

Who Will Sign Bryce Harper? How Media-Derived Narratives Shape Our Perceptions, and What Am I Doing with My Life?

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At this writing, a story dominating the sports headlines—ESPN, the sports pages of newspapers, and so on—is the fate of baseball free agents Bryce Harper and Manny Machado. Free agents are players who aren't under contract with any team and thus able to sign with any team for any period of time and for any amount of money. The gist of the story, the narrative, generated by the sports media in the fall of 2018 was that Harper and Machado are young super-star players who are certain to be inundated by teams making offers of multi-year contracts spanning ten or more years totaling an unprecedented three or four hundred million dollars, wow!

But here we are in mid-February, 2019 and no signings. Apparently, no teams are eager to throw 300-400 million dollars at Harper and Machado, or anything close to that. Really, nothing much seems to be happening and the season is scheduled to start in a few weeks. Why haven't the two players signed contracts? The media's story in answer to that question: Team owners, take your pick, are stupid, don't care about winning and the fans, stingy, and/or malevolent; in contrast, the two players, Harper and Machado, are innocents in this drama playing out before our watchful eyes.

Most people buy uncritically media-generated (movies, television, print, the music industry, the internet) stories in whatever the area--history, politics, religion, race, gender, sports, you name it.¹ When no team scoops up Harper or Machado for mega-dollars, we think, "There those bad owners go again" because that fits the story we've been told. The premise in this writing is we didn't come up with that story on our own, we got it from someplace, and that it would help us become freer, more autonomous, more our own persons, if we spent some time looking into what our stories are in all areas of our life and where we got them and how well they square

with reality. To what extent have we been conditioned by the stories, narratives, thrust at us—this happened and then this happened and then this happened, and these are the good guys and these are the bad guys, and this is what it all means, and this is how it should all turn out? I'm using this sport example to shed light on this highly important aspect of our lives.

I am in email contact with a grade school and high school classmate, now a retired dentist, I'll call Dave. Dave's a big baseball fan, watches the Yankee games on television (even though he's from Minnesota), goes on bus tours to major league games, that kind of thing. Below is an email exchange I had with him this past few days about the Harper/Machado signing, or better, non-signing. From here to the concluding paragraph, everything other than the emails will be in italics.

The media had reported Houston Astros pitcher Justin Verlander as saying that the free agency system—the arrangement where, after six years of service, players are free to negotiate a salary and terms with any team—is, as he put it, broken. I wrote this to Dave in an email message:

The Nationals reportedly offered Bryce Harper 300 million dollars for ten years. That's \$184,000 a game! \$184,000 to catch two or three fly balls and bat four times. For ten years. Justin Verlander says free agency is broken. Is free agency broken or is Harper and his agent broken.

To counter the notion that the team owners were dumb and bad, I added this:

The teams are catching on to the fact that with these multi-year contracts they have been paying players for what they did in the past and not what they are doing for them now. San Francisco Giants third baseman Evan Longoria has urged the players to "stand strong for what we believe we are worth." Longoria should be

pressed to provide a list of long-term contracts that were worth it to the teams and their paying customers. Here are some that have not been worth it:

Albert Pujols 10yrs, 240 million.

Jacoby Ellsbury 7yrs, 153 million.

Ryan Howard 5yrs 125 million.

Melvin Upton 5yrs, 75 million.

Prince Fielder 9yrs, 214 million.

Matt Kemp 8yrs, 160 million.

Josh Hamilton 5yrs, 120 million.

Troy Tulowitzki 10yrs, 157 million.

Joe Mauer 8yrs, 184 million.

Adrian Gonzalez 8yrs, 160 million.

Carl Crawford 7yrs, 142 million.

Jason Werth 7yrs, 126 million.

Chis Davis 7yrs, 162 million. Davis in 2018: WAR -2.8; BA .168; HR 16; RBI 49; OBP .243; SLG .296; OPS .539.

