

Select SABR-L Posts on Historical Topics

For a period of several years, principally around from 1998 to 2003, I was fairly active on SABR-L, the LISTSERV for the Society for American Baseball Research. Though dated, the research for my posts may still be of some general interest, so I have compiled many of them here. Most of these are as they appeared in the original posts. The edits consist mainly of removing names of other posters for confidentiality, fixing typos, and a comment here or there for context.

List of Posts

Ferdie Schupp - Lowest Single Season ERA
Yankees - A's Trades 1950s
Minor League Farming
Historical Fastball Speed
Segregation in Griffith Stadium (18 Feb 2010) Mid-1950s Bonus Rule
Baseball, Boxing and Football Popularity in 1927
1910 Chalmers Requirements
Jim Nasium
Early Baseball players in Pro Football
Reverse All-Stars
Macro Data on 3B
Re: 3b Again
3B & Power
Evolution of 3B cont.
Pre & Post Mathews 3B

Ferdie Schupp - Lowest Single Season ERA (23 Apr 2014)

It's good to see the discussion over Schupp's 1916 NL ERA title revived. Schupp was clearly and widely acknowledged as the leader at the time, a broad recognition that remained in place for many years thereafter (For example, in the 1943 Sporting News Baseball Guide and Record Book, Schupp was credited with the "Lowest Earned-Run Average, Season, Majors "). It was only post-WWII that his ERA title gradually faded from some of the record and reference books because (1) it was forgotten that the criteria was not 10 complete games when first introduced, and (2) there is something unsatisfying about a single-season record that fails to meet present-day minimum playing time requirements. And as the Sporting Life article quoted by Steve Hatcher several days ago shows, this sentiment existed in some corners at the time, but Schupp was nevertheless broadly credited with the title.

For those wanting to take a further look at the evidence and arguments, the PDF of my original article in the 1996 BRJ on page 3 can be found here:

<http://sabr.org/content/baseball-research-journal-archives>

And the 2005 TNP article where I more formally discuss the qualifications for the ERA title before (and after) the 10 complete game standard that was mistakenly retroactively applied after WWII is here:

<http://research.sabr.org/journals/pdfs-mp/592-the-national-pastime--25>

See p.82

Unfortunately, little of the evidence is in PDF form, but the NYT article on the ERA title from 1916 is here (one needs to scroll down a little to get to the article):

<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=F70E10FC39591A7A93CAAB178AD95F428185F9>

The Sporting News article on the ERA title can be found through Paper of Record in the November 30, 1916 issue on page 5.

As I've further researched Schupp for my long delayed bio for the BioProject, I have become even more convinced of Schupp's case. In addition to the record book credits outlined in the BRJ article, the baseball writers recognized his ERA title as well.

An article by John J. Ward in the August 1920 Baseball Magazine begins: "In 1916 a young Giant pitcher established a record which has never been equaled. In a season's work he held opposing clubs to less than one earned run per game."

An article in the February 1921 edition of Baseball Magazine by St. Louis Star sports editor James Gould reads, "Schupp, while a Giant, made the never-approached record of pitching a season and allowing less than one earned run per game." In the July 1938 edition he wrote, "Never before had such an earned-run average been compiled and, by the beard of all baseball prophets, never since!"

In May 1940 Robert Milne wrote in Baseball Magazine, "And that pitching performance [Schupp in 1916] created a baseball hurling record that has not been equaled to this day."

Post-WWII many sources (I assume mostly those that relied on the old record books as opposed to the retroactively credited titles in some others) continued to recognize Schupp as the leader. For example Jack Brickhouse's Latest Major League Baseball Records (1962 edition) credits Schupp with the lowest single season ERA. For another, Fawcett's Official Major League Record Book, 1973 Edition, sanctioned by Bowie Kuhn and issued by the commissioner's office lists Schupp as the record holder for the lowest single season ERA. In another instance, a syndicated UPI story from August 20, 1968 on Gibson's race for the record ERA, opened: "Ferdie Schupp might have a chance of escaping the wrath of Bob Gibson. Schupp was a little known pitcher who holds the major league record for the lowest earned run average compiled in the season with 0.90 for 140 innings in 1916."

