

# Historical Win Shares Above Bench

by Dave Studeman

January 18, 2007

You may come to the Hardball Times to catch up on Bill James' Win Shares during the season. The history of Win Shares **is briefly covered in this article**, so I won't go into all of that here. But I will say that Win Shares is a fairly controversial subject among hardcore baseball analysts due to a number of flaws in its framework.

The most serious flaw is the lack of "Loss Shares." It's nice to know that a player had, say, 200 Win Shares in his career. But if he also had 200 Loss Shares, as opposed to 150, you'd think very differently about him. The lack of Loss Shares means that Win Share totals lack perspective.

We've overcome that flaw by adding a stat called **Win Shares Above Bench** at THT. The concept is simple: first we calculate a player's expected Win Shares, which are the number of Win Shares an average player would receive given that specific player's time in the field, at bat and on the mound. We then take 70% of expected Win Shares and call that "bench level Win Shares." Actually, we don't call it anything. We just calculate it and subtract it from total Win Shares to get Win Shares Above Bench.

The result is the value a player contributed to his team above what a player with a .350 "winning percentage" would have contributed. We haven't calculated Loss Shares, but we've basically accomplished the same thing by putting total Win Shares in a playing time context.

We've been doing this at THT for a couple of years now, but I've never gone back to compute WSAB for historical Win Shares. I decided to rectify that this winter. I've taken the first (and easiest) step by calculating WSAB for all everyday players who have played since 1900; pitchers will hopefully arrive in a few weeks. Ideally, I would have posted the results before the Hall of Fame election, but I didn't finish in time.

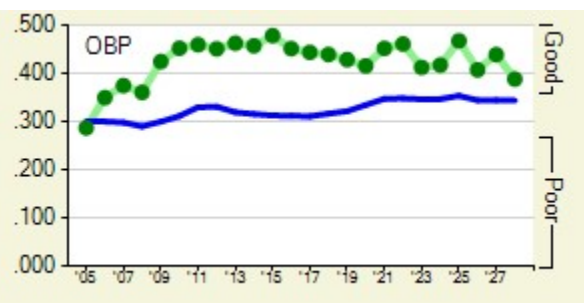
Still, you may find these rankings enjoyable.

My player comments are based on graphs and stats found in **Fangraphs** and **Baseball Reference**, two remarkable statistical resources.

### The Top Ten

**1\*. Babe Ruth (478 WSAB/659 WS):** The Babe actually has fewer WSAB than Cobb in this edition, but these figures don't include the Babe's first four years, when he didn't play in the outfield at all. Once I figure out how to calculate pitching WSAB, Ruth will blow Cobb away. He gets a provisional first.

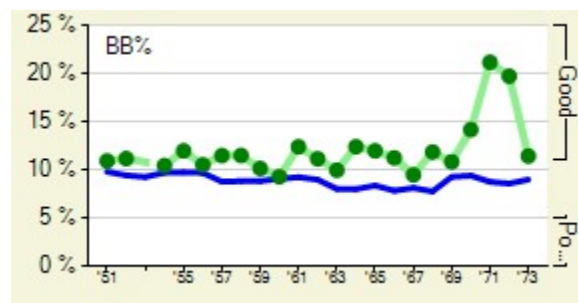
**2\*. Ty Cobb (486 WSAB/722 WS):** Cobb's season-by-season OBP is on the right. What an amazing record. Plus, he led the league in Slugging Average eight times.



### 3. Barry Bonds (472 WSAB/693

WS): And counting. These top three players form their own league, if you will; there's a big gap in WSAB between Cobb, Ruth and Bonds and the next threesome.

**4. Tris Speaker (414 WSAB/630 WS):** It's too bad Speaker played the exact same time as Cobb; he's been somewhat underappreciated as a result. Cobb was voted into the Hall in the first year of voting; Speaker in the second. Speaker was a sensational fielder. In fact, he has the 11th highest total of fielding Win Shares in history, far more than any other outfielder.



### 5. Willie Mays (413 WSAB/632 WS):

Mays is one WSAB behind Speaker. He sure learned to take a walk late in his career, didn't he? Take a look at the graph on the left.

### 6. Honus Wagner (410 WSAB/598

WS): The first infielder among the greats, Wagner dominates the all-time shortstop list like no other player at any other position.

**7. Hank Aaron (389 WSAB/643 WS):** There's another, smaller, gap between the second threesome and Aaron. Holder of the career home run record, at least for now.

According to **Baseball Reference**, he would have hit 801 home runs in today's environment.

**8. Mickey Mantle (385 WSAB/565 WS):** Here is the power of WSAB: Mantle accumulated about 80 fewer Win Shares than Aaron, but they're virtually even in WSAB. Aaron had a great, long career; Mantle had a greater shorter career. The Mick didn't accumulate as many "Loss Shares" as Aaron, and any all-time ranking should reflect that.

**9. Ted Williams (381 WSAB/555 WS):** Same thing with The Kid. Williams famously had several years lopped off his career due to two different wars. If not for that, he'd be right up there with the top threesome.

**10. Stan Musial (375 WSAB/604 WS):** Isn't it amazing how many great players seemed to come in pairs? Cobb/Speaker, Mays/Mantle, Williams/Musial? Musial finished in the top ten in National League MVP voting in 13 of 14 consecutive years. I recently read a blogger nastily complain that **Cal Ripken** didn't get 100% of the Hall vote. Musial only got 93% of the Hall vote, as did Williams. Really, how is that possible?

#### The Next Ten

**11. Eddie Collins (357 WSAB/574 WS):** Another gap down to the highest-ranked second baseman. Collins started young and played extremely well until he was 40.

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#### More from The Hardball Times



#### A Hardball Times Update

by RJ McDaniel

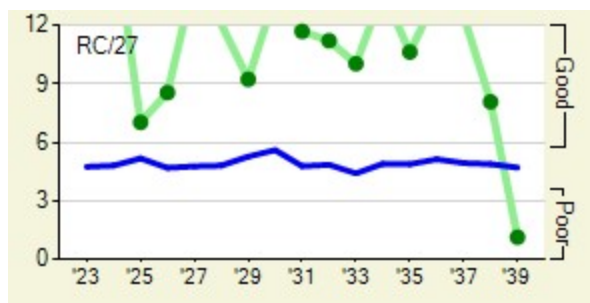
Goodbye for now.

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**12. Rogers Hornsby (331 WSAB/502 WS):** Hornsby is another player whose star rises with WSAB. He was never the same after breaking his leg at the age of 34, and his shortened career gets shortchanged by pure counting stats. Did you know that the year Hornsby hit .424, he actually finished second in the National League MVP race to a pitcher? **Dazzy Vance** took the honor in the first year of "official" MVP

voting.

**13. Mel Ott (325 WSAB/538 WS):** Ott deserves this ranking, although his home run totals were significantly boosted by the Polo Grounds; he hit 323 home runs in New York and 188 elsewhere. He's the first player on this list to have never won an MVP award, despite leading the NL (or tying for the lead) in WSAB four times.



**14. Lou Gehrig (318 WSAB/489 WS):** With his short career, Gehrig is another player whose career is boosted by WSAB. He ranks 19th in total Win Shares among position players. First basemen don't garner a lot of fielding Win Shares; Gehrig had only 34. But he was a spectacular

hitter. In the accompanying graph, his Runs Created per game is literally off the chart for many years.

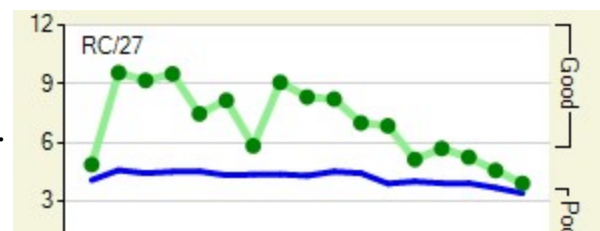
**15. Joe Morgan (306 WSAB/512 WS):** My brother had Joe Morgan on his APBA team his entire career. During his Houston tenure, when Joe's stolen bases were down due to an injury, my brother wrote him to ask him how he was doing. Joe wrote back and told him not to worry; he'd keep stealing bases. And he did.

**16. Frank Robinson (304 WSAB/519 WS):** Let's play What If: Robby had a .724 Slugging Average in Fenway Park.

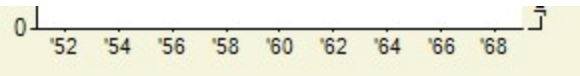
**17. Rickey Henderson (294 WSAB/535 WS):** Rickey is another player whose standing is reduced a bit by WSAB. Heck, he's probably still playing somewhere. His career walk rate was the same as Morgan's (17%). Only the most feared sluggers, like Ruth and Williams, had higher walk rates.

**18. Mike Schmidt (282 WSAB/467 WS):** The highest ranking third baseman of all time, despite that .196 average his rookie year. Schmidt may have had one of the most dramatic improvements in contact rate ever. He struck out 180 times when he was 25. By the age of 36, he was down to 89 strikeouts with no loss in power.

**19. Eddie Mathews (266 WSAB/450 WS):** According to Baseball Reference, Schmidt's most similar batter is Mathews. It's a good thing that Mathews broke into



the majors at 20, because his skills mostly went downhill from there. As you can see in the Runs Created graph, he slumped in his mid-20s, but his career was otherwise a gently sloping downhill ride.

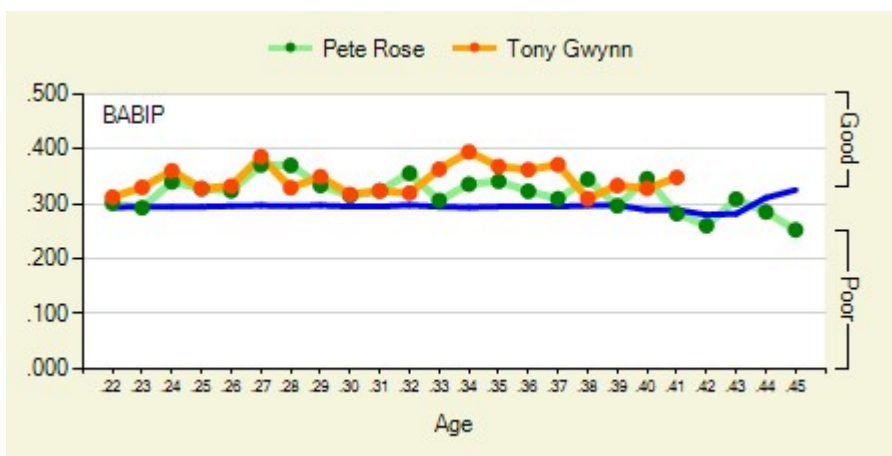


**20. Nap Lajoie (265 WSAB/425 WS):** This listing is unfair to Lajoie, because I only collected stats from 1900 on, four years after Nap broke into the majors. He should be right up there with Collins, Hornsby and Morgan. His crossover to the new American League's Athletics in 1901, and the subsequent crazy court ruling and trade to Cleveland, were key events in the formation of the junior league.

### The Twenties

**21. Jimmie Foxx (264 WSAB/435 WS):** Add Gehrig and Foxx to the list of similar players playing at the same time. Foxx's RC/G graph looks very similar to Gehrig's. Foxx's career also seemed to peter out early; he was pretty much done at the age of 34.

**22. Pete Rose (260 WSAB/547 WS):** And now we come to Charley Hustle. Rose had a ridiculously long career, and he has the largest gap between his Win Shares and WSAB totals of any player ever (he ranks 12th in total Win Shares among position players). Like the most recent Hall inductee, **Tony Gwynn**, Rose was a hitting machine. Here's a graph comparing the BABIP of Rose and Gwynn (the blue line is the league average). The two stars track each other very well, though Gwynn maintains an awesome pace in his 30s.



**23. Joe DiMaggio (251 WSAB/387 WS):** Joltin' Joe gets a huge boost from WSAB, as he should. His career was shortened by the war, but DiMaggio finished in the top 10 in MVP voting in 10 of the 13 years he did play. If you added back his war

years, he'd probably have about 320 WSAB, right around Gehrig, his one-time teammate.

**24. Sam Crawford (251 WSAB/442 WS):** In the new Baseball Historical Abstract, Bill James recalibrated Crawford's stats 20 years forward (starting from 1900 to 1920, etc.) and came up with 494 career home runs for the right fielder. He was a slugger before sluggers were appreciated, leading the AL in extra-base hits four times and placing second four more times...

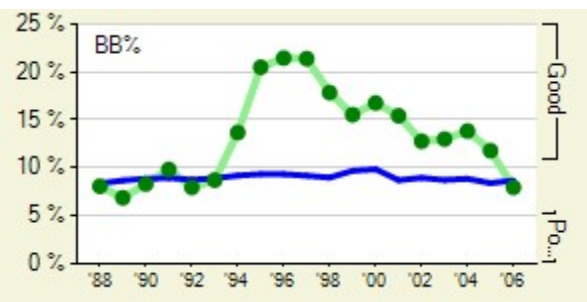
**25. Reggie Jackson (233 WSAB/444 WS):** ... as opposed to Reggie, who was way appreciated. Reggie was all power: his batting eye was OK but not great, he was an OK not great fielder, he had good but not great speed. Mr. October? He did bat .357/.457/.527 in the World Series, but .227/.298/.380 in League Championship series.

**26. Paul Waner (232 WSAB/423 WS):** Three great right fielders in a row. In Waner's second year, he won the league batting title at .380, as well as the MVP. Like Mathews, his production steadily declined after that. Unfortunately, he didn't break into the majors until the age of 23, which put him behind the starting line of most of the players so far. He had batted .369, .356, and .401 in the Pacific Coast League when the Pirates bought his contract. If he had spent those years in the majors, he would probably rank among the top 20 players of all time.

