

## **THE SQUIBBER**

### **August 2022**

The Squibber is the Bob Davids chapter's 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).

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**TRIVIA QUESTION:** Lumbering Senators slugger Frank Howard stole just four bases in the seven seasons he spent in Washington, never swiping more than one in a given year. Who were the four pitchers and catchers he victimized? (See answer below).

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#### **BOB DAVIDS CHAPTER VISIT: A Great Afternoon at Nats Park, By Gordon Janis**

On July 16, a group of Bob Davids Chapter members and friends enjoyed an afternoon at Nationals Park as the Nats took on the World Series champion Atlanta Braves, with the Braves winning 6-3.

The game time temperature was 88 degrees for first pitch at 4:06 p.m. Paid attendance was 37,880, many of whom were motivated to receive a "Juan Solo" Star Wars-themed bobblehead, which went to the first 10,000 admitted.

Our seats in section 403 were shielded from the sun, as well as the rain that came later. Chapter Treasurer Mark Pattison provided us the old-time satisfaction of physical tickets that he distributed at the center field gate to everyone in the group.

Some of us could not remember the last time we had ticket stubs as a keepsake of a game, as opposed to the folded-up ones on 8 ½ x 11 printer paper most of us use, unless we just scan our phones. Thanks Mark, for patiently waiting for everyone in the group to arrive and enduring a drunk and belligerent troublemaker whom security had to disperse before the gates even opened.

The Braves jumped out to a 4-0 lead in the third as Matt Olson (two men on) and Austin Riley hit back-to-back homers off Nats starter and losing pitcher, Paolo Espino. The Nats scored two in the fourth, highlighted by Josh Bell's RBI triple, and one in the sixth to pull within one, before the Braves tacked

on two insurance runs in the seventh.

Max Fried pitched seven innings to notch his 10th win of the season and 50th of his young career. Braves rookie Michael Harris II reached base three times and stole three bases.

When the rain first came in the seventh, play was not stopped and our group remained dry under the overhang while other sections scrambled for cover. Then heavy rains came in the eighth, forcing a rain delay of 1 hour and 49 minutes. When the heavy rain let up, some of us noticed the Skittles-sponsored tarp proclaiming, “Taste the Rainbow,” at the same time a rainbow appeared in the sky, which surely must have pleased the sponsor.

As for “Juan Solo” Soto, he went 2 for 4 with a run scored. Two days later he would win the All-Star Home Run Derby. And two weeks later, after rejecting a \$440 million contract extension, he (along with Josh Bell) was dealt to San Diego for six young players. Hopefully for Nats’ fans, GM Mike Rizzo will not look back on this trade at some point and say these six were not the “droids” he was looking for.

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### **AN OVERNIGHT BEST-SELLER: Local Author Connects with “50-for-50,” By John Maroon**

“Opening Day: 50-for-50,” by new SABR member Michael Ortman, was released worldwide just in time for Opening Day 2022, and became an overnight sensation among baseball history books, earning Best-Seller recognition in April from the world’s pre-eminent online book retailers – Barnes & Noble and Amazon.

This 290-page book is part memoir, part history, and an inspiring love letter to the sport of baseball. Ortman, a lifelong fan, Washington area resident, and former TV and sports executive, started a 50-year run of consecutive Opening Day games in 1970 that lasted through the 2019 season opener.

The streak traveled from D.C. to Baltimore, to Chicago, back to Baltimore, and ultimately, back to the nation’s capital. Three cities, six ballparks, five home teams, 50 Opening Days.

By telling detailed stories from each experience and connecting them with the joys of family, friends, and the game itself, Ortman forms a rich narrative history. Readers are pulled into exciting accounts of each game’s highlights, and long-time fans can bask in nostalgic memories of legendary players, historic stadiums, and the ways baseball has changed over half a century.

Each story is enhanced by a page on the book’s innovative companion website, [www.OpeningDay5050.com](http://www.OpeningDay5050.com). Every chapter includes a QR code that leads readers to that game’s box score, play-by-play, relevant bios from SABR’s Biography Project, and more.

Ortman said, “I am just an old baseball fan who had the honor of attending Opening Day for so many years in a row. It was an act of passion for our National Pastime and the more I spoke with fellow baseball fanatics, the more I understood that my passion for the game and the feeling I got every Opening Day was shared by so many others. I hope that baseball fans everywhere enjoy this book of memories that spans the last five decades and reconnects them with their special memories.”

