

On What's Wrong with Baseball  
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I'm a big fan of *New York Post* sports columnist Phil Mushnick. This thought is an email I sent to him in response to his column of April 17th, 2021 entitled "Exploiting Shift is Just Part of Playing True Winning Baseball." <https://nypost.com/2021/04/17/true-winning-baseball-goes-against-everything-mlb-practices/> Phil, and I are both critical of the product Major League Baseball is giving the public. We agree on the problems, but as you can pick up from reading my email to him, I don't look at them the same way he does. My email should make sense even if you don't read Phil's column. Here's my email:

Phil,

I agree, baseball as it is played these days is not the way it should be played and a pain for spectators. However, you and I have contrasting perspectives on the problem. Your basic assumption seems to be that baseball people are doing dumb things and that the solution to the issues facing the game is for them to stop doing those dumb things. In contrast, my basic assumption is that they are doing smart things given the context they are in, and that the solution is to change their context as the way to change them—give them a different circumstance to respond to.

I'll comment on topics you considered in your current column (4/17) from a contextual perspective, call it that.

Infield shifts work. He wouldn't admit it, but they worked with Teddy Ballgame [Ted Williams, great Boston Red Sox hitter who played from 1939-60]. Big Papi [David Ortiz, another great hitter, who played from 1997 to 2016, mostly with the Red Sox] acknowledged that they hurt him big time. Hitters could punch singles to the other side [away from the part of the field they can hit

the ball the farthest] and bunt—or try to, easier said than done. Even if they were successful at it, however, the opposing team, especially with the big sluggers, would be all for that arrangement on a permanent basis. Mike Trout as Maury Wills, sounds good. [Trout is a power-hitting outfielder for the Los Angeles Angels, considered by many as the best contemporary player. Maury Wills was a singles-hitting shortstop for the Los Angeles Dodgers in the 1960s.] Plus, there's no money for players in doing that. You don't like what Stanton does, but what's he making? [Mike Stanton, power-hitting outfielder for the New York Yankees. Phil thinks he tries for a home run on every pitch and as a result strikes out too much. Stanton's last contract with the Yankees was for \$325M.] Owners will also go where the money is, attendance figures and television ratings. The Babe [Babe Ruth, whose heyday was the '20s, arguably the greatest home run hitter ever] shortening up [shortening his swing] and hitting the other way [his weakest direction], wouldn't have put asses in the seats [helped attract paying customers at the games].

It is advisable for players to keep swinging hard and pulling the ball [hit it in his strongest direction] but to get it in the air, over the shifted infield, and best, to hit it over every fielder, a home run. Especially with the recently jacked up ball [made so that it will go farther], that makes sense even with the increased strikeouts that are the byproduct of doing that. Hitting it into the seats is not only where the money is, analytics types [baseball statisticians] have pointed out that that's where the wins are. Stringing together three singles to get a run isn't the most efficient way to score. It's important to keep in mind that the increased number of strikeouts—three times that in decades past--isn't just the result of swinging for the fences with two strikes. It's the outcome of trying to hit 98-mile-an-hour pitches. Someone calculated that Walter Johnson threw 89. [Johnson, who pitched in the 1920s, was known as having the fastest pitch in the league back then.]

We may not like it, but it makes abundant sense to have a starter [first pitcher in the game] go just five innings. Don't give the other team's lineup a third chance at him [to hit against him]. Bring in four hulks an inning apiece to throw 98, try to hit it. Take out a reliever even if he is successful because a lot of these guys can only go an inning or two, plus there's another game tomorrow and you want them available.

The solution to all this from a contextual angle?

- \* Ban the shift. Two players on each side of second base, on the dirt.

- \* Deaden the ball. When most players realize they have warning track power, they'll stop swinging for the fences and cut down on strikeouts.

- \* Lengthen the distance from the pitcher's mound to home plate. It's getting like fast pitch softball, nobody can hit the damn thing.

- \* Do something with substitution restrictions to force managers to keep pitchers in the game.

- \* While you are at it, take on the issue that the current context allows players to mope along by going to a clock between pitches.

To its credit, baseball is experimenting with all of these this. It isn't so dumb.

There are the problems you bring up around posing at home plate, bat flipping, jogging to first base on grounders, the look-at-me displays to the dugout after hitting doubles, etc. If the players aren't simply egotists or lazy, what might account for that? Culture. More particularly, the Hispanic culture. It goes unacknowledged, but seven or eight of the nine players the Red Sox put on the field as position players and the DH these days are Hispanic. There are as many African Americans on the Red Sox as when Pumpsie Green

[an African-American infielder] broke the color barrier on the team in 1959—none.

What we see as preening has a very different, positive, meaning in the Hispanic culture. Remember Chi-Chi Rodriguez the golfer? [Professional golfer in the 1960s and '70s.] He did a “toreador dance” pretending the ball was a bull and his club was a sword, and he put his hat over the hole when he made a birdie. If Hispanics were as strong a presence at the Masters as they are in baseball currently, we might see a very different style of play prevalent in golf. Hispanics are setting the tone in baseball now and non-Hispanics are picking up on it. Plus, ESPN loves this kind of thing for its highlight shows.

What to do about the cultural shift? We need to be more understanding and accepting of other cultures, other ways of doing things. At the same time, to some extent at least, we need to take it out of a cultural context. Running hard to first place is part of the game of baseball, not a value choice. Respect for your opponent is inherent in the game. Management can tell the players to quit dogging it and showboating if they don't want to take the field the next inning and see a player trotting out to replace them. The players can keep handling it the way they are now—after a pose at the plate or a bat flip or a super slow trot around the bases after a home run, making sure that player stays real loose the next time he comes to bat.

Spectators can change their context by acknowledging that, as you put it in the title of your last article, baseball has become a waste of time. Quit going to the games, turn off the television set, stay away from the sports pages, get off the baseball internet sites. As for me personally, I'm taking a sabbatical from baseball entertainment for the rest of this season.

Sincerely,

Robert Griffin