**27. Carl Yastrzemski (231 WSAB/488 WS):** WSAB brings Yaz's stratospheric Win Shares total back down to earth, but he's still 27th all time. I wonder if his 1967 was the greatest, most dramatic year ever. He won the MVP *almost* unanimously; one writer infamously cast his first-place vote for the Twins' **Cesar Tovar** instead. While his 1970 was just as good on the surface, the way he carried the Sox to the pennant in '67 was stunning. With two outs and runners in scoring position, Yaz batted .396/.540/.750 and seemed to win that pennant race all by himself.

**28. Gary Sheffield (230 WSAB/404 WS):** Back to right fielders. When he retires, Sheffield should be a first-ballot Hall of Famer. Remarkably, however, Sheffield has never won the MVP.

Sheffield really arrived as a hitter in 1995 and 1996, when he was 26, by getting his plate discipline under control, as you can see in the right-hand graph.





**29. Al Kaline (230 WSAB/443 WS):** The last right fielder you'll see on this list for a while, Kaline never played a game in the minor leagues. He actually wasn't very good his rookie year, batting .276/.305/.347 with only four home runs and 18 doubles. Kaline never had a great, standout year. He never hit 30 home runs, never won the MVP. But he consistently produced a great all-around game year after year.

**30. Willie McCovey (229 WSAB/408 WS):** McCovey was the unanimous NL Rookie of the Year, despite batting only 192 times. It helps that he batted .354/.429/.656 in those at bats. 1969 was his MVP year: he batted .394/.553/.789 in "late and close" situations. 1969 is the year of the Mills Brothers famous first foray into **Win Probability Added**; they called it Player Win Average. McCovey had the highest average, .677, handily beating Rose's .611 PWA.

### The Thirties

**31. Yogi Berra (224 WSAB/375 WS):** The first catcher on our list, Berra gets a boost from WSAB. He would be 51st if we ranked these guys by total Win Shares. Win Shares goes out of its way to properly credit catchers with defensive value, but there's no getting around the shortened careers catchers typically have. From 1951 through 1956, Berra won three MVP awards and came in second twice. His WSAB rank each of those years: 2,4,3,3,7,2.



**32. George Brett (220 WSAB/ 432 WS):** Ranking a bit behind Schmidt and Mathews in the third base race, Brett has one of the most interesting plate discipline development lines, as shown in the graph. He worked 38 walks in 422 plate appearances in 1984, then shot up to 103 walks in 665 plate appearances in 1985. After that, his walk rate slowly declined.

**33. Frank Thomas (220 WSAB/384 WS):** The Big Hurt should also be a first-ballot Hall of Famer; just think how he would rank if he could field or run? As a first baseman, he batted .337/.453/.625, as a designated hitter, he batted .277/.399/.515. However, that huge variance is primarily driven by the fact that he primarily played first base in the first half of the '90s, when he was awesome, and DH'd in his later years.

**34. Arky Vaughn (218 WSAB/356 WS):** I'm guessing that you don't know a lot about the second-best shortstop of all time. Vaughn played short for the Pirates and

Dodgers in the 1930s and 1940s. Offense in the 1930s National League was electric, but his bat still stands out. His .385/.491/.607 in 1935 is probably the best year by any shortstop other than Wagner. Vaughn actually quit baseball for three years, between the ages of 32 and 35, after getting into a fight with **Leo Durocher**. Because of his short career, he's someone who is better appreciated by WSAB than total Win Shares.

**35. Jeff Bagwell (218 WSAB/388 WS):** Bagwell and Thomas: born on the same day, reached the majors the same year and currently have just about the same WSAB and Win Share counts. It's a shame they won't enter the Hall at the same time.

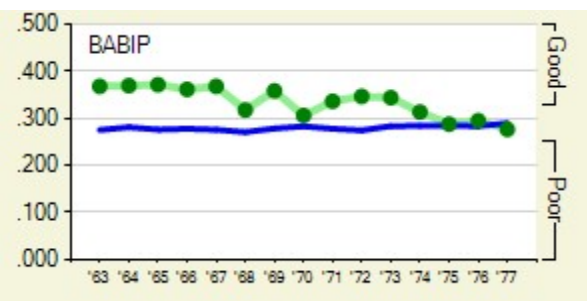
**36. Tony Gwynn (212 WSAB/398 WS):** This newest Hall of Famer clearly belongs.

**37. Craig Biggio (210 WSAB/425 WS):** Biggio is the fifth-greatest second baseman of all time according to this list. Minute Maid Park has definitely extended his career. Last year, he batted .298/.346/.522 at home and .178/.253/.288 on the road.

**38. Dick Allen (207 WSAB/342 WS):**

Dick Allen is the first person on this list who has been rejected by the Hall of Fame voters. In fact, Allen never received more than 19% of votes in any year. Although I believe Allen was often misunderstood—he was a highly emotional man during a

highly charged racial and social period—he wasn't exactly an ideal teammate. He was a divisive presence who would refuse to play, retire while the season was in progress, and generally hold contempt for any manager who actually tried to manage him.



I have also seen it said that Allen's career wasn't long enough for him to make it to the Hall, but that's hogwash. He played parts of 15 seasons, one more than Vaughn (who also quit over a managerial dispute). And he was a fantastic hitter. In the graph on the right, you can see his batting average on balls in play was around .370 in six of his first seven seasons. That is an extraordinary performance for a slugger like Allen.

**39. Al Simmons (207 WSAB/375 WS):** Simmons may have been the greatest left fielder ever before Williams and Musial came along. He didn't have the batting eye of those two, but he was their batting equal in virtually every other way.



**40. Johnny Mize (206 WSAB/338 WS):** Mize lost four years in the prime of his career to the war. If you were to add those years back, he'd probably be Jimmie Foxx's equal. Win Share totals underestimate his true value.

That's my list for now. Depending on feedback, I may delve into the next 30 or 40 players to uncover some of the most controversial Hall of Fame choices. And I do hope to run WSAB for pitchers, too.

## References & Resources

Here's the process for calculating WSAB:

1. Calculate the total number of batting, pitching and fielding Win Shares per total plate appearances, innings pitched and games played in the field (respectively). Do this for each league and year. This gives you the average rate of Win Shares accumulation.
2. For each player (not including pitchers), multiply his playing time (plate appearances and games in the field) by the appropriate league/year's Win Shares average rate.
3. Total those up for the player's career and multiply by 70% to calculate his "bench level" Win Shares.
4. Subtract that from his actual Win Shares to get Win Shares Above Bench.

The data source was **Sean Lahman's fabulous database**. I limited my analysis to the years after 1900 for two reasons: the 1800's underlying data is more scarce, and Win Shares have a completely different nature in the 19th century.

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

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Comments are closed.

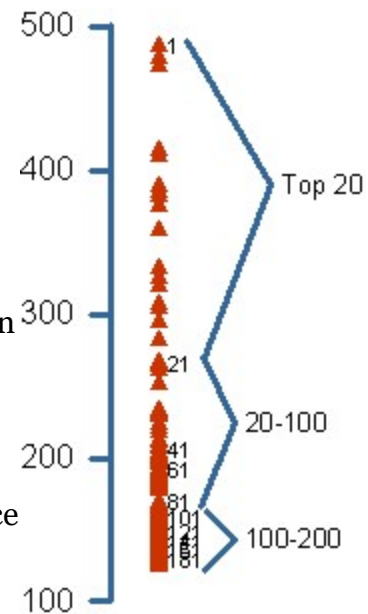
# Historical WSAB: 41 through 80

by Dave Studeman

January 25, 2007

Last week, I presented a ranking of everyday players based on a new twist on Win Shares: **Win Shares Above Bench**. I believe this is a definite improvement over basic Win Shares (**as discussed last week**). Although it's not perfect, it's pretty darn good for ranking the all-time best.

I've inserted a graph on the right that shows the distribution of the top 200 WSAB careers in our sample (everyday players, beginning in 1900). See how the players get squashed as you go down the list? The difference between the first player and the 20th is 222 WSAB, but the difference between the 20th and the 100th is only 107. And the difference between the 100th and the 200th is only 37 WSAB.



So when it comes to ranking players, we can feel pretty good about our top 20. But with each additional group of 20 players, our confidence dwindles a bit. With such small differences in WSAB, you can't clearly say that the 100th best player was "better" than the 200th. Win Shares aren't perfect, and the player rankings can change substantially if you change the baseline.

The BBWAA has voted about 70 post-1900 everyday players into the Hall of Fame, and 16 of the top 80 players in WSAB haven't qualified for Hall of Fame voting (due to the fact that they're still playing or they have been declared ineligible). Combining the two, you'd want a list of 86 players to test WSAB and Hall of Fame voting. As you'll see, with a few notable exceptions, the BBWAA votes do correlate very well with the WSAB list until we get to the 70s. And, as our graph shows, once you hit the 70s, you're talking about some pretty small differences.

But that's not really the point, anyway. This is all just plain old good fun, after all. Let's look at the crop of players who fall between 40 and 80 on the WSAB list, most of whom I think we can safely say should definitely be in the Hall. I'll add comments based on the wonderful work of **Fangraphs** and **Baseball Reference**.

#### Players in the Forties

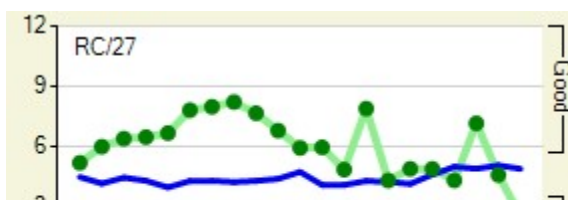
**41. Charlie Gehringer (204 WSAB/383 WS):** Known as a great fielder and a high-average hitter, Gehringer also had a phenomenal batting eye. By the end of his career, his walk rate was over 15% of plate appearances. You can't say Gehringer was unappreciated, however: He finished in the top ten in MVP voting six straight years and was elected to the Hall of Fame easily.

**42. Alex Rodriguez (204 WSAB/343 WS):** In the city of New York, A-Rod may be the least appreciated player ever. Looking at all players as of the age of 30, A-Rod ranks 15th in total Win Shares. My guess is he'll have a longer career than some of the players ahead of him and easily finish in the top 10.

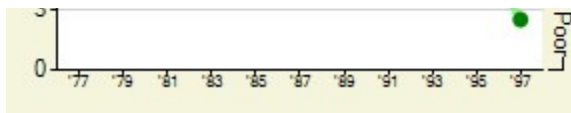
**43. Willie Stargell (204 WSAB/370 WS):** Pops had that weird tie for the NL MVP (with **Keith Hernandez**) in 1979 at the age of 39, but he also had three straight years from 1971-1973 when he finished either second or third in MVP voting. You may think of Stargell as the "old man" guiding the 1979 Pirates with his wisdom, but he was also a fierce hitter in the early and mid-1970s.

**44. Tim Lincecum (203 WSAB/390 WS):** It will be interesting to see how the Hall voters handle Lincecum. By our list, he's a no-brainer Hall of Famer; the only player ranked higher than Lincecum rejected by the voters was **Dick Allen**, who carried a lot more baggage than Lincecum will. One thing to add about Lincecum: he was "clutchy." He batted .294 overall, but .303 with runners in scoring position (batters usually do worse with RISP because managers save their best pitchers in those situations) and .315 in "late and close" situations.

**45. Mark McGwire (203 WSAB/343 WS):** We are running into some controversial players, aren't we? There should be no doubt: based on his statistics alone, McGwire belongs in the Hall.



**46. Eddie Murray: (203 WSAB/437 WS):** As the left-hand graph (runs created per game) shows, Murray's career had two phases: young and productive



and old and hanging on. Thanks to the hanging-on years, he ranks 25th in Wins Shares, but his WSAB ranking is a better

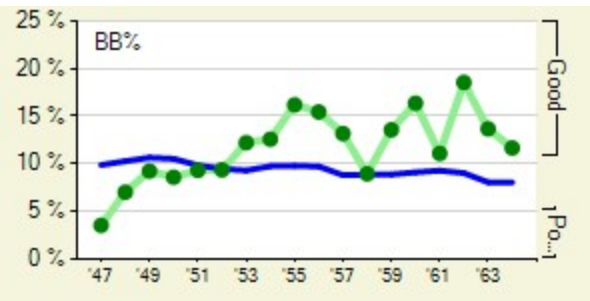
indication of his true performance.

See how closely these players are bunched? We've gotten to our sixth player, but moved only one WSAB.

#### 47. Duke Snider: (202 WSAB/352

WS): Can you even imagine what it was like in New York in the 1950s with Willie, Mickey and the Duke roaming center field? Snider hit 40 or more home runs five years in a row in the mid-50s, and learned to take a walk as his career

progressed (see the graph on the right). This enabled him to remain a valuable hitter even late in his career after he lost his power.



**48. Wade Boggs (201 WSAB/394 WS):** When most of these players first reached the majors, they were widely recognized as potential All Stars. Not Boggs. He didn't reach the majors until he was 24, and it sometimes felt like the Sox only promoted him reluctantly. Still he had a legendary batting eye and sprayed line drives all over the field—and off the Green Monster. Boggs batted .369 at Fenway.

**49. Ken Griffey Jr. (200 WSAB/371 WS):** There is a tendency to think of Junior's career as a disappointment, but that's only compared to what he might have been: an all-time Top 10 Great. It looks like Griffey will have to settle for Top 50, which ain't too shabby. Don't forget: he hit 56 home runs two years in a row and has the 27th highest MVP totals ever.

