

# THE SQUIBBER

## May 2022

The Squibber is the SABR 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:** Who is the only two Washington player since 1900 to hit 20 triples in a season? (See answer below).

### **A SUMMER OF BASEBALL: Upcoming Bob Davids Chapter Outings** **By Mark Pattison**

After two years of a pandemic, false starts and intentionally empty seats, we are more than ready to see some games this year. So save these dates. You'll be glad you did.

Saturday, May 28: The chapter's first-ever outing to see the Fredericksburg Nationals. It's the Memorial Day weekend, the unofficial start to summer to most people, but the start of our Summer of Baseball. It's a 6:05 first pitch against the Salem Red Sox. The gates will open at 5 p.m. We'll get a buffet dinner and a chance for us to work the manually operated scoreboard at the end of each half-inning. The cost for all this is just \$40.

Saturday, June 18: It's SABR Night at the Bethesda Big Train at Shirley Povich Field. We start with a bit of dinner at 5:30 p.m., with first pitch at 7:05. In between, we're aiming to hear from sculptor Toby Mendez, who's done sculptures of Shirley Povich and Walter Johnson (he also did the Orioles at Camden Yards). Big Train officials (headed by chapter member Bruce Adams) are also trying to secure Hank Thomas, Johnson's grandson, and retired Washington Post sports editor George Solomon, who worked with Povich. And if we can't get any of them, did I tell you it's also craft beer night at the ballpark? The opponent will be the Gaithersburg Giants.

Saturday, July 16: Batter up! We're heading to Nationals Park to see the hometown heroes do battle

with defending World Series champion Atlanta. First pitch is 4:05 p.m., so you may well be home before the street lights go on. There won't be any suite or speakers as with Nats games in the 2000s and '10s. But we're getting seats in the shady part of the stadium.

Oh, and don't forget the long-delayed SABR convention Aug. 17-21 in Baltimore.

### **TALKIN' BASEBALL: Upcoming Speakers Announced** **By Pete Cottrell**

Here is the speaker schedule for the upcoming meetings of the "Talkin' Baseball" group:

June 4 -- Larry Baldassaro, "Tony Lazzeri: Yankees Legend and Baseball Pioneer."

July 9 -- Bill Nowlin, "'The Kid' Blasts a Winner: Ted Williams' 110 Game-Deciding Home Runs"

The Talkin' Baseball group meets via Zoom, usually on the first Saturday of each month at 9 a.m. Check your email for updates and login instructions.

### **ENJOY A VISIT TO POVICH FIELD, By Bill Hickman**

Another season will be starting for the Bethesda Big Train on June 7. As many of you know, the Big Train is a summer collegiate team that plays in the Cal Ripken Collegiate Baseball League. Traditionally, the team performs excellently, and over 40 percent of its players have gone on to play professional baseball once they've left college.

This spring, there were 19 Big Train alumni playing in spring training games with big league teams. There are five Big Train alums playing on major league teams now that the season has started. Bill Murphy, who is the co-pitching coach of the Houston Astros, is also a Big Train alum.

The Big Train's home ballpark is Shirley Povich Field, located in Cabin John Park, just a few blocks from Westfield Montgomery Mall. It's a comfortable ballpark with special features like an entrance designed to look like the entrance to Doubleday Field in Cooperstown. It has all the accommodations of a minor league game, like food and drink, and it makes for an inexpensive evening.

A special feature has been added to Povich Field since last season. There is a sculpture of renowned sports writer Shirley Povich interviewing the great pitcher Walter Johnson, for whom the team Big Train is named.

The sculptor for this piece was Toby Mendez, who created the magnificent sculptures of the Oriole greats at Camden Yards: Frank Robinson, Brooks Robinson, Earl Weaver, Jim Palmer, Eddie Murray and Cal Ripken.

At the Big Train game on June 18, there will be a special Bob Davids SABR Chapter event, and you'll have a chance to meet Mendez, who will be the special guest that night. The charge will be \$25, and Pete Cottrell will be providing instructions for registering for this event. There will also be a T-shirt give-away featuring the sculpture.

The full schedule of Big Train games is at: <https://www.bigtrain.org/schedule/schedule/>  
You'll find the process for acquiring tickets at: <https://www.bigtrain.org/tickets/single/>

### **HANSEN'S RARE FEAT: Shortstop Tripled Up the Tribe in 1968, By Andrew Sharp**

More than half a century has passed since a player for the Washington Senators accomplished one of the rarest feats in the game: an unassisted triple play. It happened on July 30, 1968, a blowout loss for Washington during a season in which the Senators became the last American League team to finish in 10th place.

