

# ***THE SQUIBBER***

**April 2021**

*The Squibber* is the Bob Davids chapter's quarterly newsletter. It is emailed to chapter members roughly every three months. If you're a Bob Davids chapter member and are not getting the Squibber, please check that your email address and chapter affiliations listed on the SABR site are correct. Please send submissions for future editions to Squibber editor Walt Cherniak at [wcherniakjr@aol.com](mailto:wcherniakjr@aol.com).

## **IN THIS ISSUE:**

- TALKIN' BASEBALL: Upcoming Speakers Announced, By Dave Paulson
- THE SENATORS OF 1953: A Writers' Poll, By Francis Kinlaw
- GOOD TIMING: Sac Fly Rule Would Have Dethroned Goslin and Myer, By Andrew Sharp
- MYTHS OF BASEBALL: True or False? By Charles Pavitt
- SABR GAMES PROJECT: Complete Accounts Available

**TRIVIA QUESTION:** Who was the winning pitcher in the first American League game won by the Washington Senators? (See answer below)

**TALKIN' BASEBALL:** Upcoming Speakers Announced, By Dave Paulson  
Here is the speaker schedule for the upcoming meetings of the "Talkin' Baseball" group:

- May 1 -- Jerry Manheim: "This Never Happened"
- June 5 -- Bill Nowlin: "Working a Perfect Game"
- July 5 -- Tim Wendel: "Escape from Castro's Cuba"
- Aug. 7 -- Steve Bratkovich: "The Baseball Bat: From Trees to the Major Leagues, the 19th century to Today"
- Sept. 4 -- Steve Steinberg: "Comeback Pitchers: The Remarkable Careers of Howard Ehmke and Jack Quinn"

The Talkin' Baseball group normally meets on the first Saturday of each month at 9 a.m. Meetings are normally held at Brighton Gardens, 7110 Minstrel Way, Columbia, Md.

But due to restrictions caused by COVID-19, meetings are being conducted by Zoom. Check your email each month for meeting login information,

Whether virtually or in person, join us, and bring a friend!

## **THE SENATORS OF 1953: A Writers' Poll, By Francis Kinlaw**

Perhaps a shortage of news caused editors to fill column space with a light-hearted piece, or it could have been that a simple but entertaining article immediately after the holiday season seemed to be a good idea.

Whatever the reason, The Sporting News dated January 6, 1954, revealed the results of a whimsical poll of baseball writers (under the byline of C.C Johnson Spink) on its front page that was unlikely to produce holiday cheer between many players and reporters.

The survey focused on the “skills, team values, living habits and personalities of players from every major-league team,” with the scribes polled evaluating “only the players on the clubs which they observed in their own league.” While some of the categories judged were positive in nature, quite a few were either not complimentary or unrelated to baseball.

The results of the poll were presumed to be based on observations from the 1953 season, and obviously such a poll should never be accepted as definitive. However, while the collective opinions of the writers may be suspect in some cases, these are several of their interesting choices regarding players on the roster of a Washington club that finished in fifth place in the American League with a 76-76 record:

Most feared batter in clutch (Mickey Vernon)  
Fastest runner (Jim Busby)  
Slowest runner (Clyde Vollmer)  
Most relaxed on field (Vernon)  
Most nervous on field (Pete Runnels)  
Toughest pitcher for a crucial game (Bob Porterfield)  
Most box office appeal (Porterfield)  
Has done the most for the team (Eddie Yost)  
Best all-round athlete (Jackie Jensen)  
Most temperamental (Mickey Grasso)  
Least temperamental (Vernon)  
Most serious-minded (Yost)  
Most cooperative with writers (Porterfield)  
Most friendly to fans (Grasso)  
Best student of the game (Yost)  
Most helpful to rookies (Yost)  
Most popular off the field (Yost)  
Best conversationalist (Spec Shea)

Because The Sporting News was a widely read publication referred to as “The Bible of Baseball” in the mid-1950s, there can be little doubt that players throughout the big leagues quickly realized how the results of this poll affected their reputations and those of their teammates.