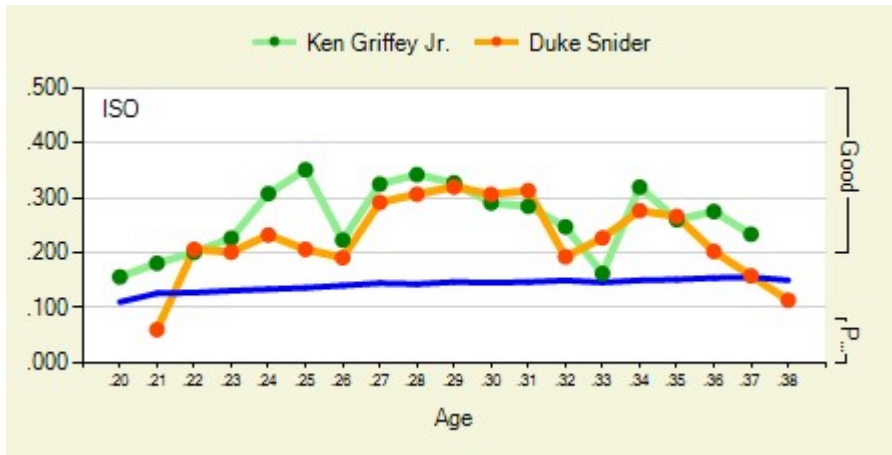
Griffey and Snider make for an interesting comparison. They were similar in many ways, as you can see in this comparative graph of their Isolated Power. The difference is that Griffey had two awesome years at ages 24 and 25.

### More from The Hardball Times

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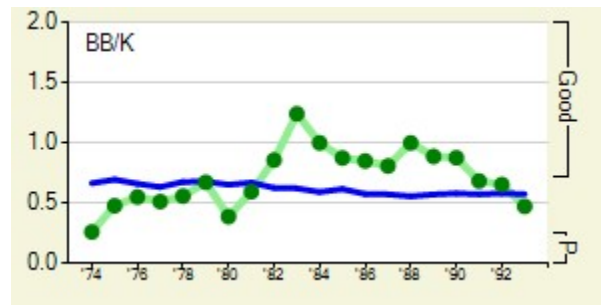
Goodbye for now.



## 50. Robin Yount (199 WSAB/423

**WS):** Yount's totals look a lot like

Murray's. His career was both long and good. Yount had a career year in 1982, at the age of 26, and pitchers pitched him differently forever after, as you can see in the right-hand graph.



## Players in their Fifties

**51. Manny Ramirez (198 WSAB/339 WS):** And then there is Manny, only 34 years old, already the 51st-best everyday player since 1900 by our reckoning. You may think of Manny as someone who has taken extra advantage of Fenway, but that's not really true. He's batted .318 at Fenway; .314 overall. He's just an extraordinary hitter. **David Ortiz** may be the King of Clutchiness, but Manny ain't too shabby either. He's batted .332 with runners in scoring position in his career.

**52. Zack Wheat (197 WSAB/380 WS):** Zack Wheat was voted into the Hall by the Veteran's Committee 30 years after he retired, and he's never ranked high on these lists. Bill James rated him the 23rd best all-time left fielder in the new Historical Abstract; conversely, we have him 52nd all-time best among **all** position players (post 1900). What gives?

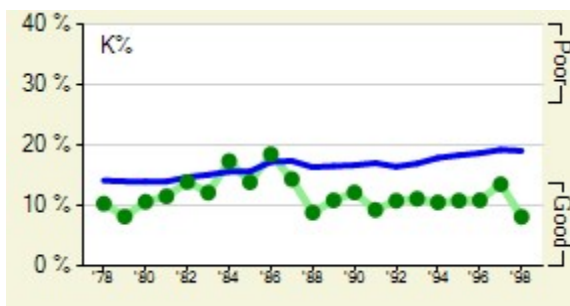
The controversy with Wheat involves the offensive "surge" of the 1920s. You know

how **Babe Ruth** reinvented the game around that time, the spitball was banned and scoring rates soared? Well, Wheat batted .299 before 1920, when he turned 32, and .339 for the rest of his career. In particular, he batted .375 two years in a row, when he was 35 and 36. So he did indeed seem to benefit much more than other players from the scorin' roarin' '20s.

James quotes **Casey Stengel**, who said that Wheat's line drives were often caught during the deadball era but that they ripped around the stadium when the ball changed. But why should that detract from Wheat's standing? His skills were apparently well suited for the times in which he played. That can be said of virtually any great ballplayer.

I can tell you something else about Zack Wheat: his strikeout rate declined throughout his entire career. In 1910 (his rookie year), he struck out in 13% of his plate appearances. After that year, his strikeout rate declined steadily year after year until it was down to 2% in 1927, his final year. That's an extraordinary accomplishment and indicates (to me, at least) that he improved his batting as he aged, regardless of what was happening around him.

Perhaps there was also something about his batting game that benefited particularly from the apparent changes in the game, but I personally think he belongs in the Hall. The Veterans Committee has made much worse choices.



**53. Paul Molitor (196 WSAB/414 WS):** Wheat and Molitor have something in common: they both played better in their 30s than their 20s. When Molitor was 30, he had a career year (1987, when **George Bell** won the MVP and **Alan Trammell** should have) and seemed to

reach a new performance plateau as a result. Also, like Wheat, a key to his success was a lower strikeout rate (see the graph on the left).

In preparing this article, I developed four different ways of counting Win Shares: total Win Shares, Win Shares Above Bench, Win Shares Above Average (in which the baseline is set at an average player instead of replacement level) and something I'm calling All Star Win Shares (which was suggested by a reader like you). The idea behind this last version is to give players credit for great years (I used 150% of expected Win Shares), but no deduction for years of lower production. It's the sort of

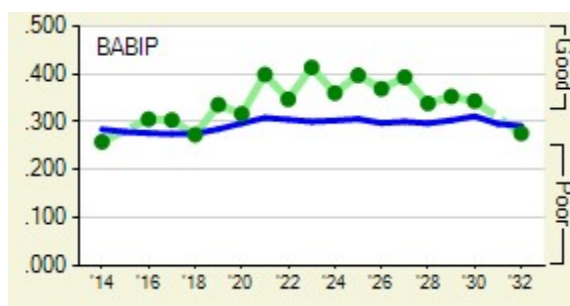


system that would rank **Sandy Koufax** highly by giving him credit for his outstanding years but no deduction for his below-average early years or premature retirement.

Paul Molitor is the first person on this list whose standings in the different systems vary widely. He's 34th in total Win Shares, 53rd in WSAB, 85th in Win Shares Above Average and 182nd in All Star Win Shares. He had a long, consistently good career but he didn't achieve the peaks of most of the players on our list.

**54. Luke Appling (196 WSAB/378 WS):** By WSAB standards, Appling is the third-best shortstop of all time. Win Shares includes the impact of fielding, of course, but it doesn't distinguish good and great fielders as well as it should. This might affect Appling; I don't know. But he ranks very highly no matter how you cut his Win Shares. For instance, he's 47th in total Win Shares 59th in Win Shares Above Average and 80th in All Star Win Shares.

**55. Johnny Bench (195 WSAB/386 WS):** Bench is the second-best catcher on our list (**Yogi Berra** was first). Bench may be the archetypal catcher; he seemed born for the role. At the age of 22, he hit 45 home runs with 148 RBIs and was voted the league's Most Valuable Player. Bench might have had an even more spectacular career if the Reds had stayed in Crosley Field. He batted .303 there but only .264 in Three Rivers/Cinergy, where the Reds moved in the middle of his MVP year.



**56. Harry Heilmann (195 WSAB/386 WS):** Heilmann is another player whose batting average soared in the '20s. In fact, he batted over .390 in four different full seasons in the '20s after batting over .300 only once (.320) in five seasons prior to 1920. As you can see in

the left-hand graph, the results showed in his batting average on balls in play. If you look closely, you can see that the overall league average rose, but not nearly as much as Heilmann's. Zack Wheat's graph exhibits the same trend, but not so dramatically.

**57. Sherry Magee (195 WSAB/354 WS):** I've been waiting for this one. Sherry Magee is the first eligible person on this list, other than Dick Allen and Mark McGwire, who hasn't been voted into the Hall of Fame. In fact, Sherry Magee never received more than two votes for the Hall.

Magee didn't have issues like Allen's or McGwire's, although he did have a bit of a temper and was once suspended 30 days for assaulting an umpire. In *The Glory of Their Times*, **Hans Lobert** said that Magee had been drunk the night before and was hung over. He also claimed that Magee suffered from epilepsy (as did his teammate **Pete Alexander**).

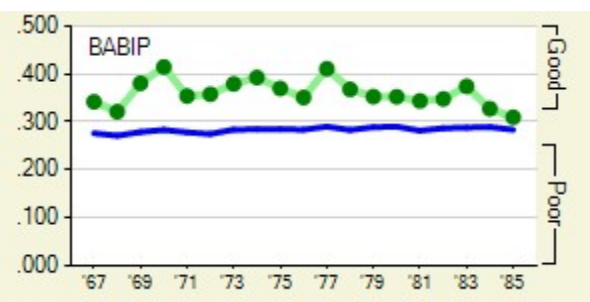
Still, I don't think these are the reasons the writers and Veterans Committee kept him out of the Hall. They just felt he didn't deserve to be there. What happened? Well, he played left field for one thing, an overcrowded position. But the real reason is bad timing. Sherry Magee played from 1904 to 1919. Yes, he retired just before the scorin' roarin' '20s. He was a "slugger" before slugging became an honor, finishing first or second in extra-base hits in the NL five straight years from 1906 to 1910.

There's a fun little test you can play at **Baseball Reference**. At the bottom of each player's page, BR lists all the categories in which the player finished in the top 10, including youngest and oldest players each year. Most of the truly great players ranked among the 10 youngest players when they started and 10 oldest when they resigned. Babe Ruth was in the youngest group once and the oldest group four times. **George Brett** was in the youngest group once and the oldest group once. The record may be held by **Ty Cobb**, who was in the youngest group three times and the oldest group eight times.

Sherry Magee was in the youngest group twice and the oldest group once. Says here he belongs in the Hall.

**58. Cal Ripken (193 WSAB/427 WS):** Ripken ranks 28th in total Win Shares, but WSAB puts his ranking at 58. His total WSAA is 106th and his All Star Win Shares rank 131st. He obviously belongs in the Hall; as befits the player with the record for consecutive games played, his resume is based on longevity more than peak value. Not surprisingly, he was in the top 10 youngest players twice and the top ten oldest players twice.

**59. Rod Carew (192 WSAB/384 WS):** Carew's batting average on balls in play, in the graph on the right, is a beauty to behold. Like a lot of great hitters, Carew's batting eye improved as he aged; his walk rate increased and his strikeout rate decreased. It's fun **to compare Carew**



**and Gwynn.** In general, Carew walked and struck out more often, and also had a higher BABIP.

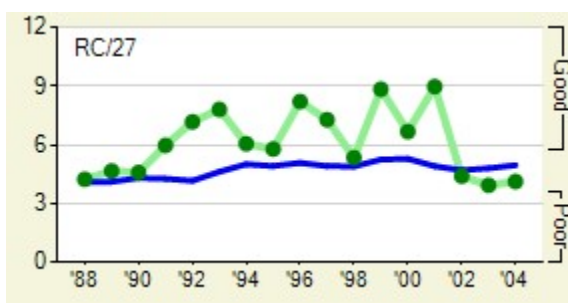
**60. Gabby Hartnett (191 WSAB/325 WS):** Hartnett, the third-ranked catcher, is 29th all-time in MVP voting even though there was no MVP voting in 1930, his best year. He had a long career for a catcher, playing until he was 40. He's also 48th overall in All Star Win Shares.

#### Sixty is the new Fifty

**61. Joe Jackson (190 WSAB/294 WS):** Like **Pete Rose**, Jackson was ineligible for the Hall of Fame, though he still received a couple of write-in votes. It's said that Jackson compares favorably to Ty Cobb as a hitter, though **Tris Speaker** is a better comparison. Of course, Jackson wasn't Speaker's equal in the field. Still, just think where he would rank if he hadn't been banned from baseball at the age of 30.

**62. Roberto Clemente (190 WSAB/377 WS):** Clemente's career was also tragically cut short, at the age of 37. That may seem old, but Clemente kept getting better as he got older. In his 30s, he slugged for higher averages, walked more often and even increased his batting average on balls in play (always outstanding to begin with). He was certainly past his peak when he died, but he probably had several good years still in him.

**63. Harmon Killebrew (190 WSAB/371 WS):** In 1966, when I was eleven, the Twins played a Hall of Fame game against the Cardinals. After the game, I waited with a bunch of other kids outside the Clark Gymnasium, where the players dressed, hoping to snag some good autographs. When Killebrew emerged, he went straight to the bus and opened his window. This really worked to my advantage, cause I was a pretty tall kid, so I stuck my program right up there and got his John Hancock. Killebrew was a pure slugger, one of the all-time best. And I've got his autograph.



**64. Roberto Alomar (189 WSAB/376 WS):** Alomar should make the Hall, no question, but his career sure dropped off a cliff, didn't it? Take that **Runs Created Per Game graph**—could anyone have seen it coming? He was only 34 at the time.

**65. Dave Winfield (189 WSAB/415 WS):** Contrast Alomar with Dave Winfield,

who seemed to play (and play well) forever. Winfield falls into the Molitor/Ripken camp of players who are valued more for their consistency and longevity than their peak performances. He ranks 33rd in total Win Shares, 65th in WSAB, 92nd in WSAA and 147th in All Star Win Shares.

**66. Mike Piazza (187 WSAB/322 WS):** A no-brainer Hall of Famer and a personal favorite. Piazza's ranking actually rises as the Win Shares metric focuses more on peak performance: 94th in Win Shares, 66th in WSAB, 46th in WSAA and 33rd in All Star Win Shares. His career effectiveness was cut short by his catcher's knees. By the time he was tried at first base, it was too late for him to learn on the job.

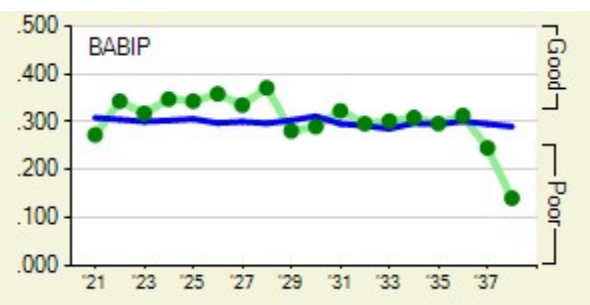
**67. Bill Dickey (187 WSAB/314 WS):** Dickey was a left-handed batter who learned to hit home runs in Yankee Stadium. According to Bill James, he had one of the most phenomenal home/road home run differentials ever in 1938 (the year he finished second in MVP voting), when he hit 23 at Yankee Stadium and four on the road. As a result, Win Shares probably overvalues Dickey.

