

# “America’s Pastime in the Neoliberal Era”

#	Name	Team	G	PA	HR	R	RBI	SB	BB%	K%	ISO	BABIP	AVG	OBP	SLG	wOBA	wRC+	EV	BsR	Off	Def	WAR
1	Aaron Judge	NY Yankees	155	678	52	128	114	9	18.7%	30.7%	.343	.357	.284	.422	.627	.430	174	94.9	0.0	61.8	-1.3	8.3
2	Jose Altuve	HOU Astros	153	662	24	112	81	32	8.8%	12.7%	.202	.370	.346	.410	.547	.405	160	86.1	4.0	52.7	0.8	7.6
3	Giancarlo Stanton	MIA Marlins	159	692	59	123	132	2	12.3%	23.6%	.350	.288	.281	.376	.631	.410	158	91.9	-2.3	49.3	1.1	7.3
4	Mike Trout	LAA Angels	114	507	33	92	72	22	18.5%	17.8%	.323	.318	.306	.442	.629	.437	180	88.8	4.0	54.4	-3.5	6.8
5	Kris Bryant	CHC Cubs	151	665	29	111	73	7	14.3%	19.2%	.242	.334	.295	.409	.537	.399	147	87.0	4.8	44.6	1.1	6.7
6	Anthony Rendon	WSN Nationals	147	605	25	81	100	7	13.9%	13.6%	.232	.314	.301	.403	.533	.394	141	89.8	1.5	33.3	14.3	6.7
7	Charlie Blackmon	COL Rockies	159	725	37	137	104	14	9.0%	18.6%	.270	.371	.331	.399	.601	.414	142	87.3	2.0	41.3	1.4	6.6
8	Jose Ramirez	CLE Indians	152	645	29	107	83	17	8.1%	10.7%	.265	.319	.318	.374	.583	.396	146	88.2	0.0	36.9	6.6	6.5
9	Joey Votto	CIN Reds	162	707	36	106	100	5	19.0%	11.7%	.258	.321	.320	.454	.578	.428	163	87.6	-9.6	47.7	-5.9	6.5
10	Tommy Pham	STL Cardinals	128	530	23	95	73	25	13.4%	22.1%	.214	.368	.306	.411	.520	.398	149	89.7	5.3	38.6	6.2	6.2
11	Corey Seager	LAD Dodgers	145	613	22	85	77	4	10.9%	21.4%	.184	.352	.295	.375	.479	.364	127	89.7	3.4	24.9	14.8	6.0
12	Nolan Arenado	COL Rockies	159	680	37	100	130	3	9.1%	15.6%	.277	.320	.309	.373	.586	.395	130	88.9	0.5	26.3	9.0	5.7
13	Francisco Lindor	CLE Indians	159	723	33	99	89	15	8.3%	12.9%	.232	.275	.273	.337	.505	.353	116	89.0	4.7	19.4	13.5	5.7
14	Justin Turner	LAD Dodgers	130	543	21	72	71	7	10.9%	10.3%	.208	.326	.322	.415	.530	.400	151	89.4	2.1	37.5	-0.6	5.4
15	Mookie Betts	BOS Red Sox	153	712	24	101	102	26	10.8%	11.1%	.194	.268	.264	.344	.459	.339	107	88.4	9.2	15.0	14.3	5.3
16	Paul Goldschmidt	ARI Diamondbacks	155	665	36	117	120	18	14.1%	22.1%	.265	.343	.297	.404	.563	.400	142	91.4	3.3	39.4	-8.3	5.3
17	Justin Upton	---	152	635	35	100	109	14	11.7%	28.3%	.268	.341	.273	.361	.540	.378	137	88.8	4.1	33.4	-3.2	5.2
18	Brian Dozier	MIN Twins	152	705	34	106	93	16	11.1%	20.0%	.227	.300	.271	.359	.498	.362	126	87.9	3.7	26.2	0.9	5.1
19	Marcell Ozuna	MIA Marlins	159	679	37	93	124	1	9.4%	21.2%	.237	.355	.312	.376	.548	.388	143	90.7	-5.2	32.6	-4.3	5.0
20	Andrelton Simmons	LAA Angels	158	647	14	77	69	19	7.3%	10.4%	.143	.291	.278	.331	.421	.323	102	86.1	2.0	3.9	24.6	5.0
21	Zack Cozart	CIN Reds	122	507	24	80	63	3	12.2%	15.4%	.251	.312	.297	.385	.548	.392	139	85.8	-1.5	24.3	8.9	5.0
22	Chris Taylor	LAD Dodgers	140	568	21	85	72	17	8.8%	25.0%	.208	.361	.288	.354	.496	.361	126	87.0	6.7	25.3	4.1	4.8

“Maybe we have to go on strike, to be honest with you. That’s how I feel about it.”  
 —Kenley Jansen, pitcher, Los Angeles Dodgers

In March 2018, Mike Moustakas, all-star third baseman for the Kansas City Royals, signed a contract worth far less than any fan or fellow player could have anticipated. With the Royals rebuilding a roster that had declined since their 2015 World Series win, most expected the free agent to sign a big contract with another ballclub. Analysts for MLBTradeRumors and Fangraphs predicted that the left-handed slugger, coming off an all-star season in which he hit 38 home runs, would sign a five-year, \$85 million contract. However, Moustakas spent months waiting for a suitable offer, and when spring training began in February, he was still without a team. He ended up crawling back to his former Royals, his tail between his legs, signing a one-year deal for \$5.5 million in base salary and up to \$2.2 million in performance incentives.