By the beard of all baseball prophets, at some point I foresee Schupp once again receiving his due for the 1916 NL ERA title.

Yankees - A's Trades 1950s (2 Dec 2013)

I'm a little late to this discussion, but over the long weekend I took a shot at evaluating the Yankees - KC A's transactions from 1955 to 1959 by Wins Above Replacement (WAR) to see how one-sided they actually were.

As most of you know, WAR is a sabermetric measure now gaining more mainstream recognition that combines batting, base running, fielding and pitching statistics to estimate how many wins a player produced for his team above a "replacement player." For each player involved in a transaction, I calculated

the WAR he would earn over the balance of his career. Of course any time a career is reduced to one number all sorts of caveats apply, but it is probably the most reasonable value for comparing groups of players over time.

Obviously not all trades are made simply acquire more talent than one receives. Teams often try to rearrange the players they have or fill holes and often consciously trade more value than they receive. Nevertheless, using WAR at least gives some sense of the balance of the transactions.

Enough with the preamble. Overall the transactions were surprisingly even. KC purchased players from New York with 14 WAR remaining in their careers (Tom Gorman, purchased in 1955 had 5.3 left, and Bob Cerv purchased in 1956 had 9.1 left), while New York came out ahead in trades, 96 WAR to 81. Overall then, NY had a very slight WAR advantage of 96 to 95.

Here are the results of the most notable trades (I'm not listing all the players, only those with the most WAR):

1955	Dixon to NY: 0	Slaughter and Sain to KC: 5
1957	Boyer and Shantz to NY: 47	No one of note to KC: 3
1957	Duren and Simpson to NY: 7	Terry, Martin, and Held to KC: 32
1959	No one of note: 0	Snyder to KC: 5
1959	Terry and Lopez to NY: 14	Sturdivant and Lumpe to KC: 16
1959	Maris to NY: 32	Siebern and Larson to KC: 20

Note: The Yankees WAR in the above five trades totals more than 96 due to rounding and because several of their acquisitions in other trades had negative WAR.

Minor League Farming (6 Mar 2013)

While farming, the placing of players controlled by one club on another, was technically illegal at the time, teams continually tried to skirt the rule. One of the most common was the optional assignment, which became so abused that the National Commission ruled in 1907 that a player could not be optioned more than once and in 1908 that the repurchase price had to be at least \$300. By 1909 major league franchises reserved between 29 players (Washington) and 61 players (Brooklyn).

Historical Fastball Speed (8 Jun 2010)

The November 16, 1912 issue of Sporting Life reports on what it claims is the first accurate scientific test of pitcher velocity. At a distance of 25 feet Walter Johnson's pitch was measured to travel "at a rate of at least 125 feet per second and in many instances doubtless more." For those doing the math, that equates to about 85 mph.

I have no idea as to accuracy of the contraption used to measure the pitch speeds. The test was made in a gun factory, and according to the article the measuring device was designed to determine the speed of bullets from firearms. Here is the description for anyone wanting to build one in his backyard.

"Across a disc-shaped opening are stretched a number of lightly charged electric wires so fine that the breaking of them expends but an infinitesimally small portion of the velocity of the thrown base ball. Five

feet behind these wires is a steel plate, also charged. The ball is hurled into the opening. The exact time from the breaking of a wire until the background is hit is registered. By calculating the distance of five feet with the fractional second consumed in traversing it, the happy result is arrived at."

Without any particular knowledge of the precision of such a contraption, it would not surprise me if the wires had a larger impact on the velocity of a baseball than a bullet.

Segregation in Griffith Stadium (18 Feb 2010)

Based on Shirley Povich's column in the Washington Post (8/17/38), Griffith Stadium almost certainly suffered from de facto segregation, at least in the late 1930s.

"Incidentally, Manager Joe McCarthy of the Yankees did not distinguish himself as the possessor of any great judicial mind yesterday. He might have been wiser than to start Jake Powell in the Southernmost city in the league in the first game that Powell played since being suspended for disparaging remarks about the colored race in a radio interview. In Washington, unlike other league cities, colored fans are congregated chiefly in one sector of the park. They could have been expected to work up a fury against Powell. They did, too. Powell's return to the Yankees' line-up might easily have been delayed until the Yankees were in another park."

