179 in 28 at bats before being released in early July. It was a remarkable run. Ruben Sierra was sometimes accused of being moody and self-centered, but it turns out that he wasn't that bad a guy to have in the clubhouse.

The top 20 players in positive career Pythagorean variances have been:

Player	Team Games	Pyth Var	Pct.
Ruben Sierra	3,965	59	1.5%
Dennis Martinez	3,755	51	1.4%
Pete Rose	3,982	51	1.3%
Dave Winfield	3,601	48	1.3%
Davey Concepcion	3,012	48	1.6%
Joe Coleman	2,899	47	1.6%
Early Wynn	3,558	46	1.3%
George Foster	3,176	45	1.4%
Johnny Podres	2,532	45	1.8%
Bobby Tolan	2,257	45	2.0%
Duke Snider	2,802	44	1.6%
Ray Knight	2,212	44	2.0%
Jim Fregosi	3,227	43	1.3%
Jim Gilliam	2,200	42	1.9%
Johnny Bench	2,690	40	1.5%
Todd Zeile	3,317	40	1.2%

Player	Team Games	Pyth Var	Pct.
Joe Nolan	1,879	39	2.1%
Rich Dauer	1,557	39	2.5%
Jim Spencer	2,635	39	1.5%
Marquis Grissom	2,684	39	1.4%

There are some well-known, successful players on this list. You've got to play a lot of games with a lot of good teams to do well here. You probably noticed a lot of Reds: Pete Rose, Johnny Bench, Dave Concepcion, George Foster, Bobby Tolan. From 1970 to 1981, the Reds won 1,108 games but were projected to win "only" 1,070. That 37-game difference was one of the best extended streaks in baseball history.

A few other players of note:

- The Baltimore Orioles had positive Pythagorean variances every year from 1976 to 1984. Dennis Martinez and Rich Dauer were Orioles each one of those years. Dauer retired a year later, but Martinez had the same effect on several other teams later in his career. Dauer stands out, however, by virtue of having a short but very "lucky" career with the Orioles.
- Joe Nolan was a vagabond backup catcher who played on two standout Pythagorean teams: the 1972 Mets (ninth-best all-time variance of 11 games; Nolan had just a cup of coffee with the Mets) and the 1981 Reds (a whopping nine-game variance in the strike-shortened season. Much has been made of the fact that the Reds had the best record in the majors but didn't make the postseason due to the split season. Perhaps it was the Pythagorean baseball gods wreaking justice.)
- Joe Coleman won a lot of games pitching for the Tigers in the early 1970s. The Tigers also had a pretty good Pythagorean streak those years, including the AL's best variances in both 1973 and 1974.

The least lucky player in this category was Lee Mazzilli, who spent 13 years with some staggeringly unlucky teams in New York and Pittsburgh. The 1984 Pirates team, in particular, was 12 games worse than its projected Pythagorean record—the fourth-worst variance in major league history.

By the way, Jack Lohrke was a unlucky Pythagorean player, too. His teams actually finished 14 games under their projected record—of all the teams Lohrke joined, only the '51 Giants had a winning record significantly higher than their Pythagorean record.

Jack Lohrke's specialty, remember, was improving teams just by being on their roster. Of course, lots of teams get better and worse as players switch between them. So I combed my data and associated all the players on a team's roster with that team's record vs. its record the previous year.

Is there a player whose teams seem to do better just because he's there?

This is the sort of thing a loyal player won't do well in. If you stay with one team your entire major league career, or even most of it, chances are that all the improvements and declines will even out over the years. However, if you switch teams often, you have a chance to rack up some improvement points. And if you're traded in midseason to contenders, you might do very, very well in this stat.

Here are major league history's top 20 "team improvers:"

Player	Team Games	Games Improved	Rate
Dennis Cook	2,996	128	4%
Jack O'Connor	3,135	112	4%
Mike Difelice	2,429	111	5%
Darren Holmes	2,366	105	4%
Brian Johnson	1,397	104	7%
Cliff Floyd	2,849	101	4%
Gene Moore	2,157	101	5%
Danny Heep	2,055	98	5%
Rusty Staub	3,822	98	3%
Armando Reynoso	1,881	96	5%
Kenny Lofton	3,172	95	3%
Rich Bordi	1,403	94	7%
Tris Speaker	3,361	92	3%
Alex Johnson	2,259	89	4%
Mike Donlin	1,956	89	5%
Dan Brouthers	2,411	88	4%
Aaron Sele	2,365	88	4%
Ray Benge	2,006	87	4%
Vinny Castilla	2,851	85	3%
Jay Johnstone	3,340	85	3%

I remember Dennis Cook as a durable left-handed reliever, the type who was in demand by contending teams late in his career. But Cook traveled across the baseball continent throughout his baseball career. Overall, he pitched for nine different teams in 15 seasons. And his presence had a positive effect on almost all of them.