“Opening Day: 50-for-50” can be purchased in paperback, ebook and audiobook through online

retailers worldwide, including BarnesAndNoble.com, Amazon.com, the book's companion website, and elsewhere.

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### **FREE BASEBALL IN FREDERICKSBURG: Chapter Outing Highlights, By Mark Pattison**

The Bob Davids Chapter's first outing during its "Summer of Baseball" series was in Fredericksburg, Va., home to the Fredericksburg Nationals, Washington's low-A farm club in the Carolina League. Initially, plans called for a game preceded by a buffet and a research presentation, but a strong string of storms that swept through much of the Mid-Atlantic the night before prompted the postponement of the scheduled game, so instead of one nine-inning game, made the May 28 outing a doubleheader via a pair of seven-inning contests, albeit under a slightly revised schedule.

Close to 30 SABR members and their friends and family took immense delight at being at Virginia Credit Union Stadium for the first time (it had been called "FredNats Stadium" in its rookie season last year, and if you blinked you missed it).

The franchise, which had relocated from Pfitzner Stadium in Woodbridge, put some care in making the park suitable for some 5,000 fans; attendance for the twin bill was a "sold out" 4,658. There are good views of the action from virtually every spot on the wrap-around concourse -- although it takes some getting used to if you don't regularly watch the game from beyond the outfield, where the SABR group was.

But that was assuaged by SABRites getting the chance to hang updated numbers on the hand-operated scoreboard. An aluminum staircase with a generous-sized platform up top is wheeled into place to post the latest runs, hits and errors, while posting 0's, 1's, or some crooked numbers at the end of each half-inning. And behind the scoreboard was the buffet: burgers, hot dogs, potato salad, beans, chips, cookies and beverages. Pretty much everyone in our group who wanted one or the other, or both, had multiple chances to partake.

Oh, yes, the game action. In the lidlifter, the FredNats has spotted the Salem Red Sox five runs in the top of the first, as the Nats' starter didn't even survive the inning. But the home team chipped away at the lead until the F-Nats were down by just a run in the seventh (and last -- hey, this IS the minors, remember) inning.

The FredNats jumped all over the Salem closer and scored two in the bottom of the seventh to win 6-5. In the nightcap, Fredericksburg was not so lucky, losing 3-1. There were three consecutive half-innings when the team at the bat had the bases loaded but could not push home a run. While there were fireworks after the game, there were more in the bottom of the seventh when FredNats manager Jake Lowery was ejected before a pitch had been thrown. Then, after a called strikeout, the FredNats batter exchanged some words with the Salem hurler, and although it never came to blows, both benches emptied and both bullpens came running in from the outfield to see what all the fuss was about.

Between games, chapter treasurer Dave Raglin gave a presentation on minor league baseball since 1978 along the I-95 corridor in northern Virginia, starting with the Alexandria Dukes through today's FredNats. A good time was indeed had by all -- and that's the point of it, isn't it?

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## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ALEXANDRIA/PRINCE WILLIAM/POTOMAC/FREDERICKSBURG FRANCHISE, By Dave Raglin**

Here are highlights of Dave Raglin's presentation at the Bob Davids Chapter event in Fredericksburg:

This talk was dedicated to David Vincent, the longtime scorer for the Prince William and Potomac Cannons, and Don Plavnick, who was a big fan of the Alexandria, Prince William, and Potomac teams and was so looking forward to seeing the Fredericksburg Nationals play.

### **Alexandria Era – 1978-1983**

Alexandria began as an expansion team, and helped bring the Carolina League from four teams to six. The effort to land the franchise was spearheaded by Mayor Frank Mann.

The Dukes operated as an independent team in 1978, and first the first professional baseball team in the D.C. area since the Senators left after the 1971 season. They debuted on April 14, 1978, in Salem, Va., and played their first home game on April 28, 1978 vs. Salem.

Home games were played at Four Mile Run Park, behind Cora Kelly Elementary School. Since it was on school property, they couldn't serve beer. There was a plan to build a \$1 million stadium that would seat 8,000 near the Beltway and Telegraph Road, in an effort to try to get an AA or AAA team.