**68. Frankie Frisch (185 WSAB/366 WS):** Frisch is another case of longevity more than peak, ranking 130th in All Star Win Shares. He had a good, long consistent career and was evidently very popular with the press, leading to an MVP in 1931 (when he was 16th in WSAB). As far as I know, the Frisch/Hornsby trade was the only (almost) straight trade of two Hall of Famers.

**69. Carlton Fisk (184 WSAB/368 WS):** Fisk had a remarkably long career for a catcher (he played until he was 45!), but he also had some outstanding peak seasons, too. He ranks among the top 80 players on all Win Shares measures and clearly belongs in the Hall.

**70. Goose Goslin (182 WSAB/355 WS):** Goslin, another left fielder, was an excellent all-around hitter in the 1920s and 1930s. He was the opposite of **Mel Ott**; when he was in his prime, his home park (Griffith Stadium in Washington) reduced his home run totals significantly

(22 home runs at home and 82 on the road) but really increased his batting average on balls in play. As a result, his batting average was consistently in the mid-.300s. When he was traded away, his home run totals increased but his batting average fell.

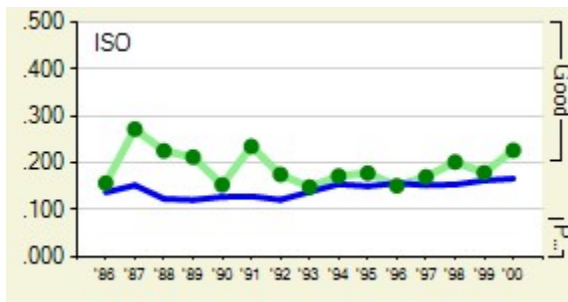


The graph shows you what I mean.

### That '70s Show

**71. Billy Williams (181 WSAB/374 WS):** Williams' career was similar to Winfield's; it was all about consistency and longevity (exemplified by the 1,117 consecutive games he played in the 1960's). Williams did have two peak years (1970 and 1972) when he finished second in MVP voting, but he only ranks 177th in All Star Win Shares.

**72. Barry Larkin (181 WSAB/346 WS):** I wonder how the voters will handle Larkin's Hall of Fame qualifications? Really, they should be unassailable. He had a long, productive and consistent career and had a number of peak seasons too. He was a great fielder, had fine speed, won an MVP and was an upstanding person and role model. He stole 51 bases in 1995 and hit 33 home runs in 1996. I'd suggest we start the campaign, but no campaign is really needed.



**73. Will Clark (180 WSAB/331 WS):** Here's the guy who needs a campaign. In the most recent Hall of Fame election, Clark garnered only 23 votes and didn't even qualify for future ballots. That's too bad, because he deserves more consideration.

Clark was a slick fielder and a tremendous hitter who had some powerful years (he's 46th in All Star Win Shares), and he was also clutchy at his best. In 1989 (his best season) for instance, he batted .435 with two outs and runners in scoring position.

Unfortunately, Clark lost his power stroke due to injuries halfway through his career (as you can see in the graph) when he became a high-average batter in Texas. The fact that he lost his power shortly before home run slugging came into vogue probably works against him. If he had been able to hang in there for a few more years, more sportswriters probably would have noticed. The "Clark for Hall" case isn't ironclad by any means, but it's very strong.

**74. Frank Baker (179 WSAB/301 WS):** Which leads you to think, "Well, if Frank 'Home Run' Baker is in the Hall of Fame, Clark should be too." And it's true: Baker's Hall of Fame case is very similar to Clark's. He had three excellent peak seasons from 1911 through 1913, but never quite hit that well again. He's 39th in All Star Win



Shares but 130th in total Win Shares. Say this for consistency, however: the writers didn't vote Baker into the Hall, the Veterans Committee did.

**75. Rafael Palmeiro (177 WSAB/395 WS):** Palmeiro, Clark's old teammate, has the exact opposite Hall of Fame case. He was a consistently excellent hitter for virtually every one of his 20 years, but he didn't reach the heights that Clark reached. He's 239th in All Star Win Shares, the lowest total of anyone we've talked about so far.

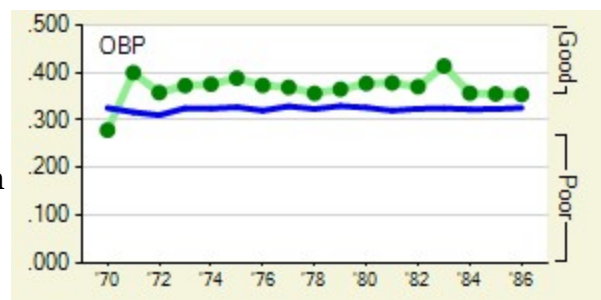
The writers were certainly going to give more Palmeiro strong Hall consideration before he apparently lied before Congress (As the McGwire case shows, hell hath no fury like a sportswriter fooled). There's a trend here: the writers seem to value longevity over peak except in a few extreme examples (like **Hank Greenberg** and **Sandy Koufax**).

**76. Reggie Smith (177 WSAB/325 WS):** If you thought Clark was an interesting case, what about Reggie Smith? Smith's rankings are really interesting: 88th in total Win Shares, 76th in WSAB, 63rd in WSAA and 125th in All Star Win Shares. In other words, he had a lot of excellent seasons but not many really, really excellent seasons. He rarely led the league in a hitting category and only received significant MVP consideration for the Dodgers in the 1970s, when he was fourth twice.

In his only eligible year for the Hall, Reggie received three votes and was subsequently dropped from the ballot.

**77. Joe Cronin (177 WSAB/333 WS):** Cronin certainly associated with a lot of good shortstops. When he first arrived in the majors, his path was blocked by **Arky Vaughan**, the second-greatest shortstop of all time, according to WSAB. When he was playing for the Red Sox, and not fielding very well, he refused to cede the position to a young kid named **Pee Wee Reese** so Boston traded the kid to Brooklyn. Cronin finally made way for **Johnny Pesky** in 1942.

**78. Bobby Grich (177 WSAB/329 WS):** If Grich had become a regular major leaguer at 21 instead of 23, he would be in the Hall of Fame today. When he was 21, he batted .383 in 235 at bats in Triple-A and played a fine shortstop. The next year, still blocked by **Mark**





**Belanger and Davey Johnson**, he was the International League MVP, hitting .336 with 32 home runs. Put him in the majors those two years, and his WSAB ranking would probably be around 50 or better.

As you can see from the OBP graph, he was a remarkably consistent performer but never had a breakout year, never finished higher than 8th in MVP voting. Still, he's ranked 102nd in All Star Win Shares and you can make a very good case that he belongs in the Hall. Add those two years at 21 and 22, and he's in for sure.

**79. Ryne Sandberg (176 WSAB/346 WS):** Sandberg started playing full time a year younger than Grich and earned an MVP, so he's in the Hall and Grich isn't. The difference is in their All Star Win Shares: Sandberg ranks 62nd and Grich ranks 102nd.

**80: Gary Carter (169 WSAB/337 WS):** Gary Carter was ranked among the top 10 youngest players twice and the top 10 oldest players twice, which is pretty good for a catcher. By the time he was traded to the Mets, the best of his career was over but he still managed to remain a productive major league player for quite a while.

#### Postgame Wrap

That's our list of the 80 best everyday players since 1900. It included 15 left fielders, 14 right fielders, 11 first basemen, 11 second basemen, eight shortstops and seven catchers, third basemen and center fielders. Of the 64 players eligible for the Hall, 58 are in (52 were voted in by the BBWAA and six by the Veteran's Committee). Allen and McGwire are special cases, obviously, which leaves only four players that are on our list but not in the Hall. Of those, Sherry Magee's Hall of Fame case is the strongest.

Of the next 10 players (81 through 90), two are still active and only three of the remaining eight are in the Hall. Next week, we'll look at some of the more "interesting" inductees into the Hall of Fame as well as a few other fascinating player careers.

#### References & Resources

If you were to rank the top 80 players by total Win Shares, you'd find that nine of the players eligible for the Hall haven't been elected. Leaving out Allen and McGwire, that means that the Hall voters have clearly rejected seven vs. four of those in the top 80 in Win Shares Above Bench. This is a little example of why something like a replacement level, or "Loss Shares," is required to make Win Shares a more

legitimate system.

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

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# WSAB Pairs

by Dave Studeman

February 1, 2007

**Win Shares Above Bench** has been the metric of choice in this series of articles. When we used it to review the top 80 everyday players since 1900 (**part one is here** and **part two is there**), we found one egregious Hall of Fame omission by the name of **Sherry Magee**. We also discovered some decent Hall of Fame arguments for **Will Clark**, **Reggie Smith** and **Bobby Grich**. Hopefully, you learned a little something about each player, too. I sure did.

I don't have the stamina to keep going through the list of top WSAB, but I did find some interesting rankings and oddities while writing the articles. In fact, I found myself being drawn to two players at a time, maybe because there are two sides to every story. Or so they say... So here's a bunch of pairings I found intriguing, with extra comments inspired by **Fangraphs** and **Baseball Reference**, a baseball blogger's two best friends.

## **Ozzie Smith (127 WSAB/180th) and Rabbit Maranville (96 WSAB/310th):**

Both Smith and Maranville (otherwise known as the Oz and the Rabbit) are in the Hall of Fame; both were voted in by the Baseball Writers Association of America. Both made it on their reputation for fielding excellence.

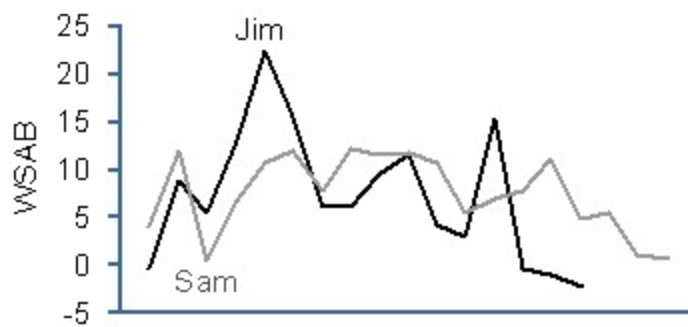
Maranville has the most fielding Win Shares (144) in baseball history (he also played a bazillion years), and Ozzie is fourth with 139. So Win Shares confirms their sterling reputations. But is that enough to merit inclusion into the Hall? According to their WSAB rankings, the answer appears to be no.

Unfortunately, fielding Win Shares are probably the shakiest part of the Win Share system, and Rabbit's and Ozzie's totals deserve a second look. And thanks to Chris Dial, we can do that. Using previous zone ratings, Chris posted a pretty firm estimate that Ozzie saved **about 150 runs compared to the average shortstop in the**

**second half of his career.** I used Chris' data for **an entry in my Baseball Graphs blog** that compared that total to his fielding Win Shares. I found that fielding Win Shares came up short in one particular year.

Now, if I apply the same logic to Ozzie's career totals (assuming he saved around 300 runs above average in his career) as in that post, I estimate that Ozzie's fielding Win Shares total is about 44 Win Shares too low. If you were to add those 44 Shares to his WSAB total of 127, the resulting 171 would place him 80th on our list, ahead of **Gary Carter**. So Smith does appear to have a legitimate Hall of Fame case.

It's hard to envision the same logic legitimizing Rabbit Maranville's inclusion. However, it's also hard to imagine a player with Maranville's batting stats finishing 2nd and 3rd in MVP voting in two consecutive years, which he did (in 1913 and 1914). Anybody around here ever see the guy play?



**Sam (143 WSAB/133rd) and Jim Rice (117/220th):** They have the same last name, but little else in common. **Sam Rice** was a singles-hitting batting machine in the 1920s, a throwback to the previous decade. He was also remarkably

consistent, posting the following WSAB totals in consecutive years: 11, 12, 8, 12, 12, 12, 11. He didn't break into the majors until he was 25, but played until the age of 44.

Jim Rice was a slugger who put up three fantastic years from 1977 to 1979, winning the MVP in 1978 (when he led the league with 23 WSAB). He broke into the majors as a ballyhooed 22-year-old phenom and didn't disappoint.

Jim played left field but he wasn't the slickest fielder in the majors. Sam played right field pretty well. Sam is in the Hall of Fame; Jim isn't.

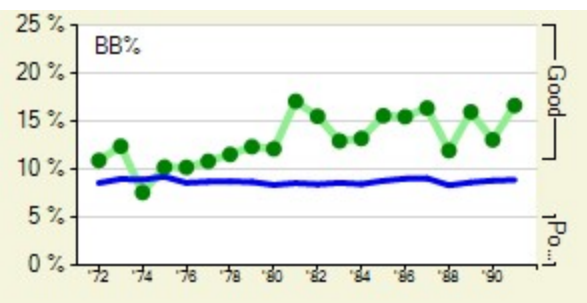
Now, Sam Rice doesn't really belong in the Hall. He was one of those biazrro Veteran's Committee choice. But you can make a decent Hall case for Jim Rice. In fact, he was listed on 63% of ballots this year. Personally, I'm not on that bandwagon, because Rice's stats received a big boost from Fenway Park. You can't make a Hall of Fame case for Jim based on his Win Shares; Win Shares likes Sam more.

**Lou Whitaker (169 WSAB/81st) and Alan Trammell (145 WSAB/126th):**

Sweet Lou Whitaker just missed being listed in my previous article. He's actually tied with Gary Carter for 80th place in all-time WSAB. Yet he received only 15 votes the one year he was eligible for the Hall. Trammell remains in the running for the Hall, but it doesn't seem likely that he'll make it.

What's the difference between the two? 1987. Trammell had 23 WSAB that year and should have won the MVP. Whitaker racked up 7 WSAB. In fact, Whitaker never had a WSAB total over 16 in any one year. He ranks 286th in All Star Win Shares while Trammell ranks 119th.