- In just his second season (1989), Cook was traded from the Giants to the Phillies in June. The Giants were in the middle of a nine-win improvement from 1988 en route to winning the NL West. The Phillies were improving a bit, though they still finished sixth.
- Starting the 1990 season on Phillies' roster, Cook worked his magic and the Phillies improved 10 wins over 1989, finishing fourth. Cook himself didn't finish with the Phils, as he was traded to the Dodgers in September. The Dodgers were in the middle of a nine-game improvement themselves. So twice in his early career, Cook got an "improvement boost" from midseason deals.
- Cook spent a lot of time in the minors in 1991, but he did pitch 20 innings for the Dodgers, who improved another 10 games and finished second in the National League West.
- Traded to Cleveland during the offseason, Cook did it again for the Indians, who improved their record by 19 wins in 1992. Alas, they had gone 57-105 the year before, so they still finished only fourth in '92. The next year, the Indians didn't improve at all, became disenchanted with their good luck charm and released him.
- Cook signed on with the White Sox for the strike-shortened 1994 season. The Sox won "only" 67 games but that was enough to take the division. If you prorate their victories over a 162-game season, the Sox actually gained two wins over their 1993 season.
- The Indians must have realized their mistake, grabbing Cook off waivers from the Sox in the offseason. Even though they had finished first in 1994, the Indians improved to 100 wins (a prorated improvement of six wins) in 1995. Once again, Cook was nowhere near when the season ended, traded to the Rangers in June. Predictably, the Rangers were also a prorated seven games better in 1995.

And so it went. Cook also pitched for the 1997 Marlins (who improved by 12 wins and won the World Series), the 1999 Mets (eight games and the postseason), the 2001 Phillies (improved by 21 wins over the previous year) and 2002 Angels (24-game improvement).

You can argue that Cook was lucky or you can argue that his teams were lucky. Perhaps it was good old American stick-to-it-ivness. Whomever or whatever you want to credit, luck and Cook went together like a horse and carriage. It was just hard to tell which one went first.

I'm not going to talk too much about the number-two guy on the list, Jack O'Connor. O'Connor played at the end of the 19th century, when owners sometimes owned more than one team and moved players between them indiscriminately. For instance, O'Connor was one of the players moved when the owners of the Cleveland Spiders bought the St. Louis Browns and decided to move all their best players there in 1899. The Browns improved by 44 wins and the Spiders had the worst season in baseball history.

The two unluckiest players in this regard, the two players whose teams got worse when they were there, were Fred Jacklitsch and John Candelaria.

Fred Jacklitsch, who was not related to Pat Listach, was a backup catcher from the early 1900s who played for some memorable clunkers, including the 1915 Baltimore Terrapins of the Federal League (which won only 47 games after winning 84 in 1914). These were the same Terrapins that lured Chief Bender to the FL only to see him post a 4-16 record. That was bad luck, indeed.

Jacklitsch also played for 1902 Phillies (who declined some 25 wins because they lost most of their best players to the American League), the 1904 Brooklyn Superbas (21 wins worse than the year before; their No. 1 catcher was the infamous Bill Bergen), the 1905 Yankees (a decline of 20 wins) and the 1917 Braves. Jacklitsch had only one at-bat for the Braves, who were just three years removed from their miracle year but declined 17 wins from their 1916 record. Fred Jacklitsch wasn't a bad player. But he was not a guy you wanted on your roster.

And how about the Candy Man? This one surprised me. John Candelaria was an unlucky teammate? It seems that Candelaria was sort of the opposite of Ruben Sierra; he got unluckier as he aged.

Candelaria pitched his first 10 years in Pittsburgh, so his improvements and declines from those years even out. Once he started switching teams, however, things went downhill. Actually, things started out poorly his last year in Pittsburgh, 1984, when the Pirates sank 18 wins to a 57-104 record.

Candelaria was then traded to the Angels who lost 17 wins in his third year there. During that year (1987), the Angels moved him onto the Mets, who were busy with a 16-win decline of their own. He was granted free agency during the offseason and he signed with the Yankees for 1988, probably figuring he could break the curse. Unfortunately (or unluckily), the Yankees

declined by three wins in '88 and another 11 wins in '89. The Yankees traded him away.

You can probably guess the rest of the story. The cappers were his last two years, when he signed with the Dodgers, who declined from 93 to 63 wins in his second year there (1992), and when he returned home to the 1993 Pirates, who had just let Barry Bonds walk. Their win total fell from 96 to 75.

The parallels between the Candy Man and Cook are pretty interesting. Both were left handers for hire late in their careers. But Cook was a lucky charm; Candelaria was an accidental step on the foul line.

Jack Lohrke's teams improved by 47 games in his short career, an improvement rate of 4 percent. Lohrke was lucky, though he didn't have Cook's longevity. Someday we'll have to talk about Brian Johnson, whose 7 percent improvement rate is the highest since 1900. In a seven-year career, Johnson played for six teams that improved by 10 games or more.

Let me run one more idea by you. I hope you know a little bit about a stat called Win Shares. Win Shares were invented by Bill James as a way to attribute a team's wins to individual players, kind of like the number of shares a stock owner owns in a company.

The approach is very complex, taking more than 100 pages of explanation in the *Win Shares* book, but it includes each player's contribution to his team in terms of hitting, fielding and pitching. The greatest year in baseball history was Hoss Radbourn's 89 in 1884. After 1900, the highest total was Honus Wagner's 59 in 1908.

Those are way out there, however. In most years, a total of 30 or more Win Shares is enough to gain MVP consideration and 40 is only reached every few years by a great player.