Robinson Cano 10yrs, 240 million. A DH playing second base, won't break a trot running to first (a problem that afflicts Machado), and a drug scandal just a phone call away (Machado?).

Giancarlo Stanton 13yrs, 325 million. Think the Yankees would do it again?

To challenge the idea that Harper is the transcendent star the media painted him as being, I raised the possibility that in reality he is no better than a player that gets no such accolades by the name of Eugenio Suarez:

Two players in 2018:

Player A: WAR 4.2; BA .283; HR 34; RBI 104; OBP .366; SLG .526; OPS .892.

Player B: WAR 1.3; BA .249; HR 34; RBI 100; OBP .383; SLG .496; OPS .889.

Player A is Eugenio Suarez. Player B is Bryce Harper.

Dave's emailed reply to all that:

Very interesting indeed. I can't and won't blame the players. It's all on the owners in my opinion. Thanks for passing this compilation on to me.

To which I responded:

I see this player-owner back-and-forth as part of a typical collective bargaining agreement. Players become free agents and can sell their services to the highest bidder. They aren't obligated to accept any particular offer, and no team is obligated to pay them any particular amount. It's like any other employer-employee situation.

The teams and their fans have been not done well by giving long-term contracts. History has shown that with players like Harper and Machado, it's irrational to give more than two or three years.

Also, what is going on is that the analytics, stats, people are giving us an objective look at who these players really are and what they contribute. The sports media are essentially public relations arms of the sport show companies. Like the motion picture industry, it helps sell tickets if you can get your customers to think they're getting a chance to see big stars for their money. Plus, the media create story lines—they tie current happenings to the past. You win baseball games with what a player does today, now, and the stats people help us become objective about that. Right this instance, Bryce Harper with his big, long, showy swing, which pitchers may have figured out, is arguably no better than Eugenio Suarez.

When you get a chance, I'd be interested in the two or three most compelling reasons that support your belief that it's all on the owners. My belief is that it's a matter of free negotiation

Dave replied with a link to a sports column from the Minneapolis newspaper:

“Harper and Kimbrel Are There for the Taking.”

“Kimbrel” refers to Craig Kimbrel a thirty-year-old ninth-inning relief specialist—they are called “closers”—also deemed a star and also a free agent, able to sign with any team. Not surprisingly, the premise of the article is that the owner of the Minnesota Twins ought to snap up both Harper and Kimbrel this instant. That it would likely involve an outlay of a quarter of a billion dollars and result in higher ticket prices wasn’t brought up in the piece. Rather, it was “Come on, give the Twins fans the chance to see these two great stars in action.”

I wrote:

A good reason for not bringing Harper and Kimbrel to Minnesota for a long-term contract is Joe Mauer.

Joe Mauer is a recently retired Minnesota Twins player who was in the list of long-term contracts that weren’t worth it in my earlier message. Mauer was a catcher who had a big year in 2009 and was rewarded with an eight-year contract totally 184 million dollars. Soon after that, he had some bad concussions from getting hit with foul balls behind the plate and was shifted to playing first base. He suddenly lost his power stroke and became, year-after-year, a plodding, mediocre singles-hitting first basemen pulling down 23 million dollars a year and boring and frustrating fans and making them leave the ballpark unhappy. My point was that the Twins had gotten stung with the Mauer multi-year contract and were very likely leery of repeating it with Harper and Kimbrel.

Silence from Dave, but undaunted, I shared this:

One of the sells of the major league baseball exhibition companies with their obscene ticket and concession prices and parking fees is that you are going to see something oh-so-special from Miguel Sano, Eddie Rosario, and Jonathan Schoop [three Twins players], or

if, say, Bryce Harper and Craig Kimbrel come to town. In a baseball game, the ball is in play for a total five minutes, and drawing on a term made popular by the late George Wallace, there isn't a dime's worth of difference between the five minutes of action in a Saints game [the Saint Paul Saints, a low-level independent team] with players making a few thousand a month and a Twins game, no matter who is on the team. One movie or book or rock concert is better than another one, but a closely guarded secret in baseball is that a home run is a home run, watch him trot; a double to left is a double to left; a grounder to short is a grounder to short; and a strikeout—one-third of the at-bats these days (Harper did it 169 times last year)--is the same the world over.