Now, Moustakas is hardly a charity case: even if he signed for less than 10% of the money he expected, he earns millions of dollars to play baseball. Nevertheless, it is strange to see one of the most productive workers in Major League Baseball receive such little interest in the labor market. It is even stranger when one considers that Moustakas’ experience is merely one instance of a broader trend across baseball. This winter, many free agents signed for significantly less than they would have earned in previous years, and some productive veterans remain unsigned after Opening Day. Even as MLB revenues skyrocket, growing from \$1.2 billion in 1992 to \$10 billion in 2017, and even as the average franchise value climbs to

an eye-watering \$1.6 billion, teams have become less willing to spend money on skilled workers. What might explain this surprising decline in the demand for labor? And how might this sea change in the valuation of baseball players be of broader social interest?

What has outraged players and attracted the ire of diehard fans is not the simple fact that free agents are earning less money. It is instead the moves by ownership and management to break two unspoken promises. The first, that the meager salaries of young players are balanced by big contracts for veterans, gives the current collective bargaining agreement a semblance of fairness. The second is indispensable to competitive sport on any level: that when you put on a uniform and step onto the field, you do everything you can to win that day's game. These informal ties are fraying with the adoption of technocratic measurements of worker performance, and with the pursuit of team-building strategies that resemble corporate restructuring efforts. What the further unraveling of these ties might portend, once the current collective bargaining agreement expires in 2021, is a strike.

## I

Baseball has become a young man's game. To some degree, this has been true since MLB established its Joint Drug Prevention and Treatment Program in spring 2006, in response to years of scandal about players' use of performance-enhancing drugs. The most prominent ban forbade the use of anabolic steroids, which players used to cultivate super-human muscle mass and strength. Steroids fueled the record-breaking home run endeavors of Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa, and Barry Bonds, and they provided a power surge for aging pitchers such as Roger Clemens. While lacking the notoriety of steroids, amphetamines were used openly in many clubhouses for decades, and they arguably made a bigger impact on the sport. Brought to baseball in the 1940s by veterans returning from the war, "greenies" allowed users to fight fatigue, increase alertness, and sharpen reaction time, making the everyday grind of a 162-game season more manageable. The benefits of these stimulants were particularly important to older players, whose ability to recover from the previous day's game had begun to decline with age. In 2010, Bill Madden of the *New York Daily News* quoted a team executive as saying on the topic of the amphetamines ban: "What you're going to see is the emphasis being on young players."

The idiosyncratic structures of MLB player development have further incentivized the movement from aging sluggers to supple young athletes. Unlike basketball and football, in which youth development takes place in collegiate programs and on professional teams themselves, MLB franchises move young prospects through their networks of minor league affiliates. These include "rookie leagues" which develop teenagers in the United States and the Dominican Republic, and four full-season minor leagues that develop advanced prospects until they're ready for the majors. Such extensive minor-league networks allow big league organizations to spend years honing the skills of their young players, who confront different challenges as they move up the ladder from low-A ball to high-A, and from double-A to triple-A. Unlike in the NBA, where a 19-year-old draft pick immediately earns millions to play

on the pro team, even though he might need years of skills development to really contribute, a teenage baseball prospect typically spends four to six years working through the minor leagues. While top prospects receive sizable signing bonuses, as minor league players they earn less than a living wage as they move through the system. Development therefore takes place with minimal resource investment by ownership, and players have endured grueling physical and mental challenges by the time they arrive in the majors, making them a less risky proposition once they're there.

A further incentive for building around youth is the low minimum salary that players earn during their first three years of service, a precedent established in the 1985 MLB collective bargaining agreement. Given that players are often prepared to contribute soon after arriving in the big leagues, these players are remarkably cheap: they earn minimum salaries in the \$500-600k range, in exceptional cases reaching as high as \$1 million. During collective bargaining, ownership justifies such low salaries by arguing that organizations need to receive a return on their development investment, not only on the prospects who make it to the majors, but on the majority who never get there. Furthermore, three years of minimum-salary control allows teams in small metro areas to compete with those in major coastal cities. Big market teams like the Los Angeles Dodgers, New York Yankees, and Boston Red Sox leverage their larger television audiences and ballpark attendance into higher revenues: in 2016, the New York Yankees had baseball's highest revenue at \$526 million, more than twice that of the Tampa Bay Rays and Miami Marlins at \$206 million. Team owners argue that in a sport with such disparities in revenue and no salary cap, the deflated salaries of young players give small-market teams the means to build a roster that can compete with the big boys.