Can you believe Mickey Mantle played for the Dukes? Yes, he did (well, it was Mickey Mantle Jr.) He had not played in three years since college. Mantle went 4-for-60 with no homers, 2 RBIs, and a walk-to-strikeout rate of 3-to-26. The only future major leaguer on the 1978 Dukes was pitcher Ron Mussleman, loaned from Seattle.

The team finished 58-75, 1.5 games ahead of the other unaffiliated team, the Kinston Eagles. Alexandria drew 3,128 fans on opening night, but only 45,220 for the season, an average of 680 a game. That was the highest they drew in their six seasons in Alexandria.

The team affiliated with Seattle in 1979 and finished second but was an independent again in 1980. On April 30, 1978, Gary Pallent hit two grand slams in one inning, one right-handed, one left-handed. They gained an affiliation in 1981 with Pittsburgh for the last three years in Alexandria and won the Carolina League Championship in 1982, beating the Lynchburg Mets 1 game to 0 and then the Durham Bulls 3 games to 0. The final game was 4-4 before Burk Goldthorn hit a grand slam off future long-time major league pitcher Tom Waddell

### **Prince William/Potomac Era – 1984-2019**

Prince William won a battle with Fairfax and Prince George's counties to get the Dukes. The county built Davis Ford Field as part of a \$1.9 million recreation complex, which was later renamed Prince William County Stadium in 1986, Pfitzner Stadium in 1996, and Northwest Federal Field at Pfitzner Stadium in 2018.

The team drew 108,818 people in the first year, more than double their high in Alexandria. Barry Bonds started his pro career at Prince William in 1985 and made a big splash: In 71 games he hit 13 HRs, 37 RBIs, and hit .299.

Another big star was Bobby Bonilla. He played for Alexandria in 1984 and AA Nashua in 1984, but after a broken leg in spring training in 1985, he was sent back to A ball, this time with Prince William. He was taken by the White Sox in the Rule V draft after the 1985 season but the Pirates reacquired him during the 1985 season for pitcher Jose DeLeon. Another Pirate, pitcher John Smiley, went directly from Prince William to the majors during 1986 at the age of 21.

The affiliation with the Pirates ended after the 1986 season and they were replaced by the Yankees. The team became the Prince William Yankees, an odd name for a team playing in the Confederacy. The name was changed to the Prince William Cannons in 1988 after the Yankees dropped them.

The Yankees ended up renewing and they won the Carolina League championship in 1989, beating Lynchburg and Durham as they had in 1982. The team was bought in 1988 by National Baseball Corp., who also owned the St. Petersburg and Hamilton teams, with Michael Caggiano heading the group.

Attendance jumped in 1989 and then in 1990 further. Art Silber bought the team in 1990. He had been the President/CEO of Sterling Bank. They switched affiliations to the White Sox in 1994, the Cardinals in 1997, and the Reds in 2003.

The team first starting shopping for a new ballpark in 1996, changing the name of the team to the Potomac Cannons and talking to Fairfax County about a ballpark near the Dunn Loring Metro station, new Dulles, the Engineer Proving Grounds in Springfield, and the site of the Lorton Correctional Complex.

An historic event happened on April 10, 2001, when Dave Raglin took future wife Barb Mantegani to a Cannons game for their first date.

They became an affiliate of the new local team, the Washington Nationals, in 2005, and changed their name to the Potomac Nationals. They have been more successful on the field since affiliating with the Nationals, with three championships and four other playoff appearances. They've also hosted many major league Nationals on rehab assignments.

There were various plans through the decade of the 2000s to build a new park, with a site next to the current stadium being considered, but it never happened. In the 2010s, they were still working to build a new stadium, this time on a site off I-95.

By this time, Pfitzner Stadium did not meet MLB's self-imposed standards for a ballpark but the team received a waiver to continue to play there. In August 2018, the Silbers announced an agreement to build a stadium in Fredericksburg, Va.. The Potomac Nationals played their last regular season game at Pfitzner Stadium on Aug. 29, 2019.

#### Fredericksburg Era – 2020-2022

The team was supposed to debut in 2020 but the COVID pandemic cancelled the season. It would have been touch and go if the ballpark would have been ready for the 2020 season. The Washington Nationals used it for the "summer camp" and taxi squad during the 2020 season.

The park was originally named FredNats Stadium but was renamed Virginia Credit Union Stadium in 2022. It has about 5,000 seats and was built for about \$35 million.