Dave answered:

I'm not necessarily a proponent of bringing those two [Harper and Kimbrel] to the Twins. It would be fun, though. Yes, especially with the new [management] guys, Falvey and Levine in charge, the Twins have learned from the Mauer contract. Any blame that has to be placed on the long and pricey contracts falls on the shoulders of the owners and ultimately on the fans for attending the games and even watching them on TV.

To which I replied:

I agree, handing out these long-term contracts that bombed was the owners' fault. If I'm a player and somebody offers me a ten-year contract I take it, a terrific deal for me. But my argument is that the experience of the owners has taught them that rarely do these long-term deals work out. Try naming some that did. Send me a list. What the players are going to have to realize is that with rare exceptions, they are going to live with maybe 2-3 year deals. Or a series of one-year deals.

You have to take analytics into account when making sense of anything in baseball. Shifts [clustering defensive players where

statistics show a batter most often hits the ball], launch angles [a response to shifts, batters try to elevate the ball over defenders' heads, which tends to increase home runs but lower batting averages and increase strikeout rates], use of relief pitchers [it's common practice these days after the fifth inning for there to be a pitching change every inning, a practice that slows the pace of games], etc., etc.

Analytics have objectified and demystified the game. In prior years, essentially the media told us—us includes owners and players—what we were seeing. They said, “Oh, this player is a star!” or, “This pitcher is a closer!” and we bought it. They created a narrative or story about a player, one that took into account what the player had done in prior years. So if Chris Davis of the [Baltimore] Orioles is hitting .160 [an incredibly low batting average], we are seeing him as, and expecting him to be, the Chris Davis of years ago. But what is going to happen in the game is not a function of the Chris Davis story but rather who Chris Davis is right now. Whatever contribution Joe Mauer made to the Twins last year was a function of the 2018 Joe Mauer and not the 2009 Joe Mauer, and the Twins were paying for the 2009 Joe Mauer when they should have been paying for the 2018 Joe Mauer. That's what the teams are catching onto.

Analytics are giving us an objective look at who a player is right now. Not what the media says he is, or was, but what he is right now. My earlier point, right this instant, don't bet the farm on Bryce Harper being better than Eugenio Suarez.

Also, analytics are teaching something about the actual performance arc of players. Especially now that the steroids era has ended [players using drugs to increase performance and lengthen their careers], the reality is that performance tails off at an earlier age that conventional wisdom has had it. That is to say, don't presume that ages 28-32 are going to be peak years.

Analytics are taking away some of the aura around the idea that there is something special about the ninth inning. They are finding that what happens in the seventh inning is just as important

as what happens in the ninth inning. Analytics are challenging the idea that a pitcher who can pitch in the ninth inning is some kind of special creature you have to shower with money to find. More pitchers can pitch the ninth inning than you presumed

So where does this come down to?

Hesitancy on the part of teams to give long-term contracts. Not because they are stupid or evil, but rather because they are in contact with reality. The track record for long-term contracts is very bad. You have to be living in a bubble not to see that. Joe Mauer becoming a singles-hitting first baseman is not the exception but rather the rule. And not so much fawning over the Craig Kimbrels of the world. There are lots of pitchers now who for an inning, which could be the ninth, can throw 98 [miles per hour], try to hit it.

This is not to say Harper and Kimbrel and Machado aren't good players. It is to say that in a free bargaining arrangement, they are living in the past if they think they are going to get a [Giancarlo] Stanton contract [ten years, 325 million dollars].

I question the blame players and the media are placing on the teams for not shelling out ten-year, 300 dollar contracts. Why exactly are teams obligated to do something dumb like that? They don't tell us. And I wasn't blaming Harper for not taking the Nationals 300-million-dollar offer. Rather, I was saying, my god, if somebody offers you 300 million dollars, take it!!