In the bottom of the first inning at Cleveland, Senators' shortstop Ron Hansen snared a liner off the bat of Joe Azcue. On a 3-2 pitch, the two base runners -- Dave Nelson, who had singled, and Russ Snyder, who had walked, were in motion. After catching Azcue's liner, Hansen stepped on second to double off Nelson and tagged Snyder, who already had reached second base. This kept Cleveland off the board in the first, but the Indians put up six runs in the fifth to turn a one-run game into a rout, eventually winning 10-1.

The Senators' only run came on Frank Howard's homer off Sam McDowell in the second. Later in the game, Hansen was charged with an error. Hansen's unassisted triple play was the eighth ever (one occurred in the 1920 World Series) and the first in either league in 41 years. The last two had come on consecutive days, May 30 and 31, 1927. Like every unassisted triple play before and after, this one involved a liner to an infielder with runners on first and second moving on the pitch.

After Hansen's, it would be another 24 years until the next unassisted triple play. There were two unassisted triple plays in the 1990s and five more since 2000, the last coming in August 2009, the 15th ever since the first was turned 100 years before. So we're now into a 13th straight season without one.

From June 1, 1927, until September 19, 1992 -- nearly 66 seasons -- Hansen's was the only unassisted triple play in the A.L. and N.L. Hansen was one of eight shortstops to get three outs on a batted ball. Five second basemen and two first basemen have done it. More pitchers have thrown perfect games than fielders have made unassisted triple plays.

Three days later, on Aug. 2, Hansen was traded back to the White Sox, from whom Washington had acquired him in the previous off-season. The Senators sent Tim Cullen to Chicago as part of the deal to get Hansen and then got Cullen back in exchange for Hansen.

Hansen also is the answer to a Washington baseball trivia question: Who was the one person who played in the last game of the original Senators and the last game of the expansion Senators? Hansen played for Baltimore at Griffith Stadium on Oct. 2, 1960, and for New York at RFK Stadium on September 30, 1971.

## **ROY'S SIMPLE FORMULA: Batting Tips from a Different Era, By Francis Kinlaw**

The March 31, 1958 edition of *Sports Illustrated* magazine featured a cover story that provided several pages of batting tips from Washington Senators slugger Roy Sievers.

At the time of the article's publication, Sievers was in spring training after having recorded very impressive offensive statistics (42 home runs, 114 runs batted in and a batting average of .301) in 1957. Sievers' comments in the article entitled "Big League Secrets" served as a gold mine of information for developing players, and his points were supplemented by several wonderful illustrations by artist Robert Riger.

(Other articles of similar quality appearing in *Sports Illustrated* in the spring of 1958 featured Sal Maglie on pitching, Del Crandall on catching, Gil McDougald on playing the infield, and Richie Ashburn on outfield play and baserunning.)

Aside from Sievers' tips themselves, readers who have been inundated in recent years with information about launch angles, exit velocity, and TrackMan will find his rules for hitting a baseball to be refreshingly simple. In paraphrased form, they are the following:

Become familiar with the pitching habits of opposing pitchers and with the pitches they can throw. Study when they like to throw certain pitches, and how they like to pitch to you.

Know the strike zone. Know it instinctively so that you can tell whether a pitch will be called a ball or a strike before the umpire makes his decision.

Go to the plate to hit, not to wait around. Swing at good pitches.

Keep your eye on the ball at all times. Focus on it when it is in the pitcher's hand, as it leaves his hand, as it comes to the plate, and even as it hits your bat. (Sievers admitted that it would be difficult to see the ball actually hit the bat.)

Don't try to swing hard. Keep your swing smooth. Keep your body level. Don't dip your rear shoulder. Don't lunge.

Wait as long as you can before swinging.

Keep your bat back but ready to swing on every pitch, even if the pitch seems to be outside the strike zone.

Many fans will agree that the third rule (going to the plate to hit (and not to wait around) is regularly violated in the modern era. And, of course, Sievers' fifth suggestion (that batters swing in a controlled manner) went out of style for power hitters decades ago.

These comments by a successful slugger were widely accepted in 1958, but they now serve primarily as one more bit of evidence that the game of baseball---and the manner in which it is played---has evolved drastically since then.