For individual players, Win Shares are a predictable stat, just like home runs and strikeouts. But sometimes players outperform their history of Win Shares and other times they clunk out. Think there are some teammates that are associated with Win Shares streaks and slumps?

I calculated the "predicted Win Shares" of each player in each major league season, based primarily on how he had performed before that season and how much he played during the season in question (I don't want to bog you down with details; I'll put the full explanation at the end of this article). I then linked them to each player's teammates—same as the previous two exercises—and calculated which teammate most boosted the individual play of those around him.

The top 20:

Player	Win Shares	Predicted Win Shares	Diff	%
Smoky Joe Wood	3,639	3,349	290	9%
Mort Cooper	3,393	3,115	278	9%
Tom Prince	4,482	4,213	269	6%
Gene Moore	3,519	3,252	267	8%
Tris Speaker	5,517	5,255	262	5%
Bobby Tolan	3,729	3,470	260	7%
Dixie Walker	5,259	5,000	259	5%
Frankie Frisch	5,037	4,779	258	5%
Frank Crosetti	4,866	4,611	255	6%
Nellie Fox	4,719	4,465	254	6%
Johnny Hopp	4,713	4,459	254	6%
Clyde Engle	2,481	2,245	236	11%
Larry Gardner	4,302	4,066	236	6%
Pedro Martinez	3,459	3,226	233	7%
Armando Reynoso	3,069	2,836	233	8%
Ed Cicotte	3,528	3,298	230	7%
Buck Martinez	4,257	4,028	230	6%
Lew Riggs	2,616	2,386	230	10%
Pinch Thomas	2,718	2,493	225	9%
Lefty Gomez	4,038	3,816	222	6%

Hey, this is a fascinating list, starting at the very top. Smoky Joe Wood was a great pitcher who spent 11 seasons with the Red Sox and Indians, and his teammates almost always outperformed their predicted Win Shares. Of course, Wood contributed to that type of luck, too. In his best year, 1912, he was 34-5 with a 1.91 ERA. He had 44 Win Shares while my system predicted he would have "only" 26.

The year that Wood apparently most inspired his teammates was 1912. Tris Speaker (who is also on our list) accrued 51 Win Shares, nearly 20 more than predicted. Larry Gardner (a fine third baseman) had perhaps his finest year with 29 Win Shares, 11 more than predicted. Altogether, the 1912 Red Sox won 105 games and the World Series.

Wood was also quite inspirational in Cleveland, circa 1920, when Tris Speaker had another big year (39 Win Shares) and Steve O'Neill had his best year ever. Actually, so did Stan Coveleski, Jim Bagby and Elmer Smith. Smoky Joe Wood was quite the teammate.

I kind of like this approach. It captures the notion of players who managed to reach a peak in their careers and isolates which teammates were there most often. There's no "Jack O'Connor" effect, because teammates carry their past history with them, even if they switch teams.

Here's something else I like about this list. Remember all the Reds from our first list, the one that had the top Pythagorean variances? Well, the only one of them to make this list is perhaps the least well-known Red of the era, outfielder Bobby Tolan. The only Yankees to appear are Lefty Gomez and Frank Crosetti. No Pete Rose, Johnny Bench, Babe Ruth or Mickey Mantle. There are stars on the list, big ones, but the presence of Crosetti and Tolan makes me feel that we've found the really key links.

Of course, you might say that Crosetti and Tolan were only lucky in that they played with great players. And you'd be right about that. But great players don't typically stay great. Most return to earth at some point; few sustain greatness the way Ruth or Mantle did. If there was a teammate associated with truly sustained greatness, I don't have a problem giving him credit for that.

Crosetti played for the Yankees for 16 years. In four of those years, 1932, 1936, 1939 and 1943, his teammates outperformed their predicted Win Shares by 40 or more Win Shares. In 1932, Red Ruffing jumped from 11 and 15 Win Shares the two previous years to 26 Win Shares, the highest total of his career. Tony Lazzeri jumped from 19 and 15 the two previous years to 27, the second-best season of his career.

The 1939 Yankees were perhaps the greatest team in history, and Crosetti was there. Charlie Keller had a great rookie year and Red Rolfe had his best year. So did George Selkirk.

That's how it ran for Crosseti, Tolan and others on our list. Great teammates, yes, but great teammates having their best years. That's what I would call luck.

There are some obscure names on the list, too.

- Gene Moore is the only player on both this list and the "improved teams" list. Moore was an outfielder—a spare one, usually—from 1931 to 1945. He played for the Cardinals, Braves, Dodgers, Yankees and Senators and he seemed to inspire his teammates everywhere he went. Most notably, he was with the Browns the only time they reached the postseason, in 1944. That was Vern Stephens' best year: 34 Win Shares and third in MVP voting. It was also pitcher Jack Kramer's best year by far. Dizzy Dean also had his best year when Moore was his teammate. So did Paul Dean, Ripper Collins, Pepper Martin, Jim Turner, Lou Fette and George Case.
- Johnny Hopp was a pretty good first baseman/outfielder from 1940 to 1952. He made most of his impact with the Cardinals during World War II, when it was easier for established major leaguers to reach new performance heights.
- Clyde Engle was an all-purpose player, good hitter who spent two years in the Federal League. He was on the same 1912 Red Sox team as Joe Wood, but he also spent a little time with the 1910 Yankees (who finished second despite having only won 51 games two years before).
- Pinch Thomas—what a great name—was a light-hitting catcher who was smart enough to be Smoky Joe Wood's teammate for a number of years. Second degree luck, you might say.