However, the value of a star player's production in his minimum-salary seasons can so far exceed the investments made in minor-league coaching, scouting, and facilities that such players are valuable assets for all teams, not just frugal small-market organizations. A player debuting in his mid-20s, after several years of development in the minor leagues, can have some of his best seasons during those years, and he constitutes enormous surplus value for his owner as a consequence. In 2017, the New York Yankees' talented threesome of outfielder Aaron Judge, catcher Gary Sanchez, and pitcher Luis Severino were among the best in the sport: analysts at FanGraphs valued their combined production at 18.3 wins above that of minor-league replacement players, a total valued at an estimated \$110 million in the open market. On-field success yielded financial benefits for the Yankees: the organization earned millions from hosting six playoff games, and fan excitement about the next generation of homegrown superstars has boosted demand for tickets ahead of the 2018 season. For all their outstanding production, Judge, Sanchez, and Severino earned a combined \$1.65 million last year, a total that will increase only slightly to \$1.85 million in 2018. It is thus easy to understand the allure of players in their first three years in the majors: typically at their athletic peaks, their skills honed through years of work in the minors, they can yield staggering returns on investment if they're successful. Cost-controlled young players are not simply a route to respectability for the plucky Cincinnati Reds and Milwaukee Brewers; the

last two World Series champions, the 2016 Chicago Cubs and the 2017 Houston Astros, were built on the excellence of minimum-salary farm system products.

The promise to players, and the reason they have swallowed the bitter pill of minimum salaries, is that they become free agents who can sign a market rate contract after their sixth season. (During their fourth, fifth, and sixth years of service, players earn salaries determined through a precedent-based arbitration system, which yields one-year contracts that are closer to, but still below, what they would find on the open market.) In one's late 20s or early 30s, one can finally earn a big payday: a multi-year contract from a team with World Series aspirations and money to burn. In this way, money evens itself out over time, and players retire well compensated for their contributions to a multi-billion dollar industry. Free-agent contracts, however, are a significant risk for teams: no matter how spectacularly athletic a player is, and no matter how productive a worker he has been, there is no guarantee that his future performance will resemble his past. MLB franchises can commit tens or even hundreds of millions of dollars to a free agent, only to watch him struggle to live up to his contract, whether because of injury, age-related decline, motivation issues, or difficulties in a new city. Nevertheless, in the free-agent era, ownership and management have always ponied up for veteran players, seduced by the promise that a star can reproduce his best seasons on the mound or at the plate, thereby bringing the team one step closer to its championship dreams. That is, until this winter. Teams have instead begun to build around young cost-controlled players who generate surplus value, rather than veterans whose future production may or may not justify their lucrative contracts.

## II

The “sabermetrics” movement has also contributed to this growing preference for youth over experience. Pioneered in the 1970s by statistician Bill James, sabermetrics emerged out of the desire to improve upon traditional metrics for evaluating player performance. Using sophisticated forms of data collection and statistical analysis, James questioned the utility of familiar measures such as batting average, pitcher wins, and runs batted in. He sought instead to replace them with synthetic metrics such as “runs created” and measures of defensive production such as “range factor”. At first, his ideas were mocked and ignored. In the 1980s, however, his *Bill James Baseball Abstract* books attracted a small cult following, and in the 1990s, a major league team began to adopt some of James' ideas. The cash-strapped Oakland Athletics, desperate for a competitive advantage against big-spending teams, used sabermetric analysis to identify players who were undervalued by conventional statistics. When the A's achieved unlikely success in the early 2000s, earning four straight playoff berths and enjoying two 100-win seasons, their methods attracted attention throughout baseball, achieving public notoriety with the book *Moneyball*. Since then, baseball management has increasingly replaced the eyes of experienced scouts with the quantitative analysis of elite-educated mathematicians and programmers. This process has been accelerated with the adoption of the PITCHf/x and Statcast computer systems, automated

tools with high-speed, high-accuracy cameras that generate information about player movements that is unavailable to the naked eye.

Now, statistics aren't exactly new to baseball, and judgments about baseball players have always been mediated by numbers, more so than in any other American sport. Fans agree that a player with a .300 batting average is a terrific contact hitter, and that a player with 100 runs batted in is an excellent power bat. The all-time record for home runs held, depending on one's feelings about steroid use, by Barry Bonds or Hank Aaron, is a hallowed number in baseball history, and a player can cement a Hall of Fame legacy by reaching 3,000 hits or 300 wins. It is thus important to be specific about the contributions of the sabermetrics movement. What exactly is different about this new wave of analytics? What makes traditionalist fans bellyache about nerds and obscure stats ruining the game? And how has sabermetrics produced a reevaluation of players, leading to a preference for young talent over veterans with a track record of success?

