

On Getting the Word About Mookie

Robert S. Griffin

www.robertsgriffin.com

At this writing, Mookie Betts, a star outfielder for the Boston Red Sox, has been traded to the Los Angeles Dodgers. An old high school friend sent a mass email to “undisclosed recipients,” which includes me, with a link to an article about the trade he obviously liked from the spectator sports and popular entertainment website *The Ringer*. It was authored by young sports journalist Ben Lindbergh and entitled “No One This Good and This Young Has Ever Been Traded” and had been posted February 5th, 2020. An excerpt:

To put it plainly: This swap is unprecedented. No player boasting Betts’s combination of excellence and youth has ever been traded before.

When ESPN’s Jesse Rogers surveyed 15 baseball insiders in late November about which of the three 20-something superstars rumored to be on the block—Betts, Francisco Lindor, and Kris Bryant—was most likely to be traded, zero picked Betts. That’s partly because the Red Sox are a big-market, deep-pocket franchise with a title less than 2 years old and a competitive roster, which makes them precisely the last type of team that typically considers off-loading a widely beloved player who made them much better. But it’s also partly because Betts isn’t just any perennial all-star. He’s baseball’s second-best player, and he’s still in his prime. That’s not the type of player *any* team tends to trade.

Betts, a career .301/.374/.519 hitter, is coming off a season in which he hit .295/.391/.524, with 29 homers and his usual stellar defense and base running. He won a Gold Glove and a Silver Slugger Award and finished eighth in American League MVP voting, and his 6.8 Baseball-Reference WAR ranked fourth among AL position players.

That was a down year.

The year before that, Betts mashed to the tune of a .346/.438/.640 slash line with 32 homers in 136 games, in a year

with a less lively ball relative to 2019. He won the AL MVP award, garnering 28 of the 30 first-place votes, and he generated 10.9 Baseball-Reference WAR, the highest single-season mark posted by any position player since Barry Bonds in 2002. (Only 20 position-player seasons have *ever* been better.) Mookie's 2015-17 seasons were stellar, too: He came close to winning an MVP award in 2016, finishing second behind Mike Trout, and in each of the past four years, he's made the All-Star team, won a Gold Glove, and finished no lower than eighth in MVP voting.

That same day I emailed my old high school buddy:

There's [journalist] Ben Lindbergh's perspective and there's the Red Sox general manager Chaim Bloom's perspective. To understand the Betts trade situation, it helps to take Bloom's perspective into account.

To Lindbergh, the general matters: this trade is unprecedented. To Bloom, only the particular matters: what to do about this unique player at this moment in time; what happened with [great player] Jimmy Foxx in 1936 is beside the point [Lindbergh had compared the Foxx and Betts situations].

To Lindbergh, the Red Sox are a sports team winning and losing games. To Bloom, the Red Sox are a profit-making baseball exhibition company. Lindbergh can get away with making the unsupported assertion that "... like Trout, [Betts] is virtually impossible to overpay." Bloom has to deal with fiscal reality. As a matter of fact, it is *not* virtually impossible to overpay Betts or anyone else. If Betts makes 40M a year from ages 28-38 [which is the expectation when, next year, he will be able to sell his services to any team]--that's \$247,000 a game--and that's if he plays every game, which he won't--what is the likely effect of that expenditure on the company's bottom line? Answering that question is a matter for hard economic analysis, not articles of faith.

Lindbergh can accept the validity of the WAR statistic as *the* measure of a player's worth (does anybody, including Lindbergh, even know how it is computed?). Bloom can't afford to do that.

Lindbergh focuses on what Betts has done in the past and makes the unsupported claim that “he is just getting started.” How does Lindbergh know that about this particular player? What Betts has done in the past does not determine what he will do in the future. What’s important to Bloom is not what Betts did in 2018, but what he is likely to do in 2021 or 2023. That involves Bloom initiating a scrutiny of Betts informed by the judgments of the very best baseball minds.

I’m certainly not one of the best baseball minds, and I’m sitting here on a leather couch in Burlington, Vermont. But with some baseball background, I see a 5’ 9” outfielder—small—with a quick downward movement in his arms as the pitch is thrown. It works as a triggering mechanism, but it’s a baseball no-no. Betts gets away with it because of his lightning fast reflexes. The question Bloom has to answer, after consultation, is what is the likelihood of Betts, small in stature, in this non-steroid era [in recent years players took drugs which prolonged high performance levels well into their 30s], getting away with that hitch in his swing at 31, when his reflexes will have diminished a tick.

Much more to be considered, including getting Price’s salary off the books, or at least partially [in the Betts trade, the Dodgers got aging Red Sox pitcher David Price and agreed to pay half his onerous contract] and the value of the new players and their team-friendly contracts [the Red Sox got three promising young players who will be bound to the Red Sox at low salaries for years and not be able to, like Betts will next year, sign a contract with any major league team]. If we were in a room with Bloom and the other Red Sox management, I’ll bet trading Betts would make far more sense from a Red Sox perspective than it would from being in the room where Ben Lindbergh typed up his article.

My friend responded that I am more onto the technical aspects of baseball than he is.