**Dwight (152 WSAB/112th) and Darrell (164 WSAB/89th) Evans:** I'm a big Dwight Evans fan. Like **Bobby Grich** or **Joe Rudi** (60 WSAB/569th), he was a joy to watch because he played the game just right. For instance, look at how his walk rate rose during his major league years (graph on the right).



His other brother Darrell has a slightly higher WSAB total. Darrell was a walking machine and he has more fielding Win Shares than Dwight (a surprise to me), which is how he managed to out-WSAB Dwight. But the Evans dudes were two fine players, underappreciated in their day. Dwight received enough Hall of Fame votes to stay on the ballot for three years, but Darrell was only on for one (eight votes).

**Ernie Banks (141 WSAB/142nd) and Luis Aparicio (88 WSAB/358th):**

1959 was the year of the shortstop in Chicago. One shortstop batted .304/.374/.596 with 45 home runs (and two stolen bases) and won the MVP. The other Chicago shortstop batted .257/.316/.332 with six home runs and 56 stolen bases and came in second in MVP voting.

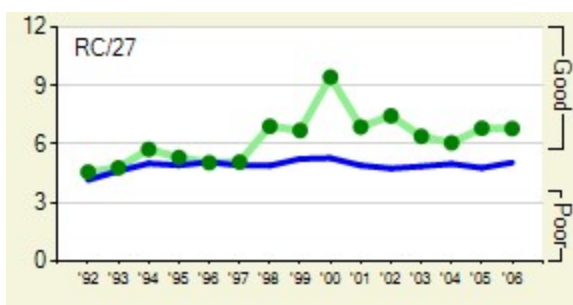
**More from The Hardball Times****A Hardball Times Update**

by RJ McDaniel

Goodbye for now.

Banks and Aparicio were two great shortstops, though they represented two extremes. Banks was a prototypical slugger of the 1950s; the only difference was that he could play some short. Unfortunately, he lost his edge when he turned 31, moved to first base and was an average hitter for the rest of his long career.

Aparicio was a new breed: a slick fielder who stole bases. He was the first of a slew of speedsters who would change the game—**Maury Wills, Lou Brock, Campy Campaneris**—who would bring speed to a new level as a tactical weapon. There was no way he deserved so many MVP votes in 1959, and his Hall of Fame election is certainly questionable. But both men are in the Hall for the types of people they were, and what they represented on the field, as well as their playing contributions.



**Larry Walker (164 WSAB/91st) and Jeff Kent (162 WSAB/92nd):** Larry Walker has retired and Jeff Kent soon will. Both men are currently ranked about 90th in WSAB, and both will present intriguing Hall of Fame possibilities.

Kent has played the more valuable position, second base, but not nearly as well as Walker played right field. As the graph shows, Kent was a late bloomer, becoming an All Star at the age of 30. If he had played on that level in his 20s, he would be a no-brainer Hall of Famer.

Larry Walker was also a tremendous player who will probably be discounted because of where he played: his first six years in Montreal and his peak years in Denver. It's worth remembering that, in 1997 (his MVP year), his OPS was actually higher on the road than at home. Walker was a great batter, fielder and baserunner and he deserves strong consideration by the BBWAA.

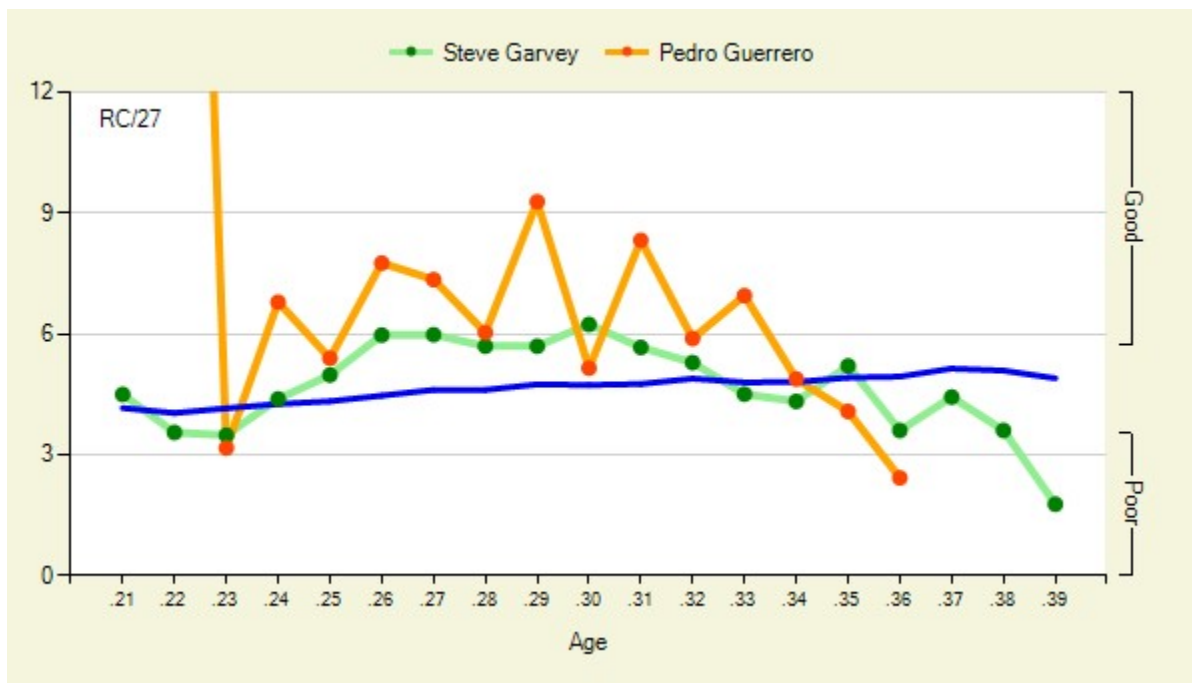
### **Pedro Guerrero (133 WSAB/170th) and Steve Garvey (105 WSAB/264th):**

Pick your least favorite trend of the 1970s: disco or the MVP voting for Steve Garvey. Steve Garvey was in the top 14 in MVP voting seven consecutive years, and actually won it in 1974. 1974, when he hit 21 home runs and had the ninth-highest WSAB count in the league. And that was his best year. These were probably the years that Bill James, Pete Palmer and John Thorn really began to see red and sabermetrics was born.

Contrast Garvey's career with Pete Guerrero's, who played first and third for the



Dodgers in the following decade. Over their careers, Guerrero and Garvey received about the same number of MVP votes. But Garvey won one while Guerrero didn't, even though Guerrero was a much better hitter. In fact, let me show you the difference in their Runs Created per 27 outs:



If Guerrero's career hadn't started late and ended early, you'd still be hearing a lot more about the guy.

### **Jimmy Wynn (158 WSAB/97th) and Cesar Cedeño (146 WSAB/124th):**

Now here are two guys you don't hear much about, yet they both rank among the top 160 everyday players since 1900. The Toy Cannon wasn't a high-average hitter, but he walked a lot (15% of plate appearances) and hit a lot of home runs despite playing in the Astrodome. And here's something I didn't know: he hit slightly worse against left-handed pitchers but walked more often with a lefty on the mound. Pretty interesting profile for a right-handed batter.

Throughout the 1970s, Cedeño was a very, very good hitter, averaging 16 WSAB over six straight years from 1972 through 1977. From 1972 to 1975, he might have been the best player in the NL outside of Cincinnati. In fact, he seemed to rise to the occasion when the Astros played the Reds, batting .328/.397/.558 in 748 plate appearances against them.

### **Orlando Cepeda (150 WSAB/116th) and Tony Perez (149 WSAB/117th):**

Both Cepeda and Perez are in the Hall of Fame, and their career WSAB figures are

decent enough for consideration. Cepeda had that great 1967, when he won the MVP and played for the World Series champ.

Perez never won an MVP (his best year was 1970, when he finished 3rd in voting) but he sure played on a lot of World Series champions. He also played a long time (until he was 44) and had a reputation as an RBI man.

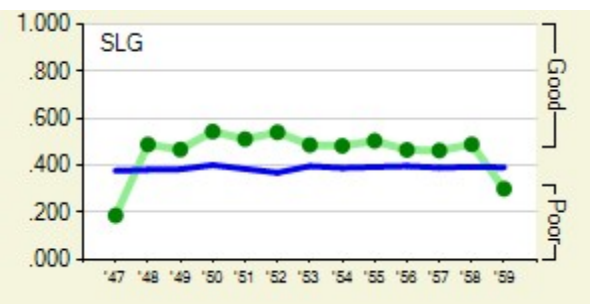
Of course, there are two ways to get a lot of RBIs: come to bat with lots of men on base, and/or bat particularly well with men on base. In 31% of his plate appearances, Perez had men in scoring position. The league average in 1975 (for example) was 24%. At the same time, he batted .265 with the bases empty and .294 with men on base (a clutch performance that is captured by Win Shares).

So although Perez's RBI totals were boosted by the Big Red Machine, his reputation as a clutch hitter was deserved and a factor in Cincinnati's success.

### **Jackie Robinson (152 WSAB/111th) and Larry Doby (155 WSAB/104th):**

Robinson and Doby would have been inducted into the Hall of Fame for their pioneering roles, of course, but they were also mighty fine ballplayers. Robinson

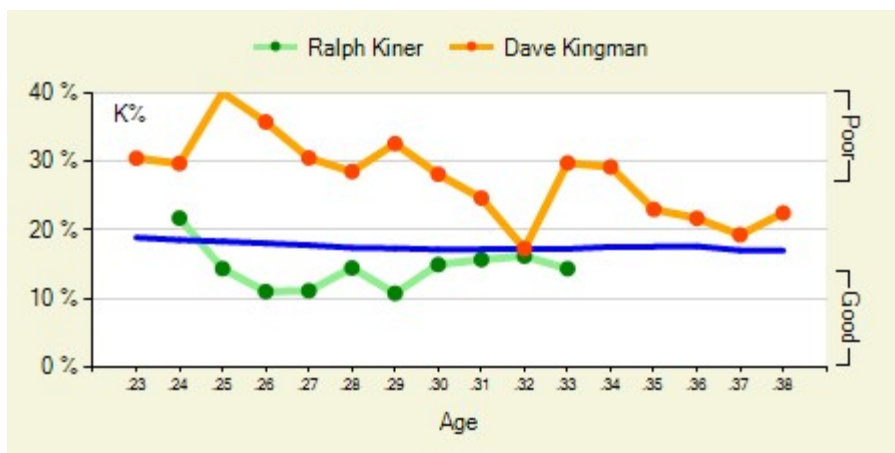
actually ranks 55th all-time in All Star Win Shares (see below). If he had broken into the majors around the age of 22 instead of 28, his career ranking would be comparable to DiMaggio's. There was nothing Jackie Robinson couldn't do on a ballfield.



Larry Doby did reach the majors at a young age (23) and managed to put together a fine career, too. That graph is Doby's slugging percentage, which he maintained at a very consistent .480 to .520 range for many years. Doby is 72nd in All Star Win Shares.

### **Ralph Kiner (129 WSAB/177th) and Dave Kingman (57 WSAB/615th):**

Kiner was *the* stereotypical slugger of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Kingman was something else altogether. Both hit a lot of home runs, but Kiner also walked. And, as you can see in the graph, he didn't strike out nearly as much as Kingman.



### **Bernie Williams (148 WSAB/119th) and Jim Edmonds (155**

**WSAB/103rd):** I've seen Hall of Fame campaigns for both Williams and Edmonds, and their WSAB rankings qualify them for serious consideration. It will be interesting to see how that shakes out.

### **Ken Singleton (145 WSAB/127th) and Andre Dawson (143 WSAB/134th)**

**and Dave Parker (141 WSAB/143rd) and Kirby Puckett (139/146th):** On the other hand, what truly distinguishes them from these guys, one of whom is in the Hall of Fame? And don't forget **Dale Murphy** (127 WSAB/181st).

**Bill Mazeroski (62 WSAB/551st) and Doug Flynn (-28/7,903rd):** Maz is in the Hall of Fame but, as James points out in the Win Shares book, his double play stats are almost certainly inflated because he played behind a ground ball staff that didn't strike out a lot of batters. Still, he has more fielding Win Shares than any other second baseman (115).

Flynn was another fine fielder at second base. But his bat, well, wasn't so hot. In fact, he is the worst player in major league history, according to WSAB. Yes, he's 7,903rd.

Next week: Pitching WSAB.

### **References & Resources**

Win Shares Above Bench is calculated by first calculating the "expected" Win Shares for a player (that is, the number of Win Shares an average player would get, based on that specific player's playing time) and then multiplying the result by 75%. In other words, a bench player is considered to be about 75% of average and every Win Share above that level is a Win Share Above Bench.

Other metrics we considered are Win Shares Above Average (in which the expected

Win Shares are multiplied by one) and All Star Win Shares. For All Star Win Shares, we multiply a player's expected Win Shares by 150% and count each Win Share above that level. Also, we don't count any Win Shares below 150% (as we do in WSAB and WSAA) so players are deducted Shares for average seasons, early retirement or injury.

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Dave Studeman was called a "national treasure" by Rob Neyer. Seriously. Follow his sporadic tweets [\*\*@dastudes\*\*](#).

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Comments are closed.

# The Best Pitchers of All Time

by Dave Studeman

February 8, 2007

I've spent the last three weeks listing and discussing the best major league everyday players since 1900 using a special version of Bill James' Win Shares called **Win Shares Above Bench**. Today, I'm going to talk about the best pitchers since 1900. I won't go into the math yet—there will be tons of gory detail at the end—but WSAB takes a lot of things into account (ERA, wins, fielding support) to evaluate a pitcher and also applies a baseline that provides appropriate context (call it Loss Shares, playing time or what have you). It may not be perfect, but it's pretty darn good.