The central theoretical innovation of sabermetrics is one consistent with today's prevailing ideology of neoliberalism: it analyzes baseball as if it were a sport played by discrete individuals, rather than one played collectively by teams. Sabermetrics partisans argue that traditional statistics are flawed because they do not sufficiently isolate an individual's production from that of his teammates. For instance, they disparage the pitcher win because there are factors beyond the pitcher's performance that determine whether his team wins that day's game: his defense could have made errors that allowed runners to reach base, or his offense might have been anemic at the plate and failed to score any runs. The pitcher win might feel important to the fan, who is wrapped up in the connection between player actions and game outcomes, but it is not useful to baseball management pursuing precise appraisals of worker productivity. Similarly, management has dismissed runs batted in, the number of runs scored when a hitter puts the ball in play, because it is contingent upon the performances of a player's teammates. If a player loops a base hit into the outfield, he'll get two RBIs if he had teammates starting on second and third base, but he'll get none if the bases are empty. For the fan cheering on his team, a line drive single has more significance in the former context, and he is concerned with a player's ability to be *clutch* — to make winning plays in decisive game situations. Sabermetrics, however, finds any connection between player performance and game context to be coincidental. The residue of the game context in traditional statistics just introduces confounding variables that detract from sound player evaluation. A hitter's prowess is more accurately assessed by examining his production in the abstract of his teammates' actions.

Sabermetrics pursues increasingly sophisticated measures of individual performance, free of the noise produced by variations in teammates, game situations, ballparks, and even fortune. With these metrics, management believes it can ascertain a player's true ability and thus anticipate his future production. One advanced metric used to evaluate pitchers is Fielding Independent Pitching (FIP). It is an attempt to improve upon the more conventional Earned Run Average (ERA), which states the number of runs a pitcher surrenders per nine innings. In a 2001 article for *Baseball Prospectus*, Voros McCracken argued that what happens

when a ball is put in play — when a ground ball rolls through the infield, or a fly ball soars into the outfield — is out of the pitcher’s control. Whether it falls for a hit or an out is in many ways up to the skill and positioning of the defenders behind him, the dimensions of a particular ballpark’s outfield, or just plain luck. McCracken supported his argument with data that showed that the proportion of balls in play that become hits fluctuates from season to season for individual pitchers. ERA is thus an inadequate measure of pitcher performance, too bound up with variables outside the pitcher’s control. FIP, by contrast, measures only the outcomes that can be traced directly to pitcher performance: strikeouts, walks, and home runs. Now, to state that a pitcher has a 3.85 FIP says nothing about his contribution to the game, and as a result, it is inscrutable to fans who understand that a pitcher with a 3.00 ERA typically surrenders two runs in a six-inning outing. It is also far from objective: FIP contains an inbuilt preference for hard-throwing strikeout pitchers, and it undervalues finesse pitchers who induce soft contact and create easy plays for the defense. But because of its ingenuity in its attempt to produce a context-free measure of individual performance, FIP has become influential.

Another attempt to isolate pitcher performance from game context is to examine the Expected Weighted On-Base Average (xwOBA) of the hitters that a pitcher faces. While FIP uses home runs as a proxy for all forms of batted-ball contact, xwOBA creates a run-value estimate derived from the exit velocity and launch angle of a ball put in play. Higher exit velocity suggests harder contact, which has a better chance of evading the defense and becoming a productive hit, and a launch angle in the sweet spot of 25-35 degrees increases the probability that a ball will leave the infield, and that hard contact will sail over the fence for a home run. The implicit argument in a statistic like xwOBA is that if a pitcher is giving up hard contact at a launch angle conducive to home runs, then he’s not pitching well, regardless of the outcome of the plays in a game. If a pitcher’s ERA is less than what his xwOBA surrendered suggests it should be, that pitcher is the beneficiary of good defense or good fortune, and one should expect that future results will regress to the mean expected outcome. As a consequence, when management evaluates a player, they might take xwOBA surrendered to be a more telling statistic than ERA, and a troubling trend in the former might make management skeptical about signing that player for the following season.

Sabermetric analysis, with its preference for computer-generated statistical models over ballpark observations, produces an alienation effect. This quantitative-analytical lens makes it less likely for management to be seduced by stardom in the free agent market. Many of baseball’s worst-value contracts have resulted from teams appraising a player based on his past performance and current stature in the game, rather than on rational projections of his future output. For instance, the Detroit Tigers signed Miguel Cabrera to an eight-year contract extension after his 2013 season, in which he won a second consecutive American League MVP and cemented himself as one of the best hitters of his generation. The Tigers promised to pay Cabrera a staggering \$292 million over the next 10 seasons, keeping him on the team until his age-40 season in 2023. Both ownership and management made clear that legacy was a significant motivation for extending Cabrera. General manager Dave