## **BUCKY'S BEST? Harris Rated 1930 Senators Higher than his Pennant Winners**

**By Gary Sarnoff**

On June 4, 1930, the surprising Washington Senators beat Bucky Harris' Tigers at Detroit for the second straight day. A team that finished 10 games under .500 in 1929 and were picked to finish seventh in 1930, the Senators were now 29-15, one game behind the first-place Athletics, and were playing well enough under second-year Manager Walter Johnson to convince everyone that they were for real, including Philadelphia Athletics manager Connie Mack.

Back in April, when the Senators were in the process of sweeping a three-game series from the Athletics, Mack congratulated a member of the Senators' front office "on their probable pennant." Somebody else who was a believer was the manager of the pennant-winning 1924 and 1925 Senators, Bucky Harris, who claimed that Johnson's Senators were better than the teams he had managed in Washington "The pitching is better than my staff of slipping veterans and fair youngsters," Harris claimed.

The catchers on the 1930 team roster, Muddy Ruel and Bennie Tate, were the same backstops Harris had in the mid-1920's, and the 1930 team also had another catcher, Roy Spencer. When making a comparison, Harris said the 1930 catchers were better. "Ruel hasn't slipped, Tate is impressive and Spencer looks like he will be a first-class catcher," said Harris.

"Joe Judge and Ossie Bluege (starting first baseman and third baseman for the 1930 team and 1924-25 teams) are just as good as they were back then. Buddy Myer is playing so well at second that a fellow named Bucky Harris, who was there in the good old days, doesn't seem to be missed. Joe Cronin is a first-class shortstop and a better hitter than (Roger) Peckinpaugh, but Peckinpaugh was an inspiration and a better fielder.

"The combination of Sam West and George Loepp (center fielders for the 1930 team) is better than Earl McNeely," Harris added. "I suspect (left fielder) Goose Goslin (who hit a disappointing .288 in 1929 and was hitting only .278 at the time) will bust loose and right fielder) Sam Rice is hot (hitting .404 and riding a 14-game hitting-streak)."

So, did all this mean that the 1930 Senators would win the pennant? "I don't mean to say that the Senators will win the pennant," answered Harris. "A pennant team needs breaks. Competition is better now. All clubs are better than in the mid-twenties."

**ROAD TRIP FROM HELL: A Snapshot of Men's Unlimited Semi-Pro Baseball in the Washington Area**  
**By Bob Schnebly**

On Thursday afternoon, late May 1992, we started a road trip. This was a road trip from Hell. From Northern Virginia through Maryland, Pennsylvania and New York my Diamond Baseball Club played 12 games in five days.

The first two games weren't far away. We played an afternoon game at Oakton High School and then a night game at Chantilly High School, both in western Fairfax County, Va..

The game at Oakton was against a skeleton crew from Apple Credit Union. For a team lacking some of its better players, they put up a good fight, but we won the game, 7-5. From there we moved over to Chantilly High School for a 7:30 game against a stacked Fairfax Furniture lineup. Fairfax was a legendary Men's Unlimited semi-pro team. We gave them a good show, but lost 6-5. Then out of town we drove.

We had between 25-30 people with Diamonds and assorted family and friends. After pulling out of the Chantilly parking lot at about 11:00 p.m. We made it to Hagerstown, Md. in about an hour and a half, pulled into our hotel and settled in for a short night.

Some of my ballplayers, not being used to the road, decided they would play poker all night. Along with poker comes alcohol. As a men's unlimited team, we had players that ranged in age from 18 to 35-plus. We had a 9 a.m. game in Chambersburg, Pa. the next morning, so rousing players at 6:00 for a 7:00 breakfast was not easy, but we finished up breakfast around 7:45 am and drove to Chambersburg.

Normally, I preferred more time for pre-game, but considering we had just finished two games the night before and having three games on Friday, we did the best we could to get ready for the Chambersburg Maroons.

I knew I had several guys who were hung over, so this was going to be a good start to their baseball education. It started with finding themselves not playing in the first game, possibly not playing in the second game, and running five miles at 8:30 in the morning. This was a lesson they would not soon forget.

Although we were down a few players (hung over), we took care of Chambersburg easily. The Maroons, formed in 1895, have a rich and storied history but were down on their luck in the early 1990s.