In the history of baseball, pitching has changed more than batting has. If we were to include the 1800s in our survey, the top of the list would be filled with the likes of **Kid Nichols**, **Tim Keefe**, **John Clarkson** and **Hoss Radbourn**; pitchers who pitched half of their team's games, were never relieved and sometimes pitched from only 45 feet away. These men were obviously great pitchers and deserve their due, but what they did was very, very different from what pitchers did in 1906, 1956 or 2006.

Then again, change didn't occur overnight. The regular four-man starting rotation didn't really take hold until the 1920s/1930s (now we have the five-man rotation), and at the start of the 1950s starting pitchers still completed 40% of their starts (vs. 3% today). So when you compare pitchers across eras, you're chasing an elusive standard.

But hey, let's remember our motto: This is Fun! As before, I will rely heavily upon **Fangraphs** and **Baseball Reference** for little factoids about each player. I'll also be referring to some basic pitching stats, such as strikeouts, walks, ERA and something called **Batting Average on Ball in Play** (the proportion of batted balls that fall in for hits, not including home runs).

## The Top Ten

**1. Walter Johnson (387 WSAB/560 WS):** In this year's **Hardball Times Annual**, David Gassko ranked the all-time best pitchers using something called Pitching Wins Above Replacement. David's system is similar to Win Shares Above Bench, but it differs in one significant way: it adjusts for the increasing level of competition over time. It gives current pitchers credit for succeeding in a tougher environment (better training, medical support and a larger pool of talent to draw upon).

As far as I know, that is the only legitimate way you can develop a system that doesn't place the Big Train first among the post-1900 pitchers (Johnson is second in PWAR). Pitching from 1907 through 1927, he was among the top three league leaders in strikeouts fifteen times, ERA twelve times and shutouts eleven times. He placed in the top 10 youngest players twice at the beginning of his career, and the top 10 oldest players four times at the end of his career. I won't bother quoting all the superlatives associated with the man; he was simply awesome, dude.



**2. Grover Cleveland Alexander (325 WSAB/476 WS):** Pete Alexander was a contemporary of Johnson's. He didn't dominate the National League as completely as Johnson dominated the American, but he came close. The graph shows how Alexander's ERA compared to

the league average each year. Every pitcher at the top of this list has a similar graph. These guys were consistently, exceptionally good.

**3. Roger Clemens (292 WSAB/435 WS):** Clemens has no chance of catching Johnson, and little chance of catching Alexander. But as I said upfront, it's much harder these days to accrue a lot of pitching Win Shares. And if you believe baseball is more competitive now than it used to be, you pretty much have to agree with David Gassko that Roger Clemens is the greatest pitcher of all time.

Clemens has covered every angle: he has posted a 3.11 ERA at home and 3.09 on the road. Righties have hit .227 against him, lefties have hit .229. His career ERA is 2.92 during the day and 3.20 at night. No matter where he's pitched, who he's faced or what situation he's pitched in, Clemens has dominated.

**4. Christy Mathewson (286 WSAB/426 WS):** Mathewson was a

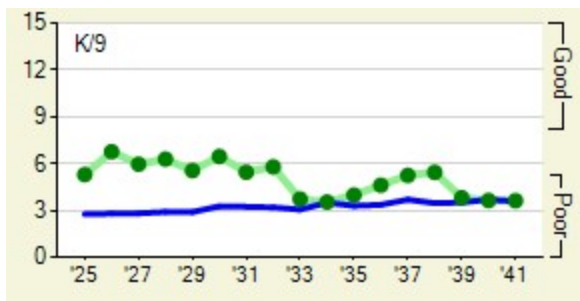




great man and a great pitcher. He was one of the few people (only person?) willing to speak out about the Black Sox scandal at the time it occurred, and he is the subject of Eric Rolfe Greenberg's wonderful book, **The Celebrant**.



Mathewson led the league in ERA five times and had the lowest walk rate seven times. As the graph shows, his walk rate dropped substantially as he aged. Unfortunately, his strikeout rate eventually dropped too, causing him to hang up his spikes in 1916.



### 5. Lefty Grove (275 WSAB/391 WS):

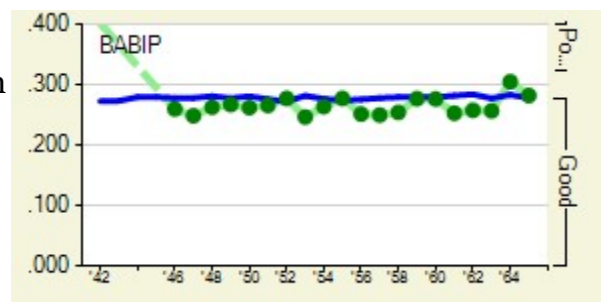
Grove pitched in the 1920s and 1930s, one decade more current than Johnson, Alexander and Mathewson. He led the American League in strikeouts seven straight years, but a sore arm (coinciding with a trade to the Red Sox) made him a

different kind of pitcher the second half of his career. Still, he led the league in ERA four times after being traded to the Sox.

In fact, Grove led his league in ERA nine different times, more than any other pitcher. The next highest total is seven, by Clemens. And the most astonishing fact about Grove is that he didn't even pitch in the majors until he was 25. Focusing on his peak years more than the length of his career, Grove is second to only Johnson in All Star Win Shares (see the definition below)

### 6. Warren Spahn (257 WSAB/412 WS):

On the other hand, Spahn is 43rd in All Star Win Shares. That's not shabby, but he built his tremendous credentials (and his Hall of Fame plaque) by being consistently very, very good for 21 years. Spahn led the league in ERA "only" three times, but in three different decades.



You know how some people say that pitchers can't control what happens to balls that are hit against them (batting average on balls in play)? Well, there are several pitchers on this list who belie that notion, and Spahn is one of them. In the graph,

you can see that Spahn consistently had a lower BABIP than average. The difference may not look like much, but that's only because of the graph dimensions. His career BABIP was .265, when the major league average was .278. And he did it year after year, with different sets of fielders behind him.

**7. Tom Seaver (247 WSAB/388 WS):** Most pitchers lose their ability to strike out batters at some point in their careers. For some, like Johnson, it's gradual. For others, like Grove, it happens quickly. For Seaver, one of the greatest strikeout pitchers of all time, it pretty much happened in 1979, his second full year with the Reds.

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### More from The Hardball Times



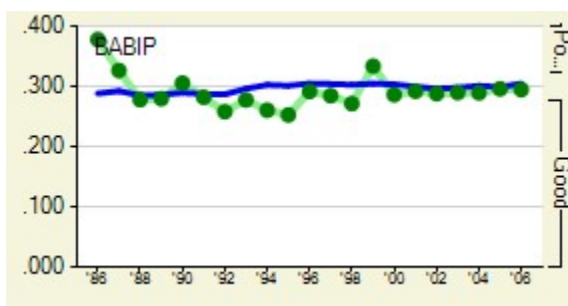
#### A Hardball Times Update

by RJ McDaniel

Goodbye for now.

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Most of the pitchers at the top of this list figured out how to pitch well after they lost their strikeout edge. Seaver is a good example. In 1981, when Seaver was 14-2 with a 2.54 ERA, his BABIP was only .224.



#### 8. Greg Maddux (244 WSAB/380 WS):

Maddux is the first person on this list who never led his league in strikeouts. But he had the best walk rate in the league seven times, didn't allow home runs and also had a consistently low BABIP (see the graph).

No doubt, his BABIP was helped by his fine glove work (16 Gold Gloves and counting) but there's a reason Rob Neyer calls him the Smartest Pitcher Who Ever Lived. Maddux is one of the most unique pitchers of all the greats.

**9. Eddie Plank (230 WSAB/361 WS):** Eddie Plank takes us back to the Mathewson era—he was the A's great lefthander before Grove. Like Grove, he didn't reach the majors until the age of 25, but he pitched into his 40s; sort of an early version of Warren Spahn. Plank is easy to overlook—he was overshadowed by

Johnson and never led the American League in ERA, strikeouts or walk rate—yet he still manages to rank ninth in WSAB.

Plank was born in Gettysburg, PA, went to Gettysburg College, and led tours of the Gettysburg battlefield after he retired and died in Gettysburg.

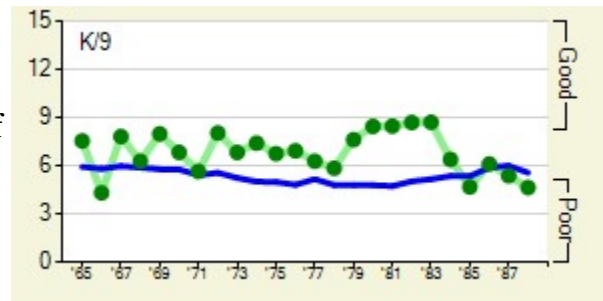
**10. Phil Niekro (214 WSAB/374 WS):** Maddux may have been unique and Spahn may have had a long career, but Niekro beats them on both counts. He's another guy who didn't make the majors until he was 25, but that's okay. He pitched until he was 48.

As you might imagine, Niekro's credentials are all about career length, the benefit of mastering the mighty knuckleball. Niekro is tenth in WSAB but 67th in All Star Win Shares. His favorite park must have been Candlestick, where the gusty winds could add a little twist to his knuckleball. In fact, his career ERA at Candlestick was 2.37 (in 235 innings).

#### The Second Ten

#### 11. Steve Carlton (213 WSAB/366

WS): Most everyone knows about Carlton's career year in 1972 (at the age of 27), but he was also a terrific pitcher into his late 30s. Take a look at how he maintained his strikeout rate through until 1985, when he turned 40.

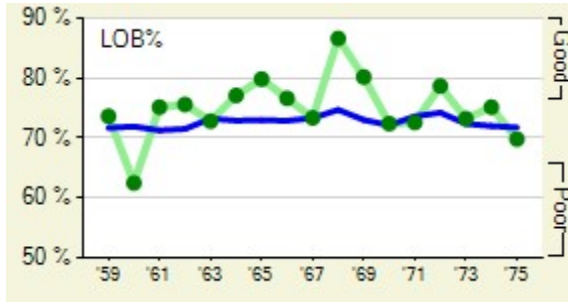


**12. Garylord Perry (212 WSAB/369 WS):** Perry's Hall of Fame case is similar to Niekro's: a long, long career and a funky pitch. He was one of the top five oldest players in his league for seven straight years.

**13. Mordecai Brown (203 WSAB/296 WS):** "Three Finger" Brown vs. Christy Mathewson may have been the greatest pitching rivalry in baseball history. The two faced each other 25 times, often with a pennant at stake, and Brown won 13 times, lost 11 and had one no decision. The rivalry reached its peak in that June 13, 1905 game, when Brown one-hit the Giants but lost to Mathewson, who no-hit the Cubs.

Brown was the Greg Maddux of his day. He didn't strike out many batters, but he also didn't walk many and benefited from perhaps the greatest fielding team of the

20th century, the Cubs of 1904-1910.



#### 14. Bob Gibson (203 WSAB/317 WS)

Gibson's 1968 is certainly one of the greatest pitching seasons of all time. His 1.12 ERA (boggles the mind, doesn't it?) set a modern day record and his amazing performance in the World Series (even though the Cardinals lost to the Tigers)

cemented his reputation. So how did he do it? What made 1968 stand out from all the other years?

It was a convergence of everything, really. His strikeout rate wasn't any higher than usual, but he had career bests in walk rate, home run rate and BABIP. And most importantly, he left 87% of the men who reached base against him on base, as the lefthand graph shows. How did that happen? Well, batters only batted only .141 vs. Gibson with runners in scoring position, more than forty points lower than his overall BA allowed of .184.

Gibson had a big career platoon differential, by the way. Lefties hit .257 against him; righties hit .204.

**15. Robin Roberts (201 WSAB/339 WS):** In the new Baseball Historical Abstract, Bill James described the "Robin Roberts" family of pitching (which includes **Fergie Jenkins** and **Catfish Hunter**) thusly: *they would all go 23-14, 22-15, 21-13 year after year, pitching lots of innings with exceptional strikeout to walk ratios, but tons of home runs allowed.* Roberts had exceptional control (almost always finishing first or second in least walks allowed per inning) and did indeed lead the league in home runs allowed four straight years. It's a combination that can win, particularly with some fleet outfielders. Roberts was such a flyball pitcher that **Richie Ashburn** aggregated six of the 10 highest putout totals ever for an outfielder.

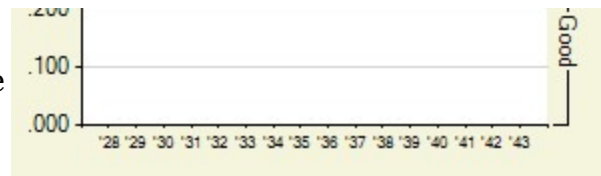
All of the pitchers in the Robin Roberts family had severe platoon differentials: lefties hit about 40 points higher than righties against both Jenkins and Hunter. In the second half of his career, lefties batted .294 against Roberts.

#### 16. Carl Hubbell (199 WSAB/305 WS)

Hubbell had that screwball; they



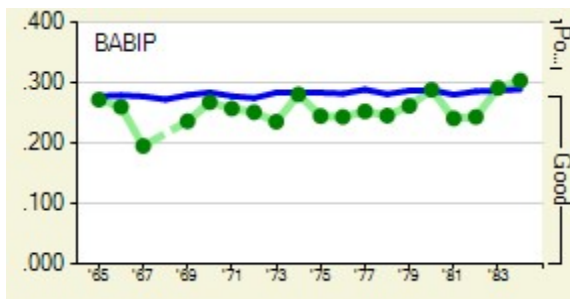
say his arm was turned permanently outward as a result of throwing it all those years. They also say that Walter Johnson could scratch his knees without bending over. Who knows?



Hubbell had exceptional control and the screwball seems to have helped him keep his batted balls fieldable. The graph shows his career BABIP, which was below average most of his career.