Mid-1950s Bonus Rule (9 Jun 2005)

In 1946 a first bonus rule was adopted amid some controversy. It lasted through a couple of revisions until 1950 when it was repealed.

At the 1952 meetings a new bonus rule was approved. This rule was the better remembered directive that set the bonus limit at \$4,000 or the player could be lost through the draft. This second bonus rule lasted until abolished at the 1957 winter meeting in Colorado Springs.

After some searching I found the following definition of this latter bonus rule in TSN 12/17/52:

"Under the rule adopted, a bonus player is any free agent with less than 90 days' professional experience, who signs for more than \$4,000 with a major league club (\$5,000 if the player is retained in the majors), \$4,000 by minor clubs higher than Class B and \$3,000 by B, C, and D. A bonus player in the minors must pass through a draft period before he can be transferred in any manner, except by outright release, and a major bonus player must be retained for two years, unless waivers area asked for his unconditional release. Such waivers are irrevocable."

Baseball, Boxing and Football Popularity in 1927 (17 Jan 2004)

In 1927 New York Evening Post sportswriter Francis Wallace wrote regarding the relative popularity of baseball, football and boxing: "The public finds baseball more and more entertaining but seeks boxing and football for the contact stuff. The national game has lost its vital thrill. Students of history may find some thing in that." Wallace believed much of this was due to the influx of more college players after around 1915 to 1920.

I have never heard this theory before and have a couple questions. It essentially makes two assumptions: (1) that the physical character of baseball had fundamentally changed, and (2) that this led to the popularity of the other sports. While I realize that the hooliganism had been driven out by 1927, I don't believe baseball was ever really popularized as a violent sport in the sense that the other two were. Even if so, it seems most of it was gone by 1905, and that the physical character didn't change materially between 1915 and 1927.

1910 Chalmers Requirements (29 Mar 2003)

On this forum we have often discussed both the optimal and actual requirements for the batting title. For those interested, I recently came across the at bat requirements for the 1910 Chalmers award in the Sporting News. The award recognized the player who finished 1910 with the highest batting average. He was to be rewarded with a \$1,500 automobile from the Chalmers Company; hence the name. This batting race led to the famous Cobb/Lajoie disputed finish.

An at bat minimum was set so that a "substitute" player could not lead the league in batting and win the award. This had been a problem in 1908 with Dode Criss "capturing the honors." That year Criss had played in 62 games, had 82 at bats, and hit .341, ahead of Cobb who hit .324 in 581 at bats. The Chalmers Company and the league obviously wished to avoid any subjective resolution at the end of the year. [A problem they ended up with anyway due to the Cobb/Lajoie controversy]

Anyway, the article outlined the at bat requirements as follows.

1. Outfielders and infielders: 350 at bats
2. Catchers: 100 at bats
3. Pitchers: 250 at bats

I believe the Catcher and Pitcher values must be reversed. This suspicion is both from common sense and because the article later refers to catcher Ted Easterly being on track for the necessary 250 at bats.

Jim Nasium (25 Mar 2001)

Several months ago someone asked about the identity of an early twentieth century sportswriter who signed his name "Jim Nasium". My recollection is that this question was never specifically answered.

While doing some research the other day, I came across a reference to him. Jim Nasium is Ed Wolfe and described as a baseball writer and cartoonist. I think he was based in Philadelphia.

Early Baseball players in Pro Football (28 Nov 1999)

After the 1902 baseball season, in one of the first instances of regular meetings between professional football teams, the three Pennsylvania major league baseball teams sponsored professional football teams. These teams played each other along with other area professional clubs. Connie Mack and Tom Shibe, Ben's son, owned the Athletic club and competed mainly to take advantage of Rube Waddell's popularity. The

team went 11-2-1, but disbanded after the season after losing \$4,000 and Waddell deciding he didn't like being pummeled as a football player. The Pittsburgh team was owned jointly by William Temple and Barney Dreyfus; at least once against the Athletics, Christy Mathewson played fullback.

