

ROOKIE STARS ACUNA, SOTO SHINING FOR BRAVES, NATS

Baseball's young stars are shining brighter every year.

Next year, say most experts, Toronto Blue Jays' slugging prospect Vladimir Guerrero, Jr., will be the majors' best rookie.

Meanwhile, there's a dandy battle for this season's rookie of the year unfolding in the National League, as two future superstars with Hall of Fame credentials already, are having phenomenal first-year campaigns.

Juan Soto, a leftfielder with Washington Nationals who didn't play his first game until May 20 and who won't turn 20 until Oct. 25, already has 20 home runs. He stands third behind current team-mate Bryce Harper and a Red Sox star from the late 1960s, Tony Conigliaro, for most homers hit by a teen-ager. Conigliaro had 24.

His main opponent for top rookie is Atlanta Braves' leftfielder Ronald Acuna, Jr., who has played a key role in lifting the Braves to top spot in the National League East.

Acuna, 10 months older than Soto, came up to the Braves in late April and already leads the team in homers with 25 (in only 365 at-bats). His slugging stats project to a 41-homer season if extrapolated to a full 162-game season.

Washington pitcher Stephen Strasburg is a big Soto booster. "A guy throws a really good pitch and he doesn't flinch," said Strasburg. "He sees it early. It's reminiscent of watching Tony Gwynn growing up, really."

Acuna, according to MLB.com, is not only getting rookie-of-the-year love, but some baseball people are suggesting he may get more than a few votes for Most Valuable Player, even though he will wind up playing no more than 110