The unluckiest player in our Win Shares methodology, the guy you just didn't want to see in the clubhouse, was Frank Tanana. Tanana was a fireballing youngster who morphed into a crafty lefty in his old age and managed to have a very good 21-year career. But boy, did he bring down his teammates.

One of his real downer years was 1980. Teammate Don Baylor batted only .250 with a .341 slugging percentage. The year before he had been the league's MVP. Nearly every Angel had a below-average year and no one was significantly better than predicted.

He killed the Tigers in 1989. Alan Trammell had only 13 Win Shares. Chet Lemon had 10, Jack Morris had four, Doyle Alexander had eight. Among the regulars, only Lou Whitaker was better than predicted. Want to blame someone for the Tigers' 59-103 record that year, two years after winning 98? Blame Frank Tanana.

There are so many great stories embedded in our research that it's hard to know where to stop. What's Tom Prince's story, for instance? (Hint: focus on the Pirates in the early 1990s and the Twins in the early 2000s). Or Dixie Walker's? Nellie Fox? Wonderful stories to be uncovered, but I doubt that any of them can match our original inspiration.

Jack Lohrke is 173rd on this list, with a positive variance of 138 actual Win Shares over predicted Win Shares—at a rate of almost 9 percent. That is a pretty good rate, right up there with Smoky Joe, but Lohrke's career was much shorter.

A lot of players have been nominated to be "Lucky like Lohrke," and I don't know which one to choose. Ruben Sierra, Dennis Martinez, Rich Dauer, Dennis Cook, Smoky Joe Wood, Frank Crosetti, Bobby Tolan? You've seen the research, but none of these guys make a compelling case equal to Lohrke's remarkable "backstory." It says here that the crown is still his. Lucky Lohrke truly was the luckiest player in baseball history.

A few notes about the methodologies in this article:

- For those of you who care, I used the "Pythagen-Pat" approach to the Pythagorean Variances. You can find a definition of PythgenPat in the Hardball Times statistical glossary (http://www.hardball-times.com/statpages/glossary/.
- To calculate each team's improvement scale, I had to average the number of games played between the two seasons involved (this made a big impact on the strike years). The calculation was (Winning Percent in Year Two divided by Winning Percent in Year One) times (The number of games played in both years divided by two).
- To calculate predicted Win Shares…
    - I first calculate each player's "expected Win Shares," which are the number of Win Shares an average player would have accrued that season, given that specific player's playing time.
    - I then calculate Win Shares Above Average for the three prior years, if available. Win Shares Above Average (or, WSAA) equals Win Shares minus expected Win Shares.
- Finally, I calculate Predicted Win Shares …
    - For rookies, I take 80 percent of the year's expected Win Shares to set predicted Win Shares. In the history of baseball, rookies have delivered at about that level.
    - For second-year players, I take 95 percent of the current year's expected Win Shares and add 50 percent of the previous year's WSAA.
    - For third-year players, I add 45 percent of the previous year's WSAA and 20 percent of the WSAA from the season before, and add them to the current season's expected Win Shares.
    - For all other players, I add 45 percent of the previous year's WSAA, plus 30 percent of WSAA from two years earlier, plus 15 percent of WSAA from three years earlier to the current season's expected Win Shares.

How ethical was it?

by Dave Studeman

August 14, 2008

In 1899, a minor league player, taking exception to a call made by umpire Samuel White, hit the ump on the head with a bat and killed him. This was voted the single most unethical act in the history of professional baseball, out of 133 such scenarios **presented last week by THT**. In the five days after posting that article, we received more than 35,000 votes on our **ethical ranking page** from many people like you, and the results are fascinating.

As you may recall, this material was compiled by Willy Stern for a baseball ethics class at Carleton College. Students discussed the ethical scenarios and ranked them from least to most unethical at the end of the semester. The purpose was to use the exercise as a way of investigating many underlying issues and disciplines, such as "... American history, race relations, sociology, law, business, marketing, ethics, philosophy, decision-making, religion, discrimination, law enforcement, even lawn care."

We outsiders didn't get the benefit of any class study and discussion, of course. But I venture to say that 35,000 votes are enough to make our standings "statistically significant," whatever that means in this particular case. So we know that killing an umpire was the most unethical scenario of all (Stern's students agreed with that ranking, by the way). What's next?

Remember that these were two different exercises. The students had the benefit of looking at all ethical scenarios when they ranked them ordinally (that is, in order from one to 133). In other words, they had the full context. Our exercise was what you might call a "binary ranking" exercise (at least, that's what Tangotiger calls it), in which voters were presented with two scenarios at a time and asked to choose the "least ethical" of the two. We developed our rankings by calculating the percentage of time each scenario was chosen as the least ethical, and then adjusting those

percentages by the average percentage of each scenario's "opponents" (although, with more than 500 votes per scenario on average, that adjustment wasn't really necessary).

So there will be some differences in the result. For instance, a student might logically infer that "I should group the three organizational racism scenarios together, because they're so similar." Our voters didn't get to think that way. You might call our results pure "gut" choices, without the benefit of discussion, study and the context of the entire list.