Dombrowski declared: “We want Miguel to be a Detroit Tiger when he goes into the Hall of Fame, and [during] whatever records may be set along the way.” From an on-field productivity perspective, however, this extension may have been misguided. After three all-star seasons, Cabrera was a shell of his old self in 2017, combining below-average hitting with poor defense and baserunning, and manifesting many of the signs of physical decline. With six years and \$180 million still owed to Cabrera, Detroit has likely made a disastrous financial decision, one which greatly limits its future competitiveness. Today’s management, however, would be less likely to offer such a contract. The mass of new metrics has encouraged more dispassionate judgment of players, and it has limited the allure of reputation and presence. Veteran players, even the very best in baseball, are looked at skeptically: their potential physical declines are emphasized, and their past endeavors are only that — great feats of athletic ability that belong to history.

### III

The plasticity of youth gives it another advantage over veteran experience. Baseball has always involved a battle of adjustments between pitchers and hitters, as players seek to identify and exploit their opponent’s tendencies. Data collection technology and sabermetric analysis have become enlisted in this battle, not only to pinpoint the weaknesses of specific opponents, but to identify efficiencies within the game as a whole. Such analysis also informs player development, as major league organizations work to develop prospects with the latest skills correlated with professional success. While veteran hitters have already developed the habits that have sustained them in the major leagues, younger players are more adaptable to the latest advice that advanced statistics spit out. Young players also have the quality of *potential*: management can imagine a skillful prospect incorporating a change in his swing or a different approach at the plate, even if there is a large possibility that he will fail to do so.

One instructive example of an analytics-driven adjustment is the “launch angle revolution” that has transformed baseball. It refers to the growing fashion of the extreme uppercut swing. Statisticians have interpreted batted-ball data as suggesting that the ideal launch angle for a ball in play is between 25 and 35 degrees. This launch angle sends a baseball flying into the outfield, an outcome that results in home runs and extra-base hits when it evades the gloves of the outfielders. Statistics show that the fly ball is much more productive than a grounder through the infield: in the 2016 season, major league hitters had a .239 batting average and a .258 slugging percentage on ground balls, and a .411 batting average and a .785 slugging percentage on fly balls. The swing necessary to achieve this elevated trajectory, however, is different from what traditional baseball wisdom dictates. Young players are typically taught to have a “level” swing, one which involves only the slightest of uppercuts to meet the downward trajectory of the baseball. This swing allows the hitter to reach many different parts of the strike zone, maximizing his ability to make contact and helping him hit to all parts of the field. In order to generate this higher launch angle and hit more fly balls, hitters have to make radical changes to their swings: they must swing

under the ball in order to lift it with backspin, sacrificing the ability to make consistent contact in order to generate more power. And hitters are increasingly making these changes. The home run is not just for big muscular sluggers anymore; even wiry shortstops are expected to send fifteen or twenty out of the park over the course of a season.

The case for the uppercut swing has been further legitimized by the dramatic improvements that players have made after adopting it. Third baseman Josh Donaldson was one of the pioneers of the fly-ball swing. After his 2012 season with the Oakland Athletics, Donaldson appeared to have an uncertain future in baseball. Now twenty-six years of age, he had only played 89 major league games in his career, and he had made little impact in those games. In the offseason, Donaldson decided to make a radical change to his swing, something he hoped might help him establish himself in the big leagues. To achieve this transformation, he worked with Bobby Tewksbary, an unorthodox swing coach who advises hitters to break with the conventional wisdom of swinging down on the ball and lifting it using topspin. Informed by advanced metrics, video analysis of great hitters, and struggles in his own career, Tewksbary instead encouraged Donaldson to swing up on the ball and aim to lift it into the outfield. Rather than drive the knob of his bat towards the ball, Donaldson now tilts the barrel back toward the catcher in order to swing through the ball on an upward plane. This adjustment helped turn Donaldson into one of the most dynamic hitters in baseball. In the 2015 season, at the peak of his powers, Donaldson hit .297/.371/.568 with 41 home runs, production that, along with his terrific defense at third base, earned him the American League MVP award.

Joey Votto, first baseman for the Cincinnati Reds, is also a mid-career adopter of the uppercut swing. While Votto had already been a star in the league, winning the National League MVP in 2010, his swing change has helped him extend his career and cement a legacy as an all-time great hitter. He explained to Travis Sawchik of FanGraphs that he began to move away from traditional hitting advice in response to the widespread use of the “shift”, a defensive strategy in which infielders position themselves toward the side where the hitter pulls ground balls. A left-handed hitter, Votto found that more of his ground balls were caught by the extra infielder shifted between first and second base. The fly ball swing, however, enabled him to send the baseball over infielders’ heads, neutralizing the impact of the defensive shift.