Fredericksburg unsuccessfully tried to lure the Hagerstown Suns in 2013-2014. The first game at the stadium was on May 11, 2021, with 2,065 people in attendance.

The all-time All-Star Team for the franchise (see below) would make a pretty good team, featuring one Hall of Fame-level player, several others who will get votes, and one of the best young stars and best young pitchers in the game today (Soto, Giolito)

Three of the best were only cups of coffee passing through: Pujols – 21 games in the middle of three stops in his only minor league season; Votto – 24 games in 2004; Soto – 15 games in the middle of three stops on his way to Washington in 2018.

Every parent club except for Seattle is represented by at least one player. I'm glad to say that my favorite DP combo, Danny Espinosa and Ian Desmond, made the team!

All-Time Alexandria/Prince William/Potomac/Fredericksburg All-Franchise Team:

Manager Johnny Lipon (1982-1984).

SP Andy Pettitte (1993); SP Lucas Giolito (2015); SP Dan Haren (2002); SP John Smiley (1995-1996); SP Robbie Ray (2012-2013); RP Reynoldo Lopez (2015); RP Alan Mills (1987-1989).

C Jorge Posada (1993); 1B Albert Pujols (2000); 2B Danny Espinosa (2009); SS Ian Desmond (2005-2007); 3B Bobby Bonilla (1983, 1985); LF Barry Bonds (1985); CF Bernie Williams (1988); RF Juan Soto (2018); ; DH Magglio Ordonez (1995); PH Joey Votto (2004).

The team was selected based on players' major league careers, not for Alexandria/Prince William/Potomac/Fredericksburg. Does not include players who were only on rehabilitation assignments.

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### **MISSING JACKIE IN 1954: Jensen Trade Nagged Nats, By Francis Kinlaw**

For the Washington Senators and their fans, the decade of the 1950s may be described as a period of frustration and mounting losses. Teams representing the nation's capital achieved undesirable status in popular culture with a pattern of play that led to ridicule in a jingle ("First in war, first in peace, and last in the American League"), satire in a popular novel (Douglass Wallop's *The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant*), and amusement on the stage and screen (*Damn Yankees*).

In 1952 and 1953, however, the franchise did seem to be on the brink of, if not pennant contention, competitive respectability. Washington's 1952 team moved up two spots in the American League's standings (from seventh place in 1951 to fifth) while posting a winning record (78-76) for the first time since 1945. The 1953 club then retained that position in the standings with an equal number of victories and defeats (76-76).

Unfortunately, the tempered optimism produced by those two seasons dissipated in 1954 as the losing trend of previous years returned to Griffith Stadium and the team fell into sixth place, 45 games behind the pennant-winning Cleveland Indians, with a very disappointing record of 66-88.

While the Nats did finish a mere two games behind the fifth-place Detroit Tigers and only three games behind the fourth-place Boston Red Sox, it is reasonable to wonder why an apparently promising situation deteriorated when a taste of respectability was being enjoyed. More specifically, to what degree did the presence of Jackie Jensen contribute to the success of the 1952 and 1953 teams, and how significant was his absence in the decline of 1954?

On May 3, 1952, Jensen had been traded by the New York Yankees to the Senators along with pitcher Spec Shea, infielder Jerry Snyder and outfielder Archie Wilson. Outfielder Irv Noren and shortstop Tom Upton were sent north from Washington to the Bronx. Manager Casey Stengel of the Yanks had become disenchanted with Jensen after he had delivered only two hits in his first 19 plate appearances of the 1952 campaign, but he would later consider the trade to be the worst one the Yankees made during his tenure with the club. As Jensen brought hope to a previously woeful club, Noren contributed relatively meager statistics to the Yankee's cause. Upton never appeared in a major-league game wearing the famous pinstripes.

Bucky Harris, the Senators' skipper, was more than pleased to insert the 25-year-old Jensen into the third spot in his batting order and place him in right field defensively. Immediate dividends were realized as Jensen hit .286 with 10 home runs and 80 RBIs.

Furthermore, Stengel came to a quick realization that he and his organization had acted prematurely in dismissing Jensen and selected him as a reserve outfielder on the American League's All-Star team.

Although Jensen continued to produce offensively in 1953 with a batting average of .266 and 10 more round-trippers, at least two personal issues were affecting his general state of mind. He was continually bothered by the demands and commitments associated with being a major-league baseball player, and he found it almost impossible to overcome a fear of flying in airplanes. So despite the accolades that he was receiving for his athletic performance, he was by no means a happy or satisfied man.