Indeed, the students rated three organizational racism scenarios as the second-, third- and fourth-least ethical scenarios of the 133. For us voters, we tended to rate high-profile gambling scenarios equally as unethical as organizational racism. For instance, here are the second- through seventh-least ethical scenarios, determined by the voters (with the student rankings in parentheses):

2. Segregation, broken by **Jackie Robinson** in 1947 (3rd)
3. The 1877 game fixing scandal by the Louisville Grays (16th)
4. Game-throwing incidents by the Mutuals and Haymakers in the 1860's (15th)
5. Early racism, as epitomized by **Cap Anson**, in the late 1800's (4th)
6. Umpire **Dick Higham** taking a bribe (18th)
7. The Black Sox scandal (14th)

As you can see, baseball fans think that throwing baseball games and taking bribes are pretty unethical acts. Students do, too, but not quite as strongly. Part of this difference may be due to the structure of the rating systems, but I'm pretty sure that baseball fans consider gambling to be more unethical than the students in Willy's class did. Willy's class included members of the Carleton baseball and softball squads, but it also had students who were unfamiliar with baseball. Fans familiar with baseball history are more likely to be sensitive to the issue of throwing games.

The next set of incidents to consider are violent ones. Here are a few examples (numbers are ranking by fans/ranking by students):
{exp:list_maker}**Juan Marichal** attacking John Roseboro with a bat (8/11)
Ty Cobb's nasty fight under the stands with umpire Billy Evans (16/7)
The father and son who rushed onto Comiskey Park a few years ago and attacked the ump (9/6)
Brooklyn fans throwing umbrella spears at Giants' players in the early 1900's (10/13)
The fan who dropped a full tomato crate on catcher **Birdie Tebbetts** while he was

sitting in the bullpen (13/10) {/exp:list_maker}
There's a bit of a pattern here. Fans considered gambling incidents relatively more troubling than students did, particularly compared to incidents of violence. Other than that, there weren't huge differences between the two groups in most of the very top rankings.

The readers of Tango's Book Blog were also asked to rank the ethical scenarios, and **their results can be found here**. Tango's readers generally followed the same pattern, at least at the top of the list.

There are a couple of odd mixes at this stage, however. For instance, the **Bill Klem** incident (in which Klem was approached by a supporter of the New York Giants and offered money to call the game in the Giants' favor) was rated the 15th-most unethical scenario by us fans but 31st by the Carleton students. And the scenario in which players raise their spikes to purposely injure another player, a la Ty Cobb and **Dick Bartell**, was rated 14th by fans and 34th by the students. Why the diff? Dunno.

The steroids scandal is generally next on both lists. Here is the rank of each steroids-related scenario (fans rank/students rank):
{exp:list_maker}Palmeiro's finger wag (21/26)
Bonds' indictment (22/25)
The steroids era in general, as detailed in the Mitchell Report (25/17)
Clemens' FBI referral (35/29)
McGwire evades (54/35) {/exp:list_maker}I'm not sure you can say that the exact ranking of these incidents is "statistically significant," so I wouldn't make too much of the fact that fans voted Palmeiro's finger wag slightly less ethical than Bonds' indictment. But it is interesting that students thought **Mark McGwire**'s evasion in front of Congress was relatively much less ethical than fans did. I would have liked to sit in on that discussion.

Let's talk about some of the scenarios in which fans and students disagreed most:

Ten-Cent Beer Night: In 1974, the Indians sold beer for 10 cents a cup, chaos ensued and the game had to be called. I think we can all agree that was a really bad idea; Rob Neyer even included it in his *Big Book of Baseball Blunders*. But Carleton students also rated it the 12th-most unethical baseball act of all time; fans rated it 78th.

Disco Night: Mike Veeck's initial baseball promotion also famously resulted in chaos on the field and a game forfeit. Fans forgave Veeck, ranking it the 94th-most unethical act of the 133, but the Carleton students ranked it 28th.

Mirror Game: This is one of my favorites. In the late 1930's, Mike's father, **Bill Veeck**, sold tiny mirrors to fans and encouraged them to reflect sun directly into the eyes of the opposing batter. Baseball fans rated this the 24th-most unethical act of the 133, but Carleton students only rated it 80th.

More from The Hardball Times

A Hardball Times Update
by RJ McDaniel
Goodbye for now.

Why the difference in the perception of these promotions? I can see the argument that selling beer for 10 cents is pretty unethical (and, yes, stupid), but I'm not so sure about Disco Night. Was that more unethical or unpredictable and unfortunate? It appears that fans are most concerned about the impact of a promotion on what happens on the field, and Mirror Game was an obvious attempt to cheat the game. Students appear to be less focused on the game impact and more focused on the "larger" ethical picture, such as promotions that could conceivably lead to violence.

Along the same lines, the Red Sox once helped **Carl Mays** avoid arrest (he had thrown a baseball at a fan in the stands) by sneaking him out of Boston and then trading him to the Yankees. Carleton students rated this the fifth-worst ethical act of all; fans voted it the 30th worst. I think the students may have a point here.