After this, we headed to Shippensburg, Pa. to play the Hometown Stars at 12:30 p.m. We won that game and moved on to Newville, Pa., where we played the Cardinals (est., 1939) at 4 p.m.

We lost the game to Newville, 7-6. Unfortunately, losing to the Cardinals became a way of life for a few years. We were the better team, but they had our number. After the game, all four teams (including my Diamond Baseball Club) gathered at Newville for a cookout. When the cookout ended, we hit the road for an all-night drive and an early morning check-in in Cooperstown, N.Y.

Three games were scheduled for that Saturday, all at Doubleday Field. We played the Milford Macs in two games at 9:00 and noon. We split the doubleheader, and then played a third game at Doubleday

versus a team from Rockland, Long Island. After winning that game, we settled in our hotel rooms. For once we were staying two days in one place.

That Sunday we split two games against the Macs in Milford, N.Y., just a short drive from Cooperstown.

Heading home on Monday, we stopped in Altoona, Pa. to play Liberty Road out of Randallstown, Md.. They beat the living daylights out of us in a doubleheader. We were exhausted and running short on pitching help.

After that the trip home was uneventful. We stopped in Hagerstown for dinner and proceeded to Falls Church High School in Northern Virginia, where we split up and went home for a decent night's sleep. Tuesday was an off day and then Wednesday we started the grind again with a night game at Chantilly High School.

In 10 seasons the Diamond Baseball Club of Northern Virginia, an Industrial Baseball League member, played 714 games, all between Memorial Day Weekend and Labor Day Weekend, 513 in the Industrial League and associated tournaments, plus 201 barnstorming games.

In 1992 and 1993 we played 204 games in 205 days (108 games in 1992 and 96 games in 1993). The Diamonds were mostly College Summer League players who wanted and needed a lot of exposure to scouts and games played.

In 1993, our Industrial All-Stars visited Cuba via the Swiss Embassy because the U.S. had no diplomatic relations with Cuba. While there we played in the "Third World Club Championships" and took home a bronze medal, defeating both the Cuban national championship team and the Cuban national team, the 1992 Olympic gold medal winner.

The games were played in Santiago de Cuba, Sept. 15 through Oct. 1, 1993. These games sadly flew under the radar of the American people because we lacked diplomatic relations, so no press coverage from the United States occurred.

(Editor's Note: Bob Schnebly is past president of the Industrial Baseball League (est. 1901). For additional information, contact him at: [robertschnebly7@gmail.com](mailto:robertschnebly7@gmail.com).)

## **MYTHS OF BASEBALL: True or False?**

**By Charles Pavitt**

This is the 14th 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 #40 – Outfield shifts are increasing along with infield shifts over time.**

Outfield shifting is not discussed nearly as much as infield shifts, but it has also increased, and its impact on the decrease in offense has probably been far more substantial than that for infield shifts.

Sports Information Services has considered a shift to be in place if the total distance across the outfielders adjusted for all of these factors was greater than 110 feet. As with infield shifts, the number appears to be rising, as Mark Simon (2019) from SIS reported 2,814 such shifts in 2018, which is 89 percent more than 2016.

In 2017, the average distances from home plate for left, center and right fielders were 296, 318, and 294 feet, respectively; the average angles from straight on were – 26.9, 0.2, and 27.0 degrees. On average, the outfielders as a group moved 40 feet from those positions.

They have also gotten deeper; comparing 2019 with 2015, seven feet so far for the corners and 12 feet so for center, the latter associated with an astounding 40-point drop-off in BABIP (batting average on balls in play).

This has not surprisingly been due to a sharp decrease in the proportion of longer fly balls becoming hits, more than compensating for the increase in the proportion for shorter flies (all this from posts by Rob Arthur on the Baseball Prospectus website).

In a presentation at the 2019 SABR Analytics Conference, Brian Reiff, also from SIS, made some good points about outfield positioning. First, it is easier to label a shift in the infield (three infielders on one side of second base) than the outfield. To define the latter, one must consider how many outfielders are shifting, where the “starting point” is from which the shift emanates, and having determined the latter, the distance both laterally and forward/back needed for it to count as a shift (keeping in mind among other issues batter handedness and ball park factors).

Overall, the further the movement from average, the worse the batter's performance; looking at their graph, OPS was at or above 750 for movement of 30 feet or less, dipped below 700 at 70 feet, below 600 at 90 feet, and was just over 500 for 120 feet.