I went on to make the point that the stories we are told often obscure other matters that deserve our attention.

The big problem with baseball isn't the salaries. It's the pace or the game, the way shifts have screwed things up, and the escalating strikeout numbers [batters are striking out at an alarming rate—the ball isn't put into play, no action]. To its credit, when things get off in the NFL, they change the rules—like what defensive backs can do, how many players have to be on the line of scrimmage, etc. In baseball, they tell power-hitting left-hand hitters [who are especially

hurt by defensive shifts] to punch singles to the left side [toward shortstop and third base].

The players could solve the pace or play issue in five minutes, no clocks [baseball is seriously considering a time-clock to make pitchers deliver a pitch within twenty seconds]. Just put pressure on each other to move it along. The Saints game you and I saw [the last time I visited my brother and his family in Minnesota] went extra innings [more than the usual nine innings] and still was over in two hours 35 minutes [these years, games last three hours 15 minutes on the average]. No clock, these players simply moved the pace along. My [fourteen-year-old] daughter in golf [she's an elite junior player]--no clock, she's simply gotten the word from the other players that she needs to pick up the pace. Peer pressure is powerful.

In baseball, the pace has to be picked up, the shifts have to go, the mound has to be lowered or made farther from home plate (the NFL changed the spot of the kickoffs), and there needs to be changes in the substitution rules [all the pitching changes after the fifth inning have slowed down the games]. If the owners and players don't change the game, attendance and television ratings are going to decrease and customers are going to get older and older. No way will my daughter sit through three-plus hours of strikeouts. The ball simply doesn't get into play often enough in baseball these years.

I simply can't make it through the games in person or on television now, bored silly. I watch the ten-minute summaries on Major League Baseball.com. And I'm fading with those—really, if you've seen one home run, you've pretty much seen them all, and over time, the thrill of watching triumphant trots around the bases dissipates.

Perhaps departing just a tad from his “it's all the fault of the owners” narrative, Dave forwarded something he had picked up from social media that said:

Bryce Harper rejected the Washington Nationals offer of approximately \$300 million over 10 years late last season, according to multiple reports. Washington tried to lock up Harper with one of the richest deals in baseball history before he became a free agent, but he opted to test the market. According to reports, the Nats' offer is now off the table, but the team is still open to a deal. At the general managers meetings on Tuesday, Nationals general manager Mike Rizzo disclosed that the team had engaged in talk to test the market. According to reports, the Nats' offer is now off the table, but the team is still open to a deal.

To which I retorted:

Yes, the Nationals are open to deal with Harper. All teams are open to deal with him. But it's February, not last fall. Harper has tested the market, as was his right. Obviously, the market isn't offering more than what the Nats did, and in fact is offering far, far less than that. Damn right the Nats old offer is off the table. They are going to make an offer in line with current, not past, reality.

Harper is going to make mind-boggling money no matter what, but I can't imagine his contract coming anywhere near the reported original Nats offer. I stress "reported" Nats offer. I can imagine the Nats doing Harper a favor. That is, leaking a 300 million/10 year offer they didn't really make in order to establish a salary baseline that might encourage other teams to meet it or top it. But it's all speculation. The media only know what the participants tell them and we only know what the media tell us.

I come back to the parent angle I brought up in the last message. Where have Harper's parents been? If a child of mine told me someone had offered him/her 300 million dollars to put on sport exhibitions, after I was revived when I fainted dead away, I would scream "TAKE IT! TAKE IT, TAKE IT, TAKE IT!!! And then I'd pass out again.

Dave answered:

The Nats offer to Harper dates back to 5 November, I believe. Truly, when it comes to making contractual decisions, it's all about business and maybe team loyalty. . . 5% of the time. So be it!!

I took the two last exclamation points to be saying, “Let’s end this exchange already!”

That was yesterday. Bryce Harper and Manny Machado remain unsigned for the upcoming season, now just few weeks away.

What does all this add up to?