**17. Randy Johnson (198 WSAB/311 WS):** One of the all-time great strikeout pitchers, Johnson led the league in strikeouts nine times. At 10.8 strikeouts per nine innings, he has the highest strikeout rate in history. He is also death to lefty batters, who have hit only .196 against him. Most tellingly, Lefty batters have only stepped up to the plate 12% of the time against him. Carlton pitched to lefties 16% of the time; Glavine has faced lefties in 20% of his plate appearances.

**18. Cy Young (197 WSAB/303 WS):** This ranking is completely unfair to Cy Young. He first pitched in 1890, so his place here is based only on the second half of his career. He had such exceptional control that his profile looks like Robin Roberts', except that no one hit home runs back then. I wonder if he was a flyball pitcher?



**19. Jim Palmer (196 WSAB/312 WS):**

Palmer won three Cy Young awards and led the league twice in ERA, but he never came close to leading the league in strikeouts or giving up the least walks per nine innings. No, Jim Palmer was the master of the LOB (Left on Base) and

BABIP (see the graph).

With runners in scoring position, Palmer's batting average allowed sank from .230 overall to .213. With two outs and runners in scoring position, it sank further to .207. Many great pitchers pitch better with men on base, but Palmer's performance was better than most. And that BABIP? I think you can chalk up almost all of it to that wonderful Orioles defense; the team BABIP during the years Palmer pitched was around .260—only slightly higher than Palmer's career mark of .255.

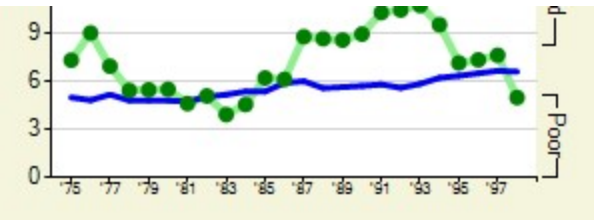
**20. Dennis Eckersley (194**





**WSAB/301 WS):** Eckersley is the first pitcher on this list who relieved for a significant amount of time. I spent a lot of time struggling with relievers in my WSAB methodology, and I'm still not sure

it's right. There are two issues: relievers get credit in the Win Shares system for pitching high-leverage innings, so good relievers naturally have more Win Shares per inning pitched.



And it's easier to relieve than it is to start. For example, look at what happened to Eckersley's strikeout ratio when he was moved to the bullpen in 1987. It took off because he knew he was almost always only going to pitch for one inning. He could throw his best and not worry about saving himself. I'll explain how I handled relievers at the end of the article but this ranking for Eckersley feels about right.

### The Roaring Twenties

**21. Red Ruffing (194 WSAB/322 WS):** Ruffing was one of the first adopters of the slider. That, and the fact that he pitched for the Yankees during the '30s, are probably the most significant things you can say about the guy. He only won one ERA title and one strikeout title. But he pitched well for a long time (twice among the top 10 youngest players and twice among the top 10 oldest) and deserves his place on this list and in the Hall.

**22. Bert Blyleven (192 WSAB/339 WS):** Bert Blyleven is the first pitcher on our list who is eligible for the Hall of Fame but not in it. In fact, he is the only one of the top 33 pitchers ranked by WSAB who isn't in the Hall. Why is that?

Well, he was a strikeout pitcher with great control, but he only led the league in strikeouts once. He never led the league in ERA, never finished higher than third in Cy Young voting (weird fact: in 1984, he finished third to two relievers: **Willie Hernandez** and **Dan Quisenberry**). This wasn't just the result of sportswriters' bias, by the way. He just didn't have many remarkable peak seasons. Blyleven is 120th in All Star Win Shares; only three other pitchers we will consider today rank lower.

On the other hand, all three of those pitchers are in the Hall of Fame: **Eppa Rixey**, **Nolan Ryan** and **Don Sutton**. Bert should be there too.

**23. Ferguson Jenkins (190 WSAB/323 WS):** See Robin Roberts.

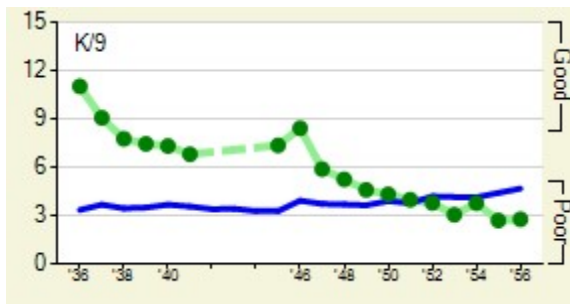
**24. Ted Lyons (189 WSAB/312 WS):** Ted Lyons may be the worst strikeout pitcher on this list—he averaged only 2.3 strikeouts a game. He also wasn't too shabby with the bat, hitting .311 in 1930.

In 1942, when Lyons was 41 years old, he only pitched for the White Sox every Sunday. He completed every game, went 14-6 and led the league with a 2.10 ERA. As Bill James pointed out in the new Historical Abstract, that was back in the day when teams played doubleheaders every Sunday. Remember doubleheaders?

**25. Eppa Rixey (183 WSAB/315 WS):** Rixey pitched from 1912 to 1933, during Pete Alexander's heyday, with the Phillies and Reds. When the Phillies sold Alexander in 1917, Rixey was so disgusted that he quit for a year and served in World War I.

I can't find evidence of this anywhere, but I wonder if Rixey was a groundball pitcher? He didn't allow many home runs per game but he wasn't a strikeout pitcher. Batters typically put the ball in play against him. Plus, he is the all-time leader in sacrifice hits allowed. Don't know what that all means exactly, but I wonder...

**26. Tom Glavine (180 WSAB/303 WS):** Glavine is a master of guile. I've got to think that very few pitchers got to own a part of the (pseudo) strike zone the way that Glavine was given the outside part of the plate. Thanks to that curve on the outside "corner," righthanded batters actually had a lower batting average against him than lefthanded batters. And he never gives in, always happy to walk a batter, even with runners in scoring position, just to maintain his ownership of that corner.



**27. Bob Feller (179 WSAB/292 WS):**

What would Bob Feller's career have looked like without World War II? The graph on the left (strikeouts per nine innings) should give you an indication. He led the league in strikeouts every full season he played from 1938 to 1948.

In his prime, he averaged about 20 WSAB per season. Add those four years back to his career total, and he's got 219, good for 10th place.

**28. Ed Walsh (179 WSAB/265 WS):** Ed Walsh pitched from 1904 to 1917, and the further I go down this list the more I'm convinced you should adjust Win Shares



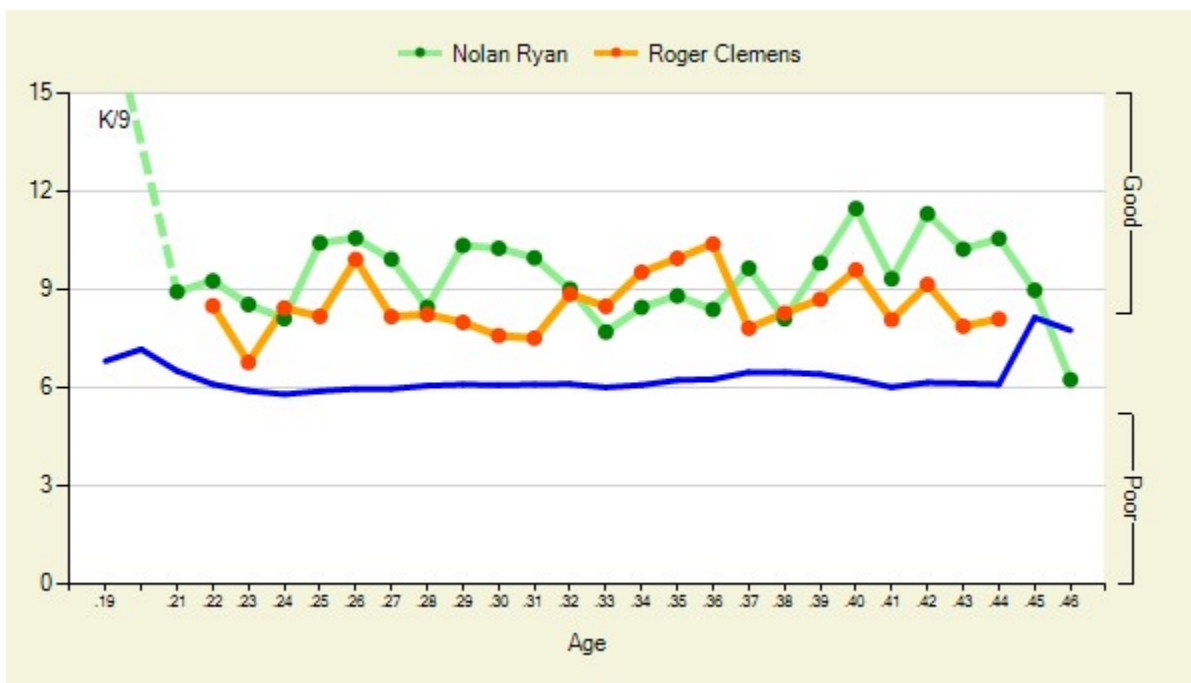
by era to get a fair pitcher ranking. I don't mean to knock Walsh, but he only had seven good seasons. Now, they were really, really good and he pitched a lot in those years (464 innings in 1908, for instance). His WSAB total is based on his real performance. But the conditions were such that no pitcher today could ever hope to match his best season. He accrued 34 WSAB in 1908; in Clemens' best season he picked up 24 (1997).

### 29. Hal Newhouser (176 WSAB/264 WS):

Hal Newhouser had one goofy career. A hard throwing lefty, Newhouser could strike out lots of batters but only reached success when he found the strike zone (see the graph) in 1944. Kept out of the war because of a congenital heart defect, Newhouser went 9-11, 8-14 and 8-17 for the Tigers before finally blossoming (at the young age of 23; he first pitched in the majors when he was 18). He was lights out from that point on, even winning the MVP in both '44 and '45.



**30. Nolan Ryan (175 WSAB/334 WS):** You might be tempted to call Nolan Ryan a modern Hal Newhouser, but Ryan never found the strike zone as well as Newhouser did, and Newhouser never struck out batters at the rate Ryan did. What really separates Ryan from lots of people is the length of his career, and the fact that he maintained his strikeout pace right up until the end. The only pitcher who comes close to what Ryan achieved is Clemens, as this comparative graph shows:



In a nutshell, Ryan led the race early, Clemens had a great surge in his mid-30's, and Ryan seemed to find something extra when he hit 40. Speaking as someone on the other side of 40, I can't even imagine that.

### The Thirties

Speed Round. Two sentences each:

**31. Early Wynn (175 WSAB/309 WS):** Started pitching in 1939, but didn't make his first All-Star team until 1955 a few years after Mel Harder convinced him to scrap the knuckleball and throw a curveball and change instead.

**32. John Smoltz (172 WSAB/269 WS):** Third member of the vaunted Braves' rotation of the 1990s. Starter ERA = 3.36; Reliever ERA = 2.35.

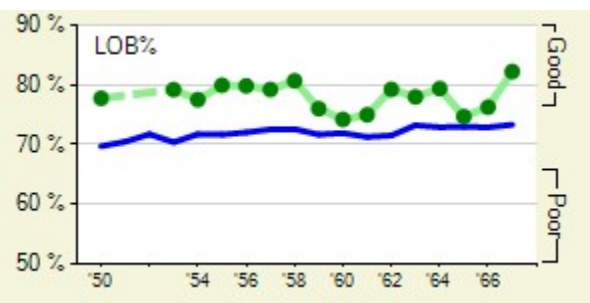
**33. Red Faber (172 WSAB/292 WS):** It's hard to say what made Red Farber so good. He might have been a Tom Glavine-type, pitching to the situation and deploying his spitter (one of the last legal ones) to induce fieldable balls.

**34. Jack Quinn (170 WSAB/287 WS):** Quinn was the oldest player in the AL five times and one of the 10 oldest 15 times. Incredibly, he is 76th in All Star Win Shares, and the first non-Hall of Famer on our list other than Blyleven.

**35. Pedro Martinez (170 WSAB/248 WS):** Pedro is 35th in WSAB but 10th in All Star Win Shares. In his prime, the best ever. Check out **some of his graphs in Fangraphs**.

### 36. Whitey Ford (168 WSAB/261

**WS):** Ford was a great situational pitcher, as you can see by the number of men he left on base. Overall, batters hit .240 against him, but .226 with runners in scoring position and .215 with two outs and runners in scoring position (includes the years 1957-1967 only).



**37. Carl Mays (168 WSAB/256 WS):** Unfortunately known for killing Ray Chapman with a fastball, Mays was a sidearm at a time when sidearmers were rare. As a result, he typically had lower BABIP averages than the league in the first half of

his career.

**38. Hoyt Wilhelm (167 WSAB/256 WS):** Wilhelm is the highest rated pitcher who was a reliever virtually all of his career. He also definitely had a big impact on his BABIP, as most knuckleballers do. The second-highest rated reliever is Goose Gossage, at 56.

**39. Wilbur Cooper (164 WSAB/266 WS):** Cooper was a fine pitcher, of course, but he's on this list more because of when he pitched (1912 to 1926) than how well he pitched.

**40. Don Sutton (164 WSAB/319 WS):** Sutton is 235th in All Star Win Shares, he also benefited more from his ballpark than almost any other player on our list (2.66 ERA at Dodger Stadium; 3.63 everywhere else). That is all I will say about Sutton.

And there you have it: our all-time Win Shares Above Bench survey. I've enjoyed this review and learned a lot in the process. Most particularly, I've learned that there are two glaring omissions from the Hall of Fame: **Sherry Magee** and Bert Blyleven. I know that the sportswriters can't do anything about Magee, but here's hoping they rectify the Blyleven omission soon.

## References & Resources

Win Shares are great, but they suffer from a lack of context. Specifically, they don't include any sense of "loss shares" or playing time, and the way it applies replacement level is pretty funky. Win Shares Above Bench is an attempt to resolve that issue. To calculate WSAB, I took these steps:

- First calculated the "expected" Win Shares for each pitcher, based on the number of innings he pitched and the average number of pitching Win Shares accrued per inning in that league that year.
- Multiply expected Win Shares by 50% for starters and 75% for relievers to get a "bench level" of Win Shares. I use 50% for starters because I'm convinced total Win Shares undervalues starting pitchers.
- Subtract one from the other to calculate Win Shares Above Bench.