Reverse All-Stars (5 Sep 1998)

Regarding reverse All-Stars, Rabbit Maranville's 1933 season came up. The nomination of Rabbit Maranville's 1933 season as the worst this century by a 2b opens a facinating debate because the MVP voters that year clearly saw something not in his meager statistics (.218/0/38).

In 1933 both The Sporting News and the BBWAA had MVP awards. In the BBWAA voting Maranville finished tied for 12th with 11 points. In the TSN balloting Maranville finished 17th with 5 points. In both he out polled Frankie Frisch (.303/4/66), Arky Vaughn (.314/9/97 plus a league leading 19 triples and a second place Pirate finish), Ducky Medwick (.306/18/98), and Paul Waner (.309/7/70).

Macro Data on 3B (19 May 1998)

For anyone not yet completely bored with this thread I thought I'd add some macro data on NL homeruns. Remember 1952 is Eddie Mathews' rookie year.

Homeruns/At Bat:

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Pos          33-46          47-52  
1B           .021             .026  
2B           .008             .014  
--  
3B           .011             .026  
--  
C            .015             .027  
OF           .018             .028  
SS           .008             .014
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Homeruns increased everywhere in the late 40's, but nowhere as much as third base. And this was pre-Mathews impact.

Re: 3b Again (19 May 1998)

I hate to beat this into the ground again, but my point was clearly missed. I am NOT arguing that 3B power did not increase dramatically in the late 40's and 50's. It did. I am arguing that I can't see Eddie Mathews as the cause due to the timing. I'd argue, based on the _statistics_, that the sequence below is more logical.

As my last post indicated, in the late 1940's power became a much more important element of the National League game. One of the places to try and place additional power was third base. The data supports this shift well before Mathews.

During the twentieth century up to 1943 only four NL third basemen hit more than 15 HRs in a season. It was accomplished a total of five times, Ott while playing third was the lone repeater.

From 1945 to 1952 (Mathews rookie year), however, before the effect of Mathews could have been felt, 12 different NL players hit over 15 HRs as third basemen a total of 21 times. Mathews was clearly the best of this group, but that does not make him the catalyst. An effect cannot occur before its cause.

I think this debate cannot be settled definitively by statistics alone. I was not alive in the late 40's/ early 50's and have no subjective knowledge one way or another on the impact of Mathews.

3B & Power (17 May 1998)

As I commented previously [that third base was in a transitional, increasing power stage] seems much more a phenomenon of a general increase in homeruns in the late 40's and early 50's in the National League in general than anything particular to third basemen.

Over the 14 years from 1933 to 1946 only *2* players in the NL exceeded 35 HRs in a season, each accomplishing this feat once (and one of the two was Ott in 1938 who played third that year). Over the 8 years 1947 to 1954, *11* players exceeded 35 HRs in a season a total of *24* times.

Rather than just a dearth of power at third in those 14 years in the NL, the lack of power was everywhere:

- In 1935 only two players exceeded 30 HRs.
- In 1936 only one player exceeded 30 HRs and a total of four exceeded 20.
- In 1937 only two players exceeded 30 HRs.
- In 1938 only one player exceeded 30 HRs.
- In 1939 no player exceeded 30 HRs.
- Over the four war years no player other than Bill Nicholson in 1944 hit more than 30 HRs in a season.
- In 1946 Ralph Kiner led the league with *23*.

For a number of reasons, homeruns increased dramatically in the NL in the late 40's, and this was not specific to third basemen. Any player, regardless of position, with even modest power for the 60's would be viewed as par if judged by the power standards of the mid/late 30's through the end of WWII.

Evolution of 3B cont. (14 Jan 1998)

Two additional points.

1. Rather than Eddie Mathews being the catalyst of a trend toward power hitting third basemen, he seems to be the culmination of the trend which started a number of years earlier.

It required a number of years after the home run became an essential part of the offense for teams to realize they could get power at third base. However, it was during the late thirties, starting with Ken Keltner and Harlond Clift and continuing after the war with Whitey Kurowski, Bob Elliot, Willie Jones and Al Rosen that this recognition occurred, not 1952 when Eddie Mathews broke in.

In the 17 years from the start of the lively ball era to 1936 I count only *2* times that a third baseman hit more than 20 HRs in a season. In the 15 years from 1937 to 1951, however, by my count, third basemen hit over 20 HRs in a season *21* times.