While Votto was able to make a significant swing adjustment in the prime of his career, many experienced players are less willing or less able to do so. Some hitters are comfortable with a more cerebral approach to their craft, but others find it difficult to assimilate statistics about batted-ball outcomes and launch angles into a complex, fine-tuned athletic movement. It requires a great deal of patience and skill for a player to remake a swing that he has used for years, and one that got him into the big leagues in the first place. Mitch Moreland, first baseman for the Boston Red Sox, stated: “The more technical I get, the bigger hole I dig. I try to keep it as simple as I can.” Votto also acknowledged that he was uncommonly placed to tinker with his swing because he is in the middle of a lucrative long-term contract. A player who has free agency on the horizon would be taking a significant risk

by changing his swing, as struggles in a contract year can cost a player millions of dollars in free agency.

Statcast data and sabermetric analysis are reversing time-honored axioms about the mechanics of baseball, and they are accelerating the cat-and-mouse game that pitchers and hitters play to find a competitive advantage. As a consequence, it makes more sense for teams to invest their resources in youth development. Young players haven't yet developed ingrained habits, and their plasticity makes them more amenable to adopting the latest approaches to hitting and pitching. Whatever a veteran free agent's accomplishments in prior seasons, investing millions of dollars in him today might prove to be unwise: his skillset might tomorrow prove to be outdated, leaving his team with an old dog who can't learn new tricks. Mirroring a trend taking place in the broader economy, the drive to find competitive advantage generates imperatives to develop new skills, even as those skills in turn become outdated and replaced with something new. The skillset of older workers is perceived as being behind the curve, and the value of their experience does not justify the higher salaries they expect after years of paying their dues. Younger workers, by contrast, have been trained to develop newer skills that are perceived as being better suited to the present-day demands of a competitive industry. And perhaps more importantly, they are grateful for any compensation, however meager, that they receive from ownership.

At the moment, teams still pay for what they perceive as a high likelihood of elite future production. In February, the Chicago Cubs signed pitcher Yu Darvish to a six-year contract valued at \$126 million, a hefty financial contribution to a 31-year-old player who has already had surgery to repair a torn elbow ligament. And the expectation remains that superstars who reach free agency in their athletic primes will receive huge contracts. Outfielder Bryce Harper of the Washington Nationals, winner of the National League MVP in 2016 and arguably the best left-handed power hitter in baseball, is expected to sign a contract valued around \$350 million next winter. Manny Machado, the Baltimore Oriole shortstop with a spectacular throwing arm and a devastating power bat, expects to receive a similar contract offer this winter. Both Harper and Machado can satisfy the sabermetrics gurus because as 26-year-olds, they have years of their athletic primes ahead of them, and because they are so talented that it is unreasonable to expect a team's farm system to produce a player of that caliber. It is likely that their production will generate surplus value on a potential \$30-35 million annual salary, especially given their value as famous faces that can bring fair-weather fans and event-attending corporate types to the ballpark.

It is the veterans who are merely very good or average MLB players who have suffered this off-season, and who will likely continue to suffer in the future. Franchises are making the calculation that average or good production can be duplicated by farm system products earning a minimum salary, who have the further advantages of being more malleable and potentially getting better with age. With the adoption of sabermetric methods by all major league franchises, and with the consequent intensification of adjustments between pitching and hitting, experience has become devalued, and novelty and youth have become prized. The logic of fashion has arrived to baseball, to the ire of longtime fans who are unhappy to

hear that their knowledge of their beloved game has become passé. While the compensation structure in Major League Baseball is designed to reward experience, management increasingly values a lack of experience. The most valuable commodity in baseball is the skillful prospect's raw physical tools and game intelligence, which can be molded at little cost into the latest optimal tendencies and dispositions.

#### IV

While sabermetrics make it increasingly apparent that one signs a free agent during his athletic decline, and while the plasticity of youth is an increasingly useful weapon in the pitcher-hitter battle of adjustments, the notion that one overpays for free agents is hardly a new idea in baseball. Management and fans alike have understood that when one signs a 31-year-old to a seven-year contract, it will probably end badly. However, that probability is today situated in a different ethical context and a different temporal horizon. Management has become much more willing to sacrifice short-term competitiveness and take a long-term approach to team building. Such long-term planning has recently taken a radical turn, mimicking corporate restructuring strategies with what has become known as “tanking”. Rather than viewing a 100-loss season as an embarrassment, management has learned to look kindly upon such miserable play because it sets up a franchise for future success. The lack of demand for free agents is no doubt linked to the increasing adoption of this practice.

In January 2015, the Washington Nationals signed pitcher Max Scherzer to an astronomical seven-year, \$210 million contract. Coming off of two brilliant seasons in Detroit, the Cy Young-winning right-hander was seen as an excellent signing for a team with championship aspirations. Now, Scherzer certainly represented significant risk for the Nationals. They had committed hundreds of millions of dollars to a single player, with no protection against injury or poor performance. Scherzer had a reputation for durability, but pitching is a stressful kinetic motion that can cause an arm injury at any moment. Furthermore, pitchers in their late 30s have a shaky track record, so Scherzer might be paid \$30 million for mediocre production in the final years of his deal. However, because Washington with its core of young talent looked primed for a playoff run, management could more easily justify that risk. Prime-age production from a premier pitcher on a win-now team was worth the possible collateral damage in the future. Playoff appearances and championship rings, the objects of every team's dreams, were on the line.