When the Senators traded Jensen to the Red Sox on Dec. 9, 1953, the ballplayer was forced to make a decision regarding his future career path: Would he continue to play baseball or pursue another occupation? Joe Cronin, the general manager of the Red Sox, convinced Jensen he would be even more successful in Boston than he had been with Washington (primarily because Fenway Park's dimensions were much more favorable for right-handed hitters than Griffith Stadium). Cronin's lobbying, paired with an offer of a salary increase persuaded the outfielder to join the Bosox.

The folks in New England were happy, and for good reason. In seven seasons from 1954 until his eventual retirement from baseball in 1961, Jensen tagged 170 homers and drove in 733 runs. He led the American League in RBIs three times (in 1955, 1958, and 1959). In 1958, he was named the American League's Most Valuable Player by the Baseball Writers' Association of America and American League Player of the Year by The Sporting News. A superb fielder, he received a Gold Glove Award as a right fielder in 1959.

So while there is no doubt that the trade turned out splendidly for the Red Sox, how did it affect the Senators' franchise? Washington did receive outfielder Tom Umphlett and left-handed pitcher Mickey McDermott in the deal, but neither came close to matching Jensen's contributions. The performance of Umphlett was particularly disappointing. Projected to be Jensen's replacement in right field in 1954, he posted an unimpressive batting average of .219 with one home run and 33 RBIs in 114 games. After registering similar numbers in 1955, his major-league career was essentially over.

McDermott proved to be more valuable to the Senators than Umphlett in 1954, winning seven of 22 decisions with an earned run average of 3.44. He would win 10 games (and lose 10) in 1955 as his ERA increased slightly to 3.75. Then, in early February of 1956, he was shipped to the Yankees in a multi-player trade.

A comparison of team statistics from the 1953 and 1954 seasons reveals reasons for the steep downturn in the Senators' fortunes. Run production dropped from 687 in 1953 to 632 in 1954, while the number of runs scored by opponents increased from 614 to 680. But other numbers obviously linked to Jensen's absence from the 1954 club are every bit as interesting. The cumulative batting average of all Washington players fell from .263 to .246, the team's cumulative on-base percentage decreased from .343 to .325, and the club's OPS took a dive from .711 in 1953 to .680 in 1954.

Two prominent sportswriters of the era can be credited with accurately forecasting the rise and fall of the Senators. Shirley Povich of the Washington Post wrote optimistically in the spring of 1953 that "with Jensen in right, Jim Busby in center and Gil Coan in left field, the Senators will have at least the three fastest outfielders in the league."

But by early 1954, Dan Daniel of the New York World-Telegram was observing that "Jensen is missed badly, and without him Bucky Harris has a weaker run-making machine." Looking back decades later, one must wonder how much better the Senators would have fared in 1954 if their outfield had consisted of Roy Sievers (who was obtained from the Baltimore Orioles and hit 24 homers and drove in 102 runs for Washington), Busby (who hit .298), and Jensen (who slammed 25 home runs and knocked across 117 runs for Boston). A team with that combination would have surely emerged victorious in more than 66 games, the meager total reached with Umphlett and a short list of reserves patrolling right field.

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

This is the 15th 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 #43 – Good teams tend to win the close games

The truth is actually the opposite, and the falsehood of this myth has been demonstrated several times. As an example, the Hirdt brothers' work in the 1986 Baseball Analyst, based on 9,381 National League games played between 1975 and 1984, determined that first place teams won 54.7% of one-run games, 57.3% of two and three run games, and 63.8% of games decided by four or more runs. The corresponding figures for last place teams were 43.6%, 40.4%, and 38.4%. The fact that good teams tend to win, and poor teams tend to lose, by multiple runs is at the basis of Bill James' Pythagorean Equation, the most well known of the available formulas for predicting team winning averages based on run differentials.

Here is the simple version of the formula:  $(\text{team runs scored})^2$  divided by  $(\text{team runs scored})^2 + (\text{team runs allowed})^2$

The presence of the squared terms accentuates the impact of blow-outs and is the reason why this formula works as well as it does. Incidentally, an exponent in the mid 1.8's performs better; 1.83 has

been a popular replacement for the 2.

