



Society For American Baseball Research

Baseball Records Committee

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Not everything that counts is counted; not everything that is counted is worth counting. ---Albert Einstein

DATA CONFIRM MINIMAL BENEFITS OF NEW EXTRA-INNING RULE

In the Summer and Fall 2020 newsletters, with the help of **Pete Palmer** and **Al Yellon**, we predicted the effects of MLB's supposedly temporary rule of starting extra-inning games with a runner on second base, for the purposes of ending games sooner. It was unclear whether this was designed to (1) make such games more exciting, (2) reduce the time players spent on-field and thus conceivably reduce the chances of catching COVID, or (3) both.

Using historical data of extra-inning rates, we predicted that about 75 games would go to extra innings in 2020. Thanks to research by **Jim Wohlenhaus**, who catalogued all the extra-inning games in 2020, we can confirm that our prediction turned out to be right on target—75 games in 2020 went into extras. Further breaking it down confirms how close real life was to our prediction, which was based on a combination of how many games went X innings historically and how often one team would outscore the other if both began an inning with a runner on 2nd base and nobody out:

Games Going Exactly X Innings	Real-Life	Prediction
10 inn	53	50
11 inn	17	15
12 inn	4	4
13 inn	1	1
14 inn	0	<1

Under both the old and new rules, the 10th inning would be played no matter what, so there were only 28 “extra-extra” innings in 2020 (i.e., the 11th or later). The expected total under the old rule would have been about 84 such “extra-extra” innings. So we saved about 56 innings of play with the new rule. That is very close to our predicted total of 58 saved innings.

This confirms our prediction that in the end, this new rule saved only about (on average) 75 seconds of time on the field in each game, given the average time of an inning. Other disagree, but as for me, I'd rather give up 75 seconds, get rid of the gimmicky rule, and revert to the one that was good enough for the first 150 seasons. But MLB has announced it intends to keep the new rule despite its minimal time savings.

Note: MLB also started doing 7-inning doubleheaders in 2020, so for any of those that went into extra innings, the 8th inning is treated as the 10th inning (and so on) for purposes of the stats above.

ANOTHER UPDATE: BROTHERS HOMERING AGAINST EACH OTHER

In the Fall 2020 newsletter, we listed brothers who had homered in the same game—but for opposing teams. We listed only those instances from the regular season, but **Bill Deane** notes that another pair did it during in a World Series. In game Seven of the 1964 Fall Classic (Oct. 15), **Ken Boyer** of the Cardinals and **Clete Boyer** of the Yankees connected, both in their final career World Series at bats.

DODGING LOSSES

Combining excellent play with a shortened schedule that allowed for larger variances, the **Dodgers** were able to put together a .717 winning percentage in 2020 (43 wins, 17 losses). **Bill Deane** notes that this is the highest percentage by a team in a season of any length since the 1954 **Indians** compiled a .721 winning percentage (111 wins, 43 losses).

If we include their post-season record, the 2020 Dodgers' final WL% was .718 (56 wins, 22 losses). That is the highest since the 1927 **Yankees** went .722 (114 wins, 44 losses). For those who are curious about how the Dodgers leap-frogged the 1954 Indians: recall that the 1954 Indians were swept in the World Series, lowering their overall WL% for the season to .703, including post-season play.

GUEST AUTHOR: CHUCK HILDEBRANDT

Chuck Hildebrandt sends along this slightly longer piece, highlighting some research he has done about players with lengthy careers who just never had a bad year, as measured by WAR. There are some expected names on the list—but also some surprises. He titles it:

Position Players Who Never Really Sucked

Even for a class of player who ranks among the very best in the world, playing major league baseball is hard. There are extremely few who have played it so well that they never had even one bad season.

To that end, I have identified 21 players in major league history who have played ten or more seasons and never had a season in which they delivered less than 1.0 WAR.

WAR is short for “wins above replacement”. In theory, a replacement-level big league player is one who could be freely switched out for the best minor-league alternative who could provide the exact same level of performance. It's a basic benchmark for determining whether a player should be in the big leagues at all. A WAR of 0.0 is exactly replacement-level; a negative WAR suggests the player should be replaced by a minor leaguer.

A 1.0 WAR, meaning a player who can provide the equivalent of one win more than a freely-available minor leaguer over the course of a season, is a valuable commodity indeed, since three-quarters or more of all major leaguers fail to reach even this standard in any given season. *(ctd on next page)*

In addition, WAR is a counting stat and not a rate stat, which means that a player has to play enough of a season at a good-enough level to achieve as much 1.0 WAR. So, players who started their careers as September call-ups, as well as players who struggle either in their rookie before becoming good, and/or in their final seasons after having fashioned an excellent career, will not show up on this list.

So a player who can deliver a minimum of this level of performance every season of his career for at least ten years is truly a rare bird.

Here is the list of the 21 position players who played at least ten seasons and never had a season under 1.0 WAR, through 2019. Click a player's link to see his FanGraphs card:

Name	Seasons	MaxWAR	MinWAR
<u>"Indian" Bob Johnson</u>	13	6.4	3.1
<u>Joe DiMaggio</u>	13	9.8	2.8
<u>Mike Griffin (19 c.)</u>	12	5.9	2.7
<u>Gil McDougald</u>	10	6.2	2.0
<u>Joe Gordon</u>	11	8.8	2.0
<u>Jackie Robinson</u>	10	9.6	1.8
<u>Mickey Mantle</u>	18	11.5	1.5
<u>Will Clark</u>	15	8.1	1.4
<u>Bid McPhee</u>	18	5.4	1.3
<u>Chick Stahl</u>	10	6.1	1.3
<u>Lenny Dykstra</u>	12	9.0	1.3
<u>Elvis Andrus*</u>	11	4.0	1.2
<u>Denard Span</u>	11	4.2	1.2
<u>John Titus</u>	11	5.5	1.2
<u>Mickey Cochrane</u>	13	6.2	1.2
<u>Harry Stovey</u>	14	6.9	1.2
<u>Russell Martin*</u>	14	7.9	1.2
<u>Ryan Braun*</u>	13	7.1	1.1
<u>Del Pratt</u>	13	4.9	1.0
<u>Jason Heyward*</u>	10	5.6	1.0
<u>Andrew McCutchen*</u>	11	8.1	1.0

NOTE: FanGraphs version of WAR is used here. The pandemic-shortened 2020 season is not counted. * Still active as of 2021.

Some players here are no surprise, especially **Joe DiMaggio**, **Jackie Robinson** and **Mickey Mantle**, all of whom were famously great right out of the gate. And **Mickey Cochrane** and **Joe Gordon** are legitimate Hall of Famers whose appearances on this list likely surprise no one.

But did you know that **Denard Span** was consistently this valuable throughout his career? Or that **Gil McDougald** never had a season under 2.0 WAR during his short stay in the bigs? And who knew **Elvis Andrus** has been this good every year of his career? (ctd on next page)

One active player whose appearance here might surprise us, but probably shouldn't, is **Russell Martin**, who has played fourteen seasons and never been under 1.0 WAR in any of them. (Even though he did not play in 2020, he has not officially retired, so he is technically still an active player.) After fourteen seasons his career WAR stands at 55.2, which is well into Hall of Fame range for catchers. However, since Martin was well-regarded almost exclusively for his sparkling defensive contributions and hardly at all for his bat, it seems likely that at least 25% of voters will see fit to leave him off their ballots for the ten seasons he will probably be on the ballot.