Among the Senators of 1953, the results were especially favorable for Mickey Vernon, Bob Porterfield and Eddie Yost. Jim Busby received praise for his speed, and Mickey Grasso was recognized for his pleasant attitude toward fans (although he must have talked less than Spec Shea).

If the judgments expressed by the writers were accurate, the personal characteristics of Washington's regular infielders created an interesting dynamic with the “relaxed” Vernon at first base, “nervous” Pete Runnels at shortstop, and “serious-minded” Yost at the hot corner. Given that trio's differing characteristics, it must have been necessary for second baseman Wayne Terwilliger to maintain a flexible personality in order to survive in a unique working environment!

## **GOOD TIMING: Sac Fly Rule Would Have Dethroned Goslin and Myer, By Andrew Sharp**

Before Juan Soto finished with the National League's highest batting average in 2020, playing in 47 of Washington's 60 games, four players with the original Washington Senators had won American League batting titles.

One of them – Mickey Vernon -- did it twice: in 1946 and 1953. Unlike the other three winners, his batting titles, reviewed retrospectively, are not in doubt, despite the second one being just a point higher than the runner-up.

Vernon's .337 average in 1953 denied Cleveland's Al Rosen, the AL's home run and RBI leader, the Triple Crown. Rosen had nine hits in his last 15 at-bats to close in on Vernon. It's widely accepted that two Senators players let themselves be tagged out in the eighth and ninth innings of the final game to keep Vernon from having to bat again. In any case, no one can say what Vernon might have done with one last plate appearance.

In 1928, the Senators' Goose Goslin, in his last time up, was in jeopardy of losing the batting title to the Browns' Heinie Manush. Goslin was fractionally ahead – .3780 to Manush's .3777 – when his teammates goaded him into taking his turn, but he quickly fell behind in the count with two called strikes. As he told author Lawrence S. Ritter for the seminal *The Glory of Their Times*, in the 1960s, Goslin decided he'd begin loudly jawing with the umpire, hoping to get ejected. Umpire Bill Guthrie knew what was going on and told Goslin to get back in the batter's box, and "you better be in there swinging, too. No base on balls, you hear me?"

As luck would have it, Goslin hit a sinking liner that fell for a hit just short of the diving outfielder's glove. So, for posterity, Goslin remains the 1928 AL batting champ with a .379 average.

Buddy Myer needed a hit in his last at-bat in 1935 to pass Cleveland's Joe Vosmik for the batting title. Myer began the day at .345 to Vosmik's .349, and figured he'd have to get four hits to take the lead, according to Warren Corbett's SABR BioProject essay. Myer had three hits in his first four at-bats. In his fifth time up, he fouled off an outside 3-2 pitch because he didn't want to walk. He doubled on the next pitch to raise his average to .34902.

In Cleveland, Vosmik's manager didn't play him in the first game of a double header. When word reached the Indians bench that Myer had gone 4-for-5, Vosmik pinch hit in the ninth, but was retired. He was 1-for-3 in the second game before it was called by darkness, and finished at .3483.

What complicates Goslin's title and that of Myer in 1935 is the sacrifice fly rule, which was vastly different in both seasons. If the scoring rules in effect then were the same as the one that has been in effect since 1954, neither Goslin nor Myer would have led the league. Vernon, on the other hand, would have finished a bit further ahead of Rosen in 1953 if the current sacrifice fly rule had been in place a year earlier.

In 1946, Vernon won his first title, finishing comfortably ahead of Ted Williams with a .353 average to .342 for Williams. Neither man had the help of the current sacrifice fly rule. Back in 1941, Williams would have hit .413, rather than .406, had he not been charged with a time at bat when his eight fly balls scored runners.

The other batting title won by a Washington player came in the American League's second season. Hall of Famer Ed Delahanty, who led the National League with a .410 average in 1899, is credited with hitting .376 in 1902. This figure was announced by league officials a month after the season ended, even though Nap Lajoie was listed at .378, ahead of Delahanty's .372 when the last game was played. How Delahanty's average rose to .376 also remains a mystery.

It's unclear what standard the new league was applying to determine the batting championship, but

under standards adopted in the 1950s, Lajoie's 381 plate appearances would not have qualified him for the title. In addition, Lajoie appeared in just 87 of his team's 136 games.