Positioning was highly associated with extremity of batter spray angle tendencies; from Brian's diagram, the correlation looks to be around .8. There was, however, a limit, as batter performance crept up with what must be considered too extreme shifts.

### **Myth #41 – Starting pitchers lose their effectiveness the third time around the opposition batting order.**

This one is tricky, because the answer depends on how the evidence is analyzed. Most research implies that starters lose their effectiveness in an approximately linear fashion throughout most of the game.

As long ago as 2006, in *The Book* written with Tom Tango and Andrew Dolphin, Mitchel Lichtman, based on 1999-2002 data, uncovered opposition wOBAs of .345 the first, .354 the second, and .362 the third time through the order.

With a bigger data set (2000-2012), in 2013 Mitchel found it to be even more linear (.340, .350, and .359). At the 2021 SABR Analytics Conference, using 2010-2019 data, Adi Wyner examined it batter by batter, reporting that after a short “warm-up” phase, pitcher performance decrements began with the first time through the bottom third of the batting order and continued steadily thereafter.

Evidence presented by Mitchel suggested that its primary cause could be greater batter familiarity with the pitcher, as seeing more pitches on average resulted in a big jump in wOBA between the first and second time through (wOBAs of .340 to .365), but not from second to third (.365 to .361) as would be expected if fatigue were the major factor. It was larger for pitchers that primarily threw fastballs rather than those with more varied repertoires.

Dave Smith, in 1960-2005 data (from Retrosheet, of course) also noted it to be larger for away teams than for home teams, suggesting an impact from the effort involved in adjusting to a relatively unfamiliar ballpark.

However, Rob Mains has maintained, correctly in my view, that all of this research is suspect because it has been based on all starts, including those in which the starter was removed before the third time through the order. Starter removal before the third time is often due to relatively poor performance, and including it would result in, so to speak, comparing apples (the better outings) to apples plus oranges (every start; technically, this data analysis problem is called selection bias.) This would slant the analysis against the hypothesized effect, because pitchers lasting longer due to pitching better translates to worse batting performance in later innings.

Rob's work has generally supported the original third time through hypothesis. One of his web posts reported OPS figures for 2012 through 2020 (.762, .782, and .841) and, for replication from back when pitchers routinely went longer in games, for 1969 (.707, .717, and .817) and 1974 (.715, .707, and .779), with a diagram showing supportive evidence during the entire 1969-1976 period.

Phil Birnbaum, in turn, claimed that the impact truly is linear but that the absence of a decline the second time through in Rob's data is due to pitchers having good luck during that stretch of the game; those having bad luck and a particularly unsuccessful second time through would have not lasted until the third time. Rob (and I) are actually comfortable with that conclusion.

#### **Myth #42 – Catchers differ in their ability to “handle” pitchers.**

This is almost certainly true, but which measurable skills constitute “handling pitchers” as opposed to other skills is beyond murky. Until about 2010, all we could measure were the ability to throw out would-be base stealers and, to an extent, prevent them from trying in the first place, and the ability to block errant pitches. The rest was thrown together into “pitcher handling.”

By 2011, given the advent of PITCHf/x, we could competently measure pitch framing, and discovered that it was a far more important skill than pitch blocking and perhaps more important than preventing base stealing.

There is still work that could be construed as relevant to “pitcher handling.” For example, In 2018, Russell Carleton measured latency time between pitches (discounting pauses of more than a minute that were almost certainly due to a delay in the game) for 2015 through 2017 and determined that catchers differed fairly consistently in the variation in average delay.

The best were able to keep pitchers in a window of about 7 seconds between their slowest and fastest time between pitches, whereas the worst were only able to maintain them within about 11 seconds. Further, catchers better at this were associated with lower OBAs (about 10 points worth at the extremes), more strikeouts, fewer homers, and a few fewer walks. Harry Pavlidis claimed in a 2015 [espn.com](http://espn.com) web post to have concocted a measure for pitch-calling performance, and claimed that A. J. Ellis (the best) saved 38 runs this way between 2012 and 2014. As he said next to nothing about the details of his method, I have no further comment on this claim.

As each of these specific skills become measurable, the vague and unmeasurable idea of “handling pitchers” becomes less mysterious.

**TRIVIA ANSWER:** Who is the only Washington player since 1900 to hit 20 triples in a season? Goose Goslin, of the 1925 American League champion Senators, hit exactly 20 three-baggers.