Having said this, teams that do particularly well (or badly) in one-run games tend to outperform (underperform) their Pythagorean prediction in a given season. Much of this discrepancy is due to dumb luck, such as randomly good/bad performance in batting with runners in scoring position or high leverage situations.

However, James in his 1983 Baseball Abstract noted some year-to-year consistency in team over- or under-performance. Several hypothesized reasons for this exist; the most reasonable of these in my opinion is the presence of a particularly good or bad bullpen.

Myth #44 – Double headers tend to be split more often than chance would predict

This myth has no support; if anything it appears that they are swept more often than expected. Back in 1969, based on the 1964 season, Goodman noted a greater-than-chance tendency for double headers to be swept rather than split, and a greater-than-chance for double headers to be swept rather than games between the same two teams on consecutive days.

However, the analysis was poor; using just one season provides too small a sample size, and the relative strength of teams was ignored. Extending the analysis to 13 seasons (2002-2014), Gallup and Eldakar (2014) discovered that there were more sweeps (55.25%) and fewer splits (remaining 44.75%) than chance would allow for. They also found that the team record was not related to this effect, but that home field advantage was; 59.22% of sweeps were by the home team. Also, the margin of victory in one game had no impact on who won the second. In summary, home field advantage appears to result in double headers being disproportionately swept.

Myth 45# - Faster players are more likely than slower players to reach base on errors

Early work suggested that this myth might be true. Cliff Blau and Tom Ruane both noted that batters who reach base due to errors tend to be faster (causing the fielder to hurry and perhaps get careless). They also posited that ground ball hitters (grounders result in more errors than flies), and right-handed hitters (more errors on grounders to the left side of the infield, probably due to the longer and more hurried throw) tended to reach on errors more often.

In 1998, Dan Levitt found Bill James's Speed Score measure to correlate at a fairly substantial 0.42 with opposition errors, with the five fastest teams forcing an average of 134 opposition errors whereas the five slowest teams forcing an average of 113. Further, speed led to additional runs; Speed Score correlated 0.26 with unearned runs, and 0.27 with a measure reflecting the extent to which teams score more runs than the Runs Created formula would predict.

However, in Dan Levitt's 2000 work using individual level data from 1980 Retrosheet files, Speed Scores correlated only .14 with percentage of times reaching base on error per opportunity to do so. Further, this relationship appeared to be an artifact of the number of ground balls hit, given that faster runners are more likely to hit ground balls (Speed Score and percentage of batted balls that are grounders were correlated .3).

The upshot is that Speed Scores only correlated .04 with times reached base on errors as a percentage of ground balls. In other words, faster runners did not reach base on errors more often because they are fast, but rather because they hit more grounders, which lead to more errors than flies.

James Click (2004) concocted a quick-and-dirty measure of speed, stolen bases plus (triples divided by [doubles plus triples]), and found it to correlate at only 0.10 with times reaching on error for players with at least 500 plate appearances between 2000 and June 2004. In summary, there is no good support for this myth.

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### **FIRST IN WAR, FIRST IN PEACE, LAST IN STEALS: The Slow-Footed 1957 Senators, By Andrew Sharp**

For a variety of reasons, stolen-base attempts have ticked up this season after several years of decline. Restrictions on the positioning of infielders could take effect next season, with the intent of producing more base hits, which could increase the importance of successful stolen-base attempts. So it's not likely steals will ever again drop to the level seen in the 1950s.

Since 1901, 11 teams have failed to steal even 20 bases in a season. The lowest total ever, including the 60-game 2020 season, was 13 by the 1957 Washington Senators.

In just 51 attempts all season, those Nats were thrown out 38 times trying to steal. Either the opposing catchers were especially good, or the Senators were lacking in speed and/or managerial daring. Given that Washington fired manager Chuck Dressen after a 5-16 start and eventually lost 99 games, you can safely draw your own conclusion.

This futility on the bases and last-place finish was quite a comedown from the franchise that at that point had the A.L.'s second-highest total ever, set in the dead-ball era, with 287 steals in a single season. (New York stole 288 bases in 1910.)

The 1950s were the nadir in the history of stolen bases in the major leagues. The percentage of steals per game has been less than 0.3 only six times since 1901, five of those between 1950 and 1956. The other time was 1949. A May 14, 2022, New York Times article contrasted those numbers with the 1987 average of 0.85 steals per game and the percentage of the last four seasons – just under 0.5 per game.