Baseball-Reference.com lists Lajoie as the batting champ because he appeared in more than 60 percent of his team's games, which the esteemed website says was the standard for league leaders prior to 1920. Nonetheless, MLB.com still credits Delahanty with the batting title, making him the first man to lead both leagues in batting average.

The sacrifice fly rule has been changed several times in different ways. From 1908 through 1925, the scoring rule was essentially the same as it is today. From 1931 to 1938 and from 1940 to 1953, if a runner on third tagged up and scored on a fly out, the batter was credited with a run batted in but was charged with a time at bat. (In contrast, no at-bat was charged to a batter who put down a sacrifice bunt.)

Game accounts on Retrosheet show that Vernon had six run-scoring fly balls in '53. Rosen had five. Subtracting those six at-bats would send Vernon up to .341. Five fewer ABs for Rosen leaves him at .338. The opposite was true for Myer in 1935. Vosmik had nine run-scoring fly balls to Myer's six. Removing those at-bats from their averages, Vosmik would have finished at .3535 to Myer's .3524.

The 1928 season was played under an overly generous sacrifice fly rule in place from 1926 through 1930. Not only did the batter avoid an official at-bat when he hit a run-scoring fly ball, he was not charged with an at-bat if his fly out advanced a runner from second to third or first to second.

Retrosheet game accounts show Goslin had nine sacrifice fly balls that did not score a run; Manush had six. So under the standard in effect for all but those five years, nine outs would have been added to Goslin's season total, pulling his average down to .372. Adding six outs to Manush's total would leave him at .374.

In fact, no separate statistic for the sacrifice fly existed before the 1954 season. Before then, in the years in which a player was not charged with an at-bat, those productive fly ball outs were lumped in with sacrifice bunts. But for most of the 1930s, all of the 1940s and the first four years of the '50s, no such thing as a sacrifice fly was tabulated. A run-batted-in and a time-at-bat was all that resulted, effectively lowering batting averages a few percentage points.

Aside from both types of sacrifice hits – bunts and fly balls – not costing the hitter a time-at-bat, there remains one weird difference: the impact on consecutive hitting streaks. A batter who, for example, walks twice, is hit by a pitch and has a sacrifice fly would see any active game hitting streak end, but if the same plate appearances included the two walks, the HBP and a sacrifice bunt, the hitting streak would remain intact – no official at-bats. In this instance, the sacrifice fly is considered an official time at bat – but not for the batter's game and season totals. Got that?

### **MYTHS OF BASEBALL: True or False? By Charles Pavitt**

This is the 10th in a series of Squibber contributions intended to report the truth (as far as present data suggests) of the tidbits of "conventional wisdom" that TV analysts and comparable pundits make without any true knowledge about their validity.

Myth #28 – Teams try to match their No. 1 starting pitchers against one another.

At least during the 2000-2009 decade, it was not true that teams made an effort to match up their No. 1 starters against one another; if anything, it was the opposite. Bill James in his 2010 Gold Mine book used his Season Score metric, a quick-and-dirty method for evaluating pitchers that works well enough within seasons for this sort of analysis, to examine the issue. He presented these data for Season Score

categories for starters and their average opposition:

Pitcher Season Score	
Number of Pitchers	
Number of Starts	
Opposition Pitcher Season Score	
>299	11
	366
68.88	
200-299	136
	4093
77.67	
150-199	152
	4660
80.13	
100-149	316
	8987
78.01	
50-99	451
	10151
77.89	
0-49	980
	11614
79.40	
<0	963
	8711
81.63	

The lowest (highest) average opposition starter Season Score was for the starters with the highest (lowest) Season Score. As Bill mentioned, it looks like there was a slight tendency for teams facing the absolute best starting pitchers to sacrifice the game and start their weakest.

Myth #29 – Experience improves catcher performance.

The evidence relevant to this myth is decidedly mixed. On the yea side, Tom Hanrahan performed three studies (1988, 1999, and 2004) with various measures in support. Here is one example from his 1999 article, based on 104 catchers totaling 539 seasons of at least 85 games with the same team in two consecutive seasons between 1946 and 1987.