Anyway, the Mirror Game is one of many scenarios that involved teams using their home field to gain an advantage over the visiting team. In general, fans tended to consider these relatively more unethical than students did. Here's a pretty comprehensive list of all the "home field" scenarios (fans' rank/students' rank):
{exp:list_maker}Mirror Game (24/80)
Leo Durocher planting a listening device in the opposing team's locker room (28/65)
The buried wire Philadelphia used to signal pitches to the batter (29/71)
The Twins using the ventilation in the HumpDome to their advantage (44/67)

The Braves setting extra-wide batting lines (46/103)
Baltimore planting soap chips in the dirt on the pitcher's mound (48/89)
The White Sox freezing the balls before the game (49/66)
Bobby Thomson's shot off stolen catcher's sign (though Thomson denied he saw the sign) (51/57)
Other examples of teams stealing signs in their home stadium, such as Detroit's use of "Indian Eyes" (52/70)
Bill Veeck setting up movable fences in Cleveland, depending on the opposition (66/102)
The Giants adding sand to the area around first to slow down Maury Wills (70/90)
Ashburn's ridge, making it easier for **Richie Ashburn**'s bunts to roll fair (83/93)
The Dodgers putting hard clay in around first base, making it easier for **Maury Wills** to take off (88/104)
Wetting the mound in Oakland when **Catfish Hunter** came to town (93/95)
Watering the area around first to make it easier for **Vic Wertz** to field (97/107)
{/exp:list_maker}Every one of these scenarios has a deeper story and would be a pretty compelling discussion topic. In general, low-key changes to the playing field are considered maybe "petty" crimes, except for a few exceptions such as the Braves' wide batting lines and the soap chips in Baltimore. I'm not sure why fans thought those two scenarios stuck out as particularly less ethical; the students generally ranked them with other field manipulations.

In general, stealing signs ranked about 50th, though I'm not sure why students rated Bobby Thomson's home run 57th and other sign-stealing incidents 70th. I think the fans were a bit more logical there (rating Thomson's home run 51st and generally stealing signs 52nd).

There is also the issue of doctoring balls and bats, in which fans and students tend to rank scenarios similarly. Here's a list of all the "doctoring" scenarios from the original 133, along with the fans' and students' rankings in parentheses:
{exp:list_maker}Stuffing a bat with super balls (37/50)
Rick Honeycutt using a tack to scuff a ball (38/52)
Jason Grimsley crawling through an air duct to abscond **Albert Belle**'s corked bat (39/46)
Amos Otis using both cork and super balls (40/43)
Corking a bat (41/40)
Ted Kluszewski banging nails into his bat (43/47)
Sammy Sosa caught corking his bat (50/48)
Joe Niekro caught with an emery board (56/54)

Lew Burdette rolling the ball to the umpire to wipe the tobacco juice off of it (61/64)
Julian Tavarez putting pine tar on the ball (63/61)
Clyde King with bubble gum on the ball (64/62)
Gaylord Perry's mudball, etc. etc. (65/55)
The spitball (68/58)
Using slippery elm on a ball (71/59)
Bill Singer's toothpaste (82/53) {/exp:list_maker}Fans and students generally ranked bat doctoring as less ethical than ball doctoring. I'm reminded of **Keith Hernandez**'s view of cheating, from his book *Pure Baseball*:

> "Now, hitting with a corked bat, that is cheating because there's no way to catch this trick on the field. But if you can stand on the mound and somehow scuff the baseball in full view of the umpires and everyone else and not get caught, more power to you.

It would appear that fans and students (though to a lesser degree) agree with Keith on this count.

Finally, there are drunks and druggies. Many players have played drunk, and this doesn't seem to bother the fans too much. They ranked it 113th of 133 scenarios; Carleton students thought it was a bit less ethical and rated it 86th. How about **Dock Ellis** taking acid on the day he pitched? No biggie, say the fans, who ranked it 115th. Carleton students ranked it 75th.

And **Pete Rose** betting on baseball? The 17th-most unethical act of all.

You can view **the entire list on this page**, which will be updated periodically. And you can continue to **rank the ethical scenarios over on this other page**.

Dave Studeman was called a "national treasure" by Rob Neyer. Seriously. Follow his sporadic tweets **@dastudes**.

Comments are closed.