So it's not at all surprising that 10 of the lowest 21 team totals come from the 1950s. Add 1949 and 1960, and the total is 12 of 21. The 1958 Senators' team stole just 22 bases -- tied for the 15th lowest total. That team also finished last. So did the 1960 Kansas City Athletics, second with the fewest steals after the Nats with 16.

Yet a near-record low total did not automatically doom a team in the standings. Playing 162 games, the 1972 Tigers stole just 17 bases, tied for the third worst all time, but still won the A.L. East title. The 1949 St. Louis Cardinals just missed the N.L. pennant, winning 96 times and finishing a game behind the Dodgers. Like the Tigers, those Cards stole 17 bases -- in just 30 attempts. (The Dodgers, in contrast, led the league with 117 steals, 69 more than any other team.)

The 1953 Cardinals won 83 games and finished in third place. They made just 40 steal attempts, making it safely 18 times, tied for sixth lowest. (The 1949 and the 1953 Cards had different managers.) The 1934 Yankees had just 19 stolen bases, but won 94 games, finishing second. The '53 Browns, in their final season, lost 100 and finished last. They also had just 17 steals.

Although annual totals fluctuated a bit, the trend on steals was down through the 1930s, '40s and '50s.

The 2007 SABR Baseball List and Record Book shows all the teams with 25 or fewer stolen bases in a season. The first two didn't happen until 1931.

A paucity of hitting in the mid- and late 1960s could be a factor in the resurgence of stolen base totals then. Lou Brock's success and that of the Oakland A's in general surely contributed to the 1970s' upward trends that continued through the '80s, with Rickey Henderson and Vince Coleman leading the way.

Ty Cobb's 1915 dead-ball era record of 96 steals stood until 1962 when Maury Wills stole 104 bases for the Dodgers. Brock topped Wills with 118 in 1974. Henderson's record of 130 in 1984 still stands, Cobb's 1915 mark has been topped nine times now, but not since 1987.

Washington's 287 steals in 1913 wasn't topped for six decades. Led by Clyde Milan's 75 and Danny Moeller's 62, that team finished second with 90 wins. The 1976 Athletics stole a record 341, and finished second in the west with 87 wins. Bill North (75), Bert Campaneris (54), and slugger Don Baylor (52!), led the way. Soon after, Henderson arrived.

The '50s Senators never had a major stolen base threat, but they did have two players with the worst success rates among those with 10 or more attempts: Pete Runnels was 0 for 10 in 1952, and Eddie Yost was safe just once in 11 attempts in 1957. Determining the optimum time to attempt a steal, if at all, is far less random now than it was then.

Chuck Hinton of the expansion Senators could steal. He had 28 stolen bases in 1962, finishing second to the perennial leader from that era, Luis Aparicio, who had 31. Hinton had 22 steals as a rookie in 1961 and 25 more in 1963, again finishing second behind Aparicio's 40. Aparicio led the league in steals for nine consecutive seasons. The first three times were emblematic of the era: His totals were 21 in 1956, 28 in '57 and 29 in '58. Yet the lowest total in each league for an individual leader in steals – 16 by Stan Hack in the N.L. in 1938 and 15 in the A.L. by Dom DiMaggio in 1950 – likely will be more than the 1957 Senators paltry team total for years to come.

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## **ICONS CAST IN BRONZE BY BETHESDA BIG TRAIN, By Mark Pattison**

The second in the Bob Davids Chapter's "Summer of Baseball" outings involved a June 18 Bethesda Big Train game in the Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League – but SABR members quickly came to the conclusion that it's much more than a game.

The Big Train, which gets its nickname from Washington Senators great Walter Johnson's own sobriquet, plays its home games at Shirley Povich Field. The team commissioned Maryland resident Toby Mendez to commission a sculpture featuring the two namesakes, "Shirley & Walter."

Mendez who has his studio in Knoxville, Md., between Frederick and Hagerstown, entertained both the SABR group and the Bethesda Historical Society with tales of "Shirley & Walter" and other sculptures he's made.

As for the Bethesda work, Mendez didn't offer too much in the way of angst either on his part or that of the Big Train. The biggest issue, it seems, was when to place the sculpture's two subjects. The choice

was 1926. Johnson was in the twilight of a 21-year career with the Senators, having appeared in the previous two World Series, while Povich was getting “more settled,” as Mendez put it, as a sportswriter for the Washington Post.