In December 2013, the Seattle Mariners took an even bigger risk on second baseman Robinson Canó, who had just come off of five brilliant seasons at the keystone for the New York Yankees. While New York hoped to re-sign their homegrown all-star, the Mariners outbid them with an audacious 10-year, \$240 million offer that would keep Canó in Seattle through his age-40 season. In contrast to the Nationals, who were adding finishing touches to an already excellent roster, the Mariners were looking to rebound from a disappointing 71-91 season. One player, even one as skillful and accomplished as Canó, is unlikely to propel a losing team into championship contention. However, Seattle calculated that he could put

them in the mix for a playoff berth in the short-term, and that seemed to justify the potentially gruesome final years of the deal. Baseball is an odd game: the best team doesn't always win in the playoffs, and if you end up in the postseason, you have a shot at winning the whole thing. The 2006 St. Louis Cardinals, for instance, went on a magical championship run after a mediocre 83-79 season. You just have to get hot at the right time.

Baseball management, however, is no longer building teams on the Seattle model. The upside of chasing short-term competitiveness by signing free agents is perceived as being outweighed by the probability of player decline and limited future payroll flexibility. Sophisticated statistical projection systems can reinforce such calculations. By aggregating projections for individual players on a team, models provide management with an expected number of wins with a particular roster. Such quantitative projections make it more difficult for management to make exaggerated appraisals of their teams. While projections are situated within a normal distribution that acknowledges possible deviations from the expected outcome, a quantitative estimate has a gravitational pull on management's perception of the future. Surprises do happen every year, but it's not wise to plan on them happening. For management confronting statistics that project a mediocre roster, it is difficult to believe that a couple signings can make their team into a dominant force. Because the legacies of players, teams, managers, and owners have become defined by the number of championships they win, management increasingly responds to prospects of mediocrity by withholding investment in experienced labor-power and embarking on long-term rebuilding projects.

Rebuilding is not a new tactic, but in recent years rebuilding strategies have become increasingly radical, to the point where any pretense of trying to win is thrown out the window. Baseball management has borrowed organization-building strategies from the corporate world, which has turned since the 1970s to practices of asset stripping, tax-advantaged debt-leveraged buyouts, and precarious employment contracts in order to restore high profits. This radicalization is informed in part by the quantitative-analytical perception of players as "assets", properties under team control which have specific costs and yield specific sums of value on the field. Such perception inclines management toward a complete sell-off during a rebuild. Eschewing the stability and guidance that veteran players might bring to a young team, management allocates all of its assets toward future success, exchanging its currently productive players for prospects, draft picks, and payroll flexibility. In the short term, this strategy produces teams that barely belong in the major leagues. But concerns about such poor short-term performance are mitigated by incentive structures that reward losing teams. The teams with the most losses receive the first selections in the next year's player draft, and organizations with the lowest revenues collect "revenue sharing" payments from teams with the highest payrolls. These incentives, originally designed to boost struggling teams and keep parity throughout the league, make such lose-now, win-later strategies more viable. In recent years, teams that have gone through seasons of "tanking" have reaped enormous benefits. The 2016 Chicago Cubs and the 2017 Houston Astros won World Series championships on the backs of homegrown star players, who were

obtained with top draft picks received after disastrous losing seasons.

This intentional lose-now, win-later strategy has made the 100-loss season, once dreaded by players, fans, and organizations as an embarrassing mark of incompetence, into something desirable. A season of Bad News Bears baseball now contains the promise of elite young talent in next year's draft and, eventually, a core group of young stars that can compete for a championship. More and more teams are choosing this rebuilding strategy, creating an ugly ethical quandary within baseball: at the heart of an institution built on competition, many teams prefer losing to winning. In an early March press conference, Tony Clark, the executive director of the MLB Players Association, stated that "upwards of one-third" of major league teams are "not as interested in being the last team standing" at the end of the season. Accompanying "tanking" is thus the dissolution of the annual goal of assembling the best possible team and giving things a chance — after all, every spring inaugurates a new season, and you can't predict baseball. Management's distance from fans and players enables it to retreat more easily from this ethical compact of competition. Its sabermetric analysis of team personnel, with its emphasis on context-free individual metrics that predict future performance, separates it from fans' passionate attachment to results. Mathematicians and programmers have replaced lifelong "baseball men" on management staffs, so management increasingly lacks a sense for the miserable day-to-day grind of playing a lost, worthless season. The boom/bust mentality that drives management toward either championship contention or comprehensive rebuilding devalues the pleasures of rooting for a solid if unspectacular baseball team, one which plays meaningful games late in the season and gives fans something to cheer for all year.