I expect that Bill saw all that verbiage from me as uninvited, beside the point, and a waste of his time—it didn’t square with his story, it was useless to him, an unwanted and unnecessary intrusion into his life. Was our exchange a waste of my time? As I think about it now, I should have better things to do than come on with what I’m sure were unwelcome lectures on where Bryce Harper and Manny Machado, who I don’t suppose spend a lot of time attending to what I’m doing at the moment, are going to play ball. I devoted hours to researching and writing up what you’d just read, and it’s hitting me that says something about the (low, empty) quality of my life sitting here on this leather couch in retirement. On the other hand, I had a decent time putting the emails together, got lost in the process, time flew by, and writing this website article has brought home to me that I need to stop, as I put it in a thought for this website, trying to charm the uninterested, which has been a life-long tendency of mine.² It’s turned out that what started as an article about media-generated interpretive stories has for me become one about what I’m doing with my life at 4:34 p.m. on a Thursday afternoon in February of the year 2019, and I’m writing this last sentence with an increasingly profound feeling of melancholy and dread.

Endnotes

1. I've written about this topic previously. For example, in the writings section of this site, see the 2012 article, "'Moneyball': An Inquiry Into Media Manipulation," and the 2014 article, "Epistemology Matters: Reflections Prompted by a Death in Missouri."
2. "On Trying to Charm the Uninterested," April, 2011.

Update: It's early March. Manny Machado signed with the San Diego Padres, 300 million for ten years, and Bryce Harper signed with the Philadelphia Phillies, 330 million for thirteen years. The signings were contrary to my analyses and predictions. The Phillies and Padres have tons of business knowledge and experience and scads of experts with printouts, and I'm sitting here alone on this leather couch. However, that doesn't stop me from predicting that the two teams will come to regret those long-term contracts. Time will tell.

In an email message to a friend yesterday, I wrote:

Bryce Harper is this big star according to the media and conventional wisdom. But the emperor's naked, or poorly clothed anyway—at this moment in time, Harper's not as good as people think he is. They're projecting "clothes" onto him he isn't really wearing, and forecasting that he will wear clothes in the future that he most likely will never wear.

In the website article I wrote on Harper's and Manny Machado's free agent signings, I questioned the worth to the teams of all these long-term contracts they've been giving out. Harper just got one from the Phillies for 330 million dollars for, egad!, 13 years.

People see Harper not as he is but rather as he was three years ago. They can't see what is right in front of them. Last year, Harper hit .249, a very low average, and statistics show that he was a lousy defensive player.

Conventional wisdom has it that at his age now, 26, Harper's best years are ahead of him. The thinking is that players do best between 28 and 32, but research is showing it's between

24 and 26. So Harper's best years are likely behind him, not ahead of him.

Harper has a big, long, showy swing. With just a tick slower reaction time—researchers think reaction time peaks at twenty, that young—he's not going to be able to pull off that elongated swing. Plus, pitchers will learn to take advantage of his exaggerated swing by changing speeds and finding “holes,” hitting areas he doesn't get to on time or at all.

My prediction is that Harper will rise to a .260 batting average level next year and continue to hit about that and thirty or so home runs for a couple, three years—good but not great--and then slowly go downhill from there (a model for this pattern, Angels first baseman Albert Pujols). Each year he gets worse will be explained away as due to an injury, or written off as simply a “bad year,” and he will be expected to revert to superstar form the next year. He will continue to drift down (and collect huge checks—for thirteen years!) and the explanations and high expectations will continue. Hope springs eternal.

Seeing things that aren't really there goes on other, more important, areas of life than baseball. Some instances, people see things around race, gender, intelligence, and ethnicity and class, and in personal relationships, that aren't really there, and they rationalize reality away. In general, people have a really tough time coming to grips with the fact that the world is as it is and not what they think it is or want it to be. I wrote about this phenomenon in a November, 2011 website thought, “On Dog Shows.” My take on it is that though maybe not in the short run, in the long run it is best to come to grips with reality and live according to its dictates.