Mendez takes great care in preparing prior to even crafting the first clay replica, looking at period photos of his subjects. “For 1926,” he said, “I had to make sure I had the right number of buttons on his (Johnson’s) uniform.”

His other baseball works include “The Teammates” at Fenway Park in Boston, and “Heroes of Birdland” at Camden Yards in Baltimore.

“The Teammates” had its genesis with the photo used on the cover of the paperback edition of David Halberstam’s book of the same name. Pictured are Ted Williams, Johnny Pesky, Bobby Doerr and Dom DiMaggio, four of the Crimson Hose’s pivotal players in the 1940s. What Mendez found in his research was that there was a fifth player in the shot: “(Rudy) York was in that photo,” he said, “but they Photoshopped him out.”

Bosox then-president Larry Lucchino asked Mendez how long it would take to produce “The Teammates.” He replied. “Sitting, a year. Standing, a year and a half.”

Lucchino was clearly unhappy. “That’s not good enough. These guys aren’t going to live long enough to see this.” “The Teammates” was unveiled in 2010; Dom DiMaggio died in 2009, and Terrible Ted was long dead, but Pesky and Doerr lived to see their likenesses in bronze. Yet it was Lucchino, Mendez reported, who was first to pose for a photo with the sculpture.

Mendez was commissioned by the O’s to do “Heroes of Birdland,” and there were struggles nearly from the get-go. There was great fear that Brooks Robinson wouldn’t like his sculpture, especially with Mendez having to back up the truck in Robinson’s driveway in the rain to keep the clay facsimile dry. What the sculptor dreaded would be a perfunctory 20-minute talk with Robinson turned out to be a two-hour chat.

The late Frank Robinson’s sculpture had its own difficulties. F. Robby’s daughter kept saying that it didn’t look right – not like her father. But Mendez remembered that his daughter was even younger than he was; she was a couple of years old when her dad won the Triple Crown in 1966. The Hall of Famer, dismissed by the Cincinnati Reds as “an old 30” when he was traded to Baltimore, “still had baby fat on his cheeks” that season, Mendez said. He did add more musculature to Robinson’s forearms, though; “you’ve got to have your guns,” he noted.

Orioles owner Peter Angelos wanted the sculptures just right. “He’d order changes, then the next week, he couldn’t remember what changes he’d wanted, so he’d order changes back to the way it was,” Mendez said. A long talk with Angelos produced a review by a third party: Jim Palmer, who wasn’t aware of the commissioning (which would include his own likeness) but also could not keep a secret. Palmer made some suggestions that Mendez gladly accepted – and kept mum.

Mendez also did a casting of Nolan Ryan – the hard way. He’d asked Ryan to meet him so the sculptor could take about 100 different measurements to ensure the accuracy of the finished work. Mendez also asked Ryan to come in a uniform but the pitcher demurred. “He said he’d given away all his uniforms for charity auctions, and any spare uniforms were hundreds of miles away.

Mendez said Ryan ultimately came clean: “He said he’d put on 10-15 pounds after he retired, and he didn’t fit into his uniforms any more.” A compromise was brokered.

As for the game, the Big Train, sitting in first place in the league (so what else is new?), trounced the Gaithersburg Giants 12-0. There’s a new “mercy rule” in the Ripken League that allows for an immediate end to a game once there’s a 12-run lead. That happened in the bottom of the eighth with a two-run single. But horrible defense and pitching is what really did in the Giants.

With two out and the bases loaded in the first inning, the Gaithersburg left fielder wandered all over before letting an easy fly ball drop well to his right to clear the sacks. In the Bethesda sixth inning, two runs scored on a single, true, but two other runs scored (after the first three batters were walked to load the bases) on an error by the shortstop, who muffed a grounder while trying to stay away from the second baseman, who was also pursuing the ball. One run scored on a wild pitch, and another scored on a balk – one of two in the inning. On game day, it should be noted, Gaithersburg was in second place in the league.

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**TRIVIA ANSWER:** Howard stole bases against pitcher Clyde Wright and catcher Tom Satriano of California (1966); Lew Krausse and Phil Roof of Oakland (1969); Wally Bunker and Ellie Rodriguez of Kansas City (1970); and Mike Nagy and Duane Josephson of Boston (1971).