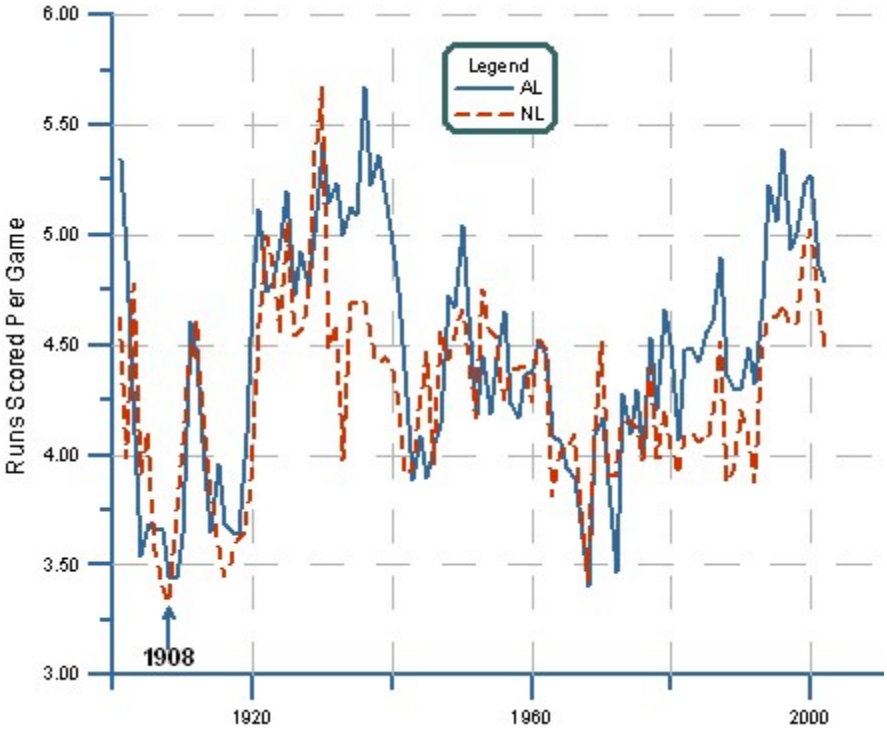
Remembering Honus Wagner

by Dave Studeman

April 3, 2004

In 1908, **Honus Wagner**, one of the greatest players of all time, had one of his best years. He batted .354, with an OBP of .415 and a SLG of .542. He had 201 hits, including 39 doubles, 19 triples and ten home runs. He scored 100 runs and drove in 109. He stole 54 bases and had 308 total bases. Remarkable numbers.

But to truly get a sense of just how remarkable these numbers were, take a look at this graph of the number of runs scored per game in each year since 1900:



Wagner reached those outstanding numbers in the lowest run-scoring year of the last century. Not even the 1960's reached such an offensive nadir. As a result, *Wagner led the league in BA, OBP and SLG, as well as hits, total bases, doubles, triples, stolen bases and RBI's.* He was second in home runs (in a park extremely

unfriendly to home runs) and runs scored.

For comparison's sake, let's look at some of the **American League batting leaders in 1968**, the second-lowest run-scoring year of all time.

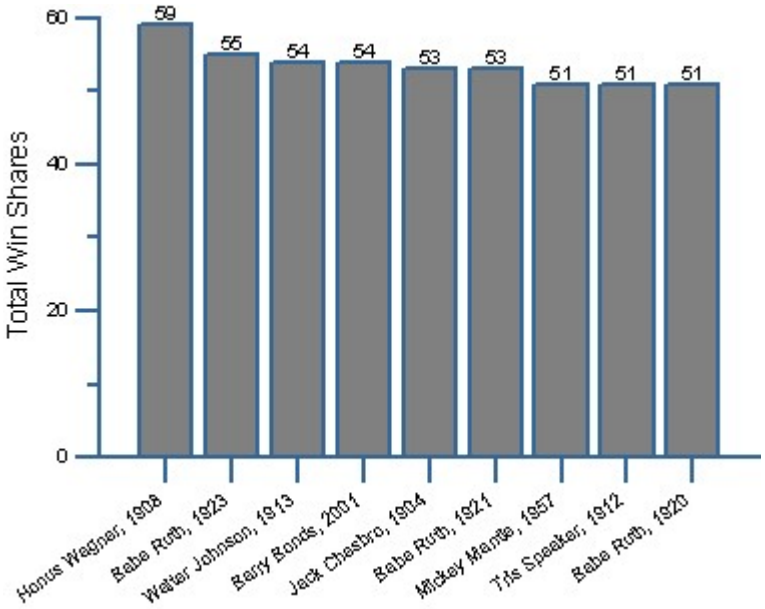
- Batting Average: Yaz (.301)
- Hits: **Campaneris** (177)
- OBP: **Yaz** (.426)
- SLG: **Howard** (.552)
- Total Bases: Howard (330)
- Runs: **McAuliffe** (95)
- RBI: **Harrelson** (109)
- Stolen Bases: Campy (62)

As you can see, these league-leading numbers are comparable to Wagner's, but it took several players to match what Wagner did all by himself. And he played a great shortstop on top of it. He truly dominated the league.

In fact, according to Win Shares, Honus Wagner's 1908 was the greatest individual season in baseball history (post 1900).

Wagner generated 59 Win Shares in 1908. This is an astounding number. The second highest single-season total was Babe Ruth's 55 in 1923. There follows a pretty normal distribution after Ruth — several players had 54, 53 and so on — but Wagner's 1908 was four Win Shares better than the number two season.

Here's a graph of the single-season Win Share leaders (includes all seasons of 50 or more Win Shares, starting in 1900):



Not bad for a guy who almost retired at the beginning of the season. Wagner didn't participate in the Pirates' 1908 spring training, saying that he wanted to rest. From all accounts, he wasn't holding out for money.

> "Hans Wagner is still among the unsigned, but he is not holding out. He has said that he will not play the coming season, but he is not in any way dissatisfied with his treatment at the hands of the club. He has declared time and again that he is getting all the money he is worth, but has said that he is tired and wishes to rest up for a year. However, the local owners are hopeful that he will change his mind and get into the game.