This decline in competitive drive outside a core of top teams has given management enormous leverage in its contract negotiations with labor. With fewer teams vying for free-agents, management can work with less pressure to outbid competitors, instead offering contracts that suit internal analytics-derived valuations of a player's future production. Furthermore, teams in rebuilding mode will trade their best players for prospects, increasing the supply of skilled labor for competitive teams to choose from. For example, the Miami Marlins, acquired by new ownership after the 2017 season, embarked on a rebuilding project to cut payroll and develop cost-controlled young players. They traded an enormous quantity of talent, including the reigning National League MVP, Giancarlo Stanton, and three all-star caliber players, Dee Gordon, Marcell Ozuna, and Christian Yelich, in exchange for salary relief and minor league prospects. All four players went to teams who might otherwise have pursued free agents to fill those positions. The erosion of an everyday ethos of competition has thus wreaked havoc on the baseball labor market: it decreases demand while increasing supply. This erosion also supports the increasing polarization of baseball teams toward two unequal factions: the contending super-teams looking to supplement a core of farm-system products with the occasional free agent, and the rebuilders working to develop a nucleus of young stars that can support a future championship run.

What has been understood as the increasing *rationalization* of baseball — the media incessantly celebrates how “smart” today’s management staffs are — is in fact the increasing *liberalization* of baseball. This has taken place on the one hand on the level of ideology. With its keen focus on individual productivity, and with its argument that individual actions have only coincidental relationships with game contexts, sabermetric analysis portrays baseball as a game played by talented individuals, rather than by teams. With its preference for young pliable athletes over savvy veteran players, it has replaced the value of experience with the logic of fashion. This has taken place on the other hand on the level of social structure. Ownership has exploited traditional institutions of player development and compensation to reduce the proportion of revenue going to labor. This shrinking share is distributed among an increasingly polarized workforce: while a small group of marketable superstars earns hundreds of millions during their careers, most baseball players fight for relative table scraps. Management has modernized their minor-league systems to produce highly cultivated labor-power at low cost, allowing them to replace experienced workers with high salary demands with a new crop of desperate, hungry neophytes. Accompanying this decline of baseball’s middle class is the polarization between dominant superteams and asset-stripped rebuilders. It is this dynamic of liberalization, rather than any universal rationality about the value of free agents, that has left Mike Moustakas and other veteran players without the payday that they had spent years working for.

This shift has taken place as spectator sports have transformed from working-class pastime to professional-class entertainment. Skyrocketing ticket prices and new luxury amenities have brought a wealthier clientele to the ballpark, one which is less invested in the outcome of a game than in enjoying the evening’s spectacle. There has also been a change in the character of the diehard fan. He has become an *analyst*, adopting the perspective of sabermetrics and experiencing the sport through it. The knowledgeable fan is no longer the historian — the one who watches all the big games, most of them at the stadium, and can remember the pitching matchup in game 6 of the 1996 World Series. Those facts can be looked up easily on the internet anyway, and in many cases the game footage itself can be found on YouTube. The modern superfan instead uses advanced metrics to see beneath the surface of the game and appraise the true abilities of individual players and teams. He can spot the brilliance of an unheralded shortstop, who might not be a spectacular power hitter but nevertheless gets on base, runs the bases well, and plays great defense. He makes sure never to be a prisoner of the moment: he sagely dismisses a player’s hot streak or slump as an aberration, one which will dissipate in short order as the player’s performance regresses to the mean. Perhaps most usefully for ownership, the analyst prizes the efficiency and payroll flexibility that young cost-controlled players provide, and he is willing to support strategies that withhold investment in free-agent players, even if that extra money just goes into the pockets of owners.

What is ominous for baseball as a whole is that liberalization contains the possibility of labor upheaval. The last MLB players’ strike in 1994 lasted over seven months and wreaked

havoc on the sport: ballpark attendances and television ratings plummeted, and fans remained bitter at players and owners for years. The strike contributed heavily to the downfall of the Montreal Expos, who struggled to rebuild their fanbase after their promising 1994 season was halted abruptly by the work stoppage. It wasn't until the steroid-fueled home-run bonanza of 1998, in which Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa both broke Roger Maris's 1961 record, that MLB found itself on solid ground again. But that strike took place almost twenty-five years ago now, and memories have faded. And as veterans' expectations increasingly diverge from the real compensation offered to them, the dissatisfaction that accompanies downward mobility will continue to emerge. If younger players observe the breaking of the informal covenant of "be underpaid now and get overpaid later", then they might push for change as well. At the moment, the union is extraordinarily weak, led by a former player who was completely overmatched in the most recent collective bargaining negotiations. With four seasons to play before the current agreement expires, however, the union does have time to get its act together. It will be interesting to see whether the nascent labor militancy observed this winter continues to grow within America's pastime.

Chris Marino  
New York, NY  
11 April 2018