All Star Win Shares are the number of Win Shares above 125% of expected Win Shares, with no deduction for any totals below 125% of expected Win Shares. In other words, All Star Win Shares gives pitchers credit for extraordinary years, but no subtraction for subnormal years or injuries. For two good examples: Sandy Koufax is

31st in All Star Win Shares and Dizzy Dean is 30th. In WSAB, however, both are in the 90's.

For relievers, I used 250% of expected Win Shares. This may strike you as high, but relievers can pick up some huge numbers of Win Shares just based on their leveraged innings. Even using 250%, Mariano Rivera is 19th all-time. Billy Wagner is 41st.

I used many sources for this article, including Bill James' and Rob Neyer's *Guide to Pitchers* and James' two *Historical Abstracts*.

After posting the article, one reader pointed out to me that Eddie Plank actually didn't attend Gettysburg College. According to Wikipedia, *History books often erroneously state that Plank was a graduate of Gettysburg College. Plank did attend the Gettysburg Academy, a prep school affiliated with the college, but Plank never attended nor graduated from the college. Plank did, however, play for the Gettysburg College baseball team.*

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Dave Studeman was called a "national treasure" by Rob Neyer. Seriously. Follow his sporadic tweets [@dastudes](#).

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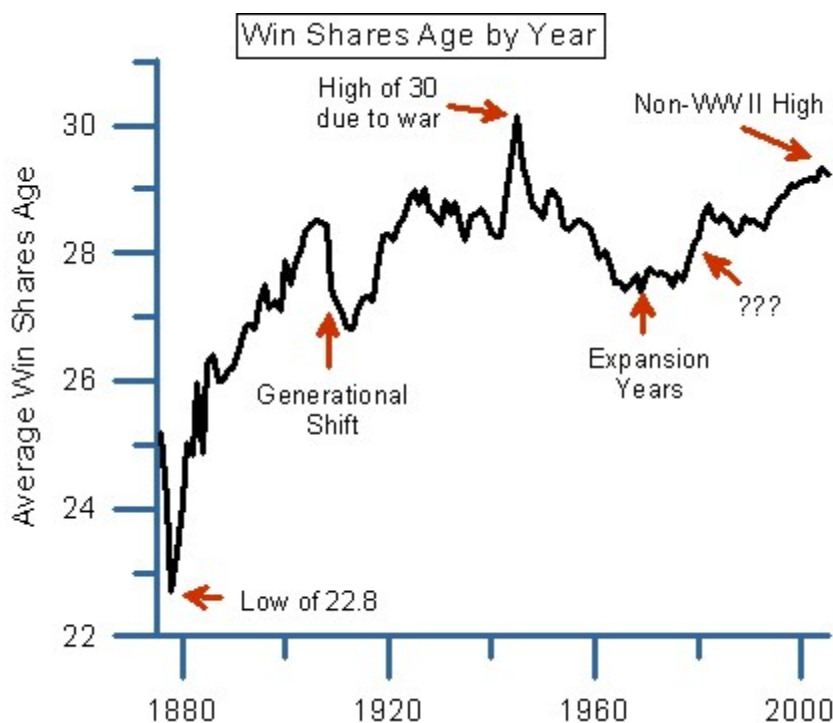
# What Happened between 1977 and 1982?

by Dave Studeman

February 2, 2006

**Late in the season**, I started messing around with the “Win Shares age” of current and past players. The idea behind Win Shares age is simple: you take each player’s age, multiply it by his **Win Shares** (a simple number that measures how much he contributed to his team), add them all up and divide by total Win Shares. What you get is the average age of a team or league, weighted by how much each player contributed.

Here’s a graph of the average major league Win Shares age beginning with 1876, the first year of the National League.



One little graph, so many stories! As you can see, major league baseball was originally a young man's game. The all-time low age was 23 in 1878, a figure largely driven by 22-year-old **Tommy Bond**, who started 59 of Boston's 60 games, went 40-19 with a 2.06 ERA and had 60 Win Shares. Baseball was a different game back then, wasn't it?

Major league baseball expanded to three leagues in the 1880s, shrank in the 1890s as the National League enjoyed a monopoly, then expanded again in 1901 when the American League decided to compete directly with the National. During those years, the average major league age rose steadily as the leagues pulled in players from other clubs, and ballplayers found they could kinda sorta make a bit of money playing ball. In other words, playing ball became a real job, at least on a part-time basis. By 1906, the average major league age had risen to 28.5 years, six years older than it had been 30 years earlier.

The average age remained 28.5 in 1908 (perhaps **the greatest baseball season ever**), but in 1909 the average Win Shares age fell a full year, the biggest single-season change in modern baseball history. Several older players started to decline in 1909 (**Honus Wagner**, **Mike Donlin**), and a younger generation of 21- and 22-year-olds took center stage, including four players who now rank among the 12 highest on the all-time Win Shares totals list: **Walter Johnson**, **Ty Cobb**, **Tris Speaker** and **Eddie Collins**. In fact, 1909 may mark the greatest "generational shift" of baseball talent ever.

Taking it a step further, Speaker and Johnson's age cohorts may also be the "greatest age group" in baseball history. In 1913, at the age of 25, they accounted for 16% of all major league Win Shares, the highest total of any age group in any year. The gang included Speaker (630 career Win Shares), Johnson (560), **Zack Wheat** (380), **Harry Hooper** (321), **Bobby Veach** (265), **Del Pratt** (242), **Cy Williams** (235), **Donie Bush** (232) and **Hippo Vaughn** (205).

The next significant aging blip occurred during the last two years of World War II, when young men went off to war and baseball was played by the old and **one-armed**. When players like **Stan Musial** returned from the war, the average age returned to its prewar level and then declined further as new generations took to the field and integration eventually increased the pool of available young talent.

The leagues expanded in the 1960s and 1970s, which helped keep the average age at a relatively low level as major league teams looked everywhere for talent. It's also



likely that the “baby boom” generation supplied a steady feed of young talent during those years. And then something happened around 1977. See that increase from 1977 to 1982? The average major leaguer aged a year in that time, one of the biggest shifts in history. When I noticed that blip last September, I wondered what could have aged the average major league player so much after so many years of stability...

After thinking about it and doing a bit of research, I think we can safely say that **Andy Messersmith** did it. The Messersmith ruling was in 1976, when arbitrator Peter Seitz declared that Messersmith and **Dave McNally** were free agents after sitting out for a year. As a result of this landmark ruling, 22 players never signed their 1976 contracts, and they became the first “free-agent class” in the offseason between 1976 and 1977. Here’s a list of some of the major contracts signed by that class:

Players	Age	Years	Total Value
Reggie Jackson	31	5	\$3,000,000
Joe Rudi	30	5	2,090,000
Don Gullett	26	6	2,000,000
Gene Tenace	30	5	1,815,000
Bobby Grich	28	5	1,750,000
Rollie Fingers	30	6	1,600,000
Dave Cash	29	5	1,500,000
Sal Bando	33	5	1,400,000
Gary Matthews	26	5	1,200,000
Don Baylor	28	6	1,020,000
Bill Campbell	28	5	1,000,000
Wayne Garland	26	10	1,000,000
Campy Campaneris	35	5	950,000

Those figures look almost quaint by today’s standards, don’t they? I don’t know about you, but the length of the contracts really jump out at me. Giving five, six and 10-year contracts to players, let alone players in their 30s, is something you just don’t see outside of Toronto these days. As a result, the “cost of retirement” rose for players who would lose out on the last years of their contracts if they left the ballgame. **Campaneris** and **Bando**, as just two examples from this list, probably retired a couple of years later than they would have in the 1960s.

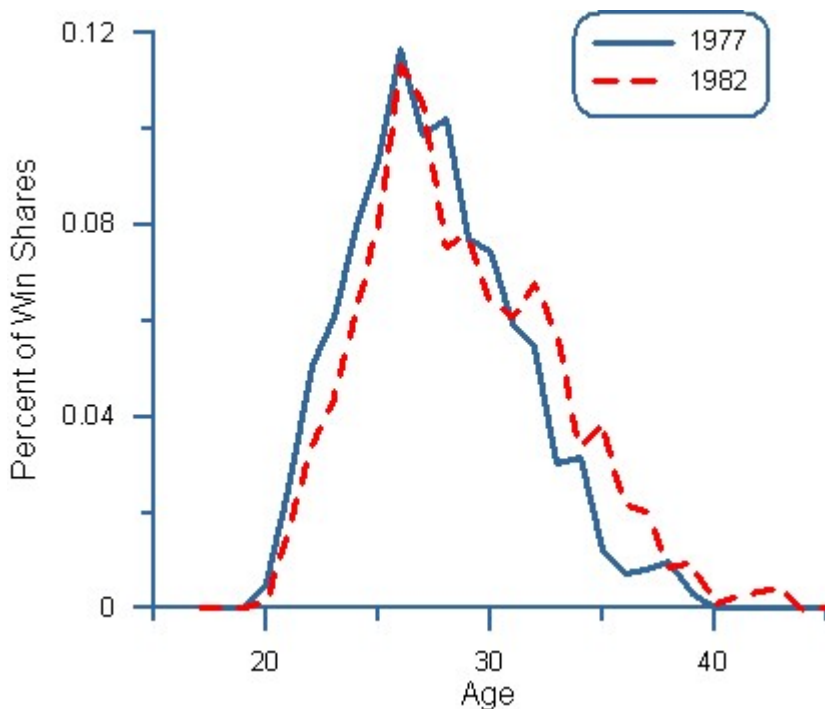
Even those who didn’t sign long-term contracts delayed hanging up their spikes; if you pay someone lots of money to do something, they’re likely to keep doing it. Three

pitchers in particular, **Phil Niekro**, **Jim Kaat** and **Gaylord Perry**, set a record for most Win Shares by 43-year-olds (27 in 1982), a record that will probably be broken in 2006 if **Roger Clemens** returns to the mound.

Owners also started to figure out that they could hold back their young players from major league rosters in order to ensure that their major league time was productive and they could hold onto the players longer. In 1978, 21-year-olds contributed 169 Win Shares, led by **Terry Puhl**, **Lou Whitaker** and **Carney Lansford** (and, a little lower on the list, **Paul Molitor** and **Bob Welch**), but this was a last hurrah for players that young. There hasn't been a group of 21-year-olds that totaled even 100 Win Shares since 1982.

Today, more top prospects are likely to go to college than they did 40 years ago, which also impacts the age of players making their major league debut. But I doubt that this trend had much impact between 1977 and 1982.

Between older players hanging on and younger players staying in the minors longer, the major league "age curve" shifted to the right during those five years:



After 1982, the Win Shares age remained steady, right around 28.5 years, for about a decade. In 1993, however, it rose to 28.7 from 28.4 the previous year and increased steadily until it reached 29.3 in 2004, the highest major league age of any year other than the mid-1940s. Obviously, the 1990s were influenced by ever-growing salaries, better training and conditioning techniques and, um, performance-enhancing drugs.

It will be interesting to see how much the crackdown on steroids impacts Win Shares age calculations in the future.

Win Shares age actually declined slightly last year, to 29.27. Having **Barry Bonds** on the sidelines and **Randy Johnson** below peak performance were big factors. Plus, a couple of interesting age groups deserve mention for their 2005 contributions:

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### More from The Hardball Times



#### A Hardball Times Update

by RJ McDaniel

Goodbye for now.

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- 2005's 33-year-olds (**Manny Ramirez**, **Carlos Delgado**, **Andy Pettitte**, etc.) were among the best ever for their age group.
- 2005's 22-year-olds (**David Wright**, **Miguel Cabrera**, **Joe Mauer**, **Grady Sizemore**, etc.) were the best of their age group in a while, right up there with the 22-year-olds of 1998 (**A-Rod**, **Vlad Guerrero**, **Miguel Tejada**, **J.D. Drew**, **Lance Berkman**, **David Ortiz**, **Carlos Lee**, **Carlos Guillen** and **Paul Konerko**).
- What's more, 1998's 22-year-olds contributed 1,018 Win Shares as 28-year-olds in 2004, the only age group to exceed 1,000 in a single year, and the fourth-highest 28-year-old age group total ever on a percentage basis.

And that's what happened between 1977 and 1982, as near as I can figure. As an added bonus, I'll leave you with this table of the number of Win Shares contributed by each age group in each of the last four full decades. The last column is the percent change from the 1960s to the 1990s.

Age	1961-1970	1971-1980	1981-1990	1991-2000	% Diff
18	24	11	0	0	
19	183	38	45	18	-90%
20	375	431	189	146	-61%
21	1,150	1,350	657	486	-58%
22	2,087	2,270	1,546	1,324	-37%
23	3,414	3,791	2,915	2,704	-21%

24	4,021	5,075	4,436	4,217	5%
25	5,102	5,888	5,744	5,150	1%
26	5,256	6,131	6,478	6,342	21%
27	5,104	5,915	6,221	6,345	24%
28	4,382	5,508	5,649	6,518	49%
29	3,987	4,907	5,139	6,050	52%
30	3,457	4,461	4,455	5,579	61%
31	2,796	3,573	3,713	5,278	89%
32	2,355	3,038	3,219	4,079	73%
33	1,963	2,211	2,732	3,308	69%
34	1,555	1,723	2,173	2,593	67%
35	987	1,262	1,638	1,976	100%
36	615	849	1,346	1,415	130%
37	367	574	853	949	159%
38	275	375	578	453	65%
39	129	233	450	322	150%
40	97	143	282	241	148%

### References & Resources

All ages were pulled from the **Lahman database**, which has been updated for the 2005 season. They are calculated as of July 1 of each season.

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Dave Studeman was called a "national treasure" by Rob Neyer. Seriously. Follow his sporadic tweets [@dastudes](#).

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Comments are closed.