That is from the Sporting News of March 5, 1908. I also love this quote from an April edition of The Sporting News of that year, trying to blame the fans for Wagner's retirement:

> "Fans knocked and hammered the peerless Dutchman until it became wellnigh an outrage. They forgot that he was the best in the world and, when he came to the bat with men on bases and failed to clout the sphere over the farthest corner of the fence, he was roasted and hissed. And now they are bemoaning his loss, and some of

> Wagner's friends assert that if the big Dutchman had been properly appreciated by the Pittsburg fans, the thought of retirement would never have entered his cranium.

Baseball Library calls Wagner's spring retirement "an annual event," but he seemed a little more sincere in 1908. Of course, he wound up playing in 151 of the team's 154 games, so who knows?

Good thing he did play, cause 1908 turned out to be one of the most exciting seasons in baseball history. Both leagues had three-team races that went down to the last day, and the National League race featured one of the most famous plays in baseball history, "**Merkle's Boner**." The Cubs, whose infield featured Tinker-Evers-Chance, won the pennant and the World Series. In the AL, Detroit won the pennant, thanks partially to **one of the greatest stretch drive pitching matchups of all time**. All in all, a remarkable year.

Pittsburgh led the NL for most of July and August, fell behind a bit, then won 12 and tied one of their last 14 games to almost win it all. A great year for a team that basically consisted of some fine pitching and Wagner. Wagner was the entire offense; his .957 OPS was 245 points higher than the next highest OPS on the team, **Fred Clarke's** .712. The next year, with a little more batting help from his friends, Wagner and the Pirates won 110 games.

Leading the league in both OBP and total bases is quite a feat. Arguably, those are the two most important categories of batting prowess. Hans Wagner led the NL four times in those two categories; only **Rogers Hornsby** did that more often.

OBP and Total Bases don't account for extra bases achieved through steals, however. So let's add that to the leaderboard. Honus Wagner led the National League three times in all three of those categories. No one else ever did it once. In the American League, only **Ty Cobb** achieved the exact same record.

Cobb played left field, however, while Wagner played an excellent shortstop. **Sam Crawford** compared Cobb and Wagner:

> " In my opinion, the greatest all-around player who ever lived was Honus Wagner.

Cobb could only play the outfield, and even there his arm wasn't anything special. Honus Wagner could play any position. He could do everything. In fact, when I first played against him he was an outfielder, and then he became a third baseman, and later the greatest shortstop of

them all. Honus could play any position except pitcher and be easily the best in the league at it. He was a wonderful fielder, terrific arm, very quick, all over the place grabbing sure hits and turning them into outs. And, of course, you know he led the league in batting eight times.

You'd never think it to look at him, of course. He looked so awkward, bowlegged, barrel-chested, about 200 pounds, a big man. And yet he could run like a scared rabbit. He had enormous hands, and when he scooped up the ball at shortstop he'd grab half the infield with it. But boy, Honus made those plays! He looked awkward doing it, not graceful like Larry Lajoie, but he could make every play Lajoie could make and more. Talk about speed. That bowlegged guy stole over 700 bases in the 21 years he played in the Big Leagues. A good team man, too, and the sweetest disposition in the world. The greatest ballplayer who ever lived, in my book.

Wagner was indeed a good man, as **Paul Waner** observed:

> "Honus was a wonderful fellow, so good-natured and friendly to everyone. Gee, we loved that guy. And the fans were crazy about him. Yeah, everybody loved that old Dutchman! If anyone told a good joke or a funny story, Honus would slap his knee and let out a loud roar and say, "What about *that*."

You've got to wonder just how good a coach the man was, however. **George Gibson**, who caught for the Pirates during some of Wagner's playing time there, sought out Honus for advice with his batting woes:

> "Once I said to him, "Honus, I can't seem to get the hang of it. I *try* hard enough, but it doesn't seem to do any good. What am I doing wrong?"
>
> He said, "Look, the secret is to follow the ball from the time it leaves the pitcher's hand until it gets to the plate."
>
> I liked Honus so I didn't say anything to him, but that didn't sound like much of a secret to me. Heck, I could do *that*. After all, I was a catcher; that's all I did all day long.

Wagner also holds the distinction of having the most **valued baseball card of all time**, the T206 tobacco card, which sold on eBay for a record $1.27 million. I was once on a business trip in Phoenix, talking baseball with a cab driver, when he started telling me a story about his old baseball card collection that was ruined in a fire some twenty years earlier. He claimed he had the Wagner in his collection. I

didn't know whether to believe him or not. But if the story was true, imagine all the "what if" scenarios that had been going through his mind ever since, most of which probably did not involve driving a cab.

Honus Wagner is one of those guys I really, really wish I could have seen play. I plan to watch the movie on Sunday, hoping to catch a little bit of the magic.

References & Resources

The Sam Crawford, Paul Waner and George Gibson quotes come from one of the greatest baseball books ever written, **The Glory of their Times**, by the recently-deceased Lawrence Ritter.

The Honus Wagner picture, and many more like it, can be found at **Portrait Matt's website**.

The 1908 information came from "Baseball's Pennant Races: A Graphic View" by John Warner Davenport. It's been out of print for many years, but there are many other sources of 1908 information. By the way, "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" was also written that year.

You can read more about Wagner at the online **Baseball Library**.

If you want to read old Sporting News editions online, subscribe to the **Paper of Record. SABR** members get a discount.

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