His method was too complicated to describe in detail here. The following table lists staff ERA differences between seasons in which the catchers crossed 100-games-played milestone (but not two; Tom had a good reason for this limitation that would take me too long to explain here).

So, for example, it would include a (these are made-up numbers) a catcher who entered a season with 115 career games and ended it with 210, and would not include a catcher who started a season with 195 career games and finished it with 305 or a catcher who began a season with 105 career games and concluded it with 190 career games despite all having caught 85 games that year.

Barrier  
Crossed  
Sample Size  
Difference  
From Previous  
100  
49  
-.07  
200  
44  
-.02  
300  
39  
-.12  
400  
29  
-.04  
500  
25  
-.02  
600  
28  
-.02  
700  
22  
.00  
800  
20  
+.06  
900  
15  
+.04  
1000/1100  
19  
+.08/year  
1200 to 1700  
16  
+.11/year

Note that the last two combined one-barrier-crossed seasons in order to get a decent sample size. Anyway, on average the staff ERA decreased as catchers gained experience, peaked at the 600 and 700 game barriers at .29 better, then regressed for the rest of their careers.

On the nay side, Keith Woolner (now heading up the Indians' analytics staff) used data from Retrosheet and Total Sports from 1984 through 1997 to performed Without You With You (WOWY; these compare a given catcher with all the others on his team in a given season) analyses with every pitcher with each catcher with whom he faced 100 or more batters (sample size = 6347 pitcher/catcher combinations). He then calculated the overall run value for the results of those plate appearances for each of the combinations.

The distribution of these run values approximated the normal distribution fairly closely, implying either that performance differences do not exist or that they do exist but occur randomly. Further, catcher performances relative to one another had absolutely no relationship from year to year. There are substantial differences in method across their work, but other than those I cannot substantively reconcile Tom and Keith's very distinct conclusions.

Myth #30 – Veteran catchers can serve as mentors for young pitchers

Back when only stolen bases against, caught stealing, and passed balls were quantified, that mysterious aspect of catching which is known as “handling pitchers” played a large role in defining catcher fielding reputations.

As more factors became measurable, particularly pitch framing, there was less room for pitcher handling in evaluations. The work on catcher experience just described above could be relevant, but if there is an impact it could be due to something now measurable, such as improvements in framing.

I am aware of one attempt specifically intended to estimate the impact of handling pitchers, Russell Carleton's examination of the myth that veteran catchers can serve as mentors for young pitchers. His sample size was every team from 1989 through 2008 with pitchers 27 or younger who faced at least 250 batters during the season and did not switch teams within-season, a catcher at least 32 years old on Opening Day who caught at least 360 innings during the season (if two such catchers on a team, he used the older) and, combining the two, at least 12 relevant pitcher-seasons (for an adequate sample size per catcher).

The study revealed some evidence that such catcher-mentors might exist (Jason Kendall improved both strikeout and walk rate for young pitchers), but the impact was tiny, the sample size was too small, it is quite possible that the findings are due to improvements in pitcher skill on a given team independently of the catchers over time (as Russell admitted), and overall there really isn't any reason to think that this wasn't a random finding. But once again – absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

### **SABR Games Project: Complete Accounts Available**

If you enjoyed the following two articles in the last issue of the Squibber, you may wish to read the complete accounts of those games on the SABR Games Project website as noted:

- **FOUR CONSECUTIVE HOMERS? Nats Have Done it Twice**, by Andrew Sharp, <https://sabr.org/gamesproj/game/july-27-2017-back-to-back-to-back-to-back-home-runs-lead-nationals-slugfest/>
- **OPENING DAY IN WASHINGTON: Unfortunately, Without Fans**, by Steven C. Weiner, <https://sabr.org/gamesproj/game/july-23-2020-baseball-returns-to-washington-without-fans-on-opening-day/>

**TRIVIA ANSWER:** Right-hander Bill Carrick allowed seven hits and one unearned run on April 26, 1901 (exactly 120 years before I wrote this) to pitch the Senators to a 5-1 victory at Philadelphia.