Additional evidence: the following NL homerun totals for starting first and third basemen prior to Mathews indicate third was already in the process of becoming a power position.

Year	1B	3B
1948	113	104
1949	83	97
1950	128	117
Total	324	318

Finally, the very fact that players like Sid Gordon and Bobby Thomson were moved back to third base (the position they played in the minors) in the late forties suggests that the Pie Traynor, slick fielding, high batting average third baseman model was already changing.

2. One poster suggested that "pre-Mathews there were two basic types of third Baseman, the 'slow shortstop' and the converted outfielder, of whom the 'slow shortstops' were the majority, and were primarily in the lineup for their defensive ability."

As regards the converted outfielder, I would argue the exact opposite. It is only since WWII as 3B became a "power" position, that teams have constantly attempted to convert a slugging outfielder to third base to achieve power from that position. From the time the defensive requirements of various positions crystallized (around 1900-1910) until WWII, I can find little evidence of many teams trying to convert an OF to 3B other than Mel Ott.

On the other hand, the previous posts on this topic enumerate the many attempted--usually unsuccessful--conversions to third base post Mathews. Some of the better known cases include, in no particular order: Dick Allen, Jim Ray Hart, Don Demeter, Dave Kingman, Frank Thomas, Pedro Guerrero, Tommy Harper, Mike Shannon, Keith Moreland, Andy Van Slyke, and Bobby Bonilla. Even Frank Robinson got a try at third for 11 games in 1958. And this doesn't include either Graig Nettles or Buddy Bell as both were third basemen in the minors.

Pre & Post Mathews 3B (10 Jan 1998)

One poster started an interesting debate about third basemen pre and post Eddie Mathews. At the risk of over simplifying, I think he makes essentially two arguments.

1. Third basemen are stronger sluggers relative to the other positions post-Mathews.

I absolutely agree. Below I have calculated the Slugging Percentages by era.

Position	Dead-Ball	1920-1951	Post-Mathews (1952+)
3b	.334	.383	.401
2b	.334	.376	.354
ss	.319	.358	.342

1b	.361	.438	.431
of	.364	.431	.417
c	.301	.367	.372

Clearly, since 1952 third basemen have more power relative to other positions. For those interested, the calculation defined a player's position for a given year as the one he played the most that year. On such a huge data set I think little accuracy is lost by such an assumption. For example the post-Mathews era calculation encompasses nearly 614,000 at bats for third basemen.

2. Third basemen pre-Mathews played primarily other positions (both OF and middle infield) before moving to 3b while post-Mathews most came up as 3b.

The following are the starting AL third baseman in 1939. I use 1939 because I am using the 1940 Baseball Register to check positions.

Red Rolfe- SS in minors, moved to 3b very early in ML career
 Jim Tabor- 3B in minors
 Ken Keltner- played 3b/ss/of in minors but debuted in majors as 3b
 Eric McNair- SS most of career.
 Pinky Higgins- basically 3B in minors
 Buddy Lewis- 3B in minors
 Dario Lodigiani- 2b in minors, came up as 3b/2b
 Harlond Clift- 3b in high minors

The following are the starting AL third baseman in 1995.

Tim Lincecum- SS/3b in minors, came up as ss/3b
 Wade Boggs- 3b in minors.
 Jeff Manto- 3b in minors
 Travis Fryman- SS in minors
 Ed Sprague- c in high minors, 3b in low minors, came up 3b but some C
 Jim Thome- 3b in minors
 Gary Gaetti- 3b in minors
 Robin Ventura- 3b in minors
 Kevin Seitzer- of/1b high minors, 3b low minors, came up 3b/1b
 Scott Leius- SS in minors and came up as SS
 Mike Blowers- 3b in minors
 Tony Phillips- SS in minors and came up as SS
 Dean Palmer- 3b in minors
 Craig Paquette- 3b in minors

Granted this is a limited sample, but I fail to see the trend described. Most AL starting 3b in both 1939 and 1995 were either 3b or SS in the minors. This makes intuitive sense: strong hitting minor league shortstops who can't quite field at the major league level (or lose a step once there) are shifted to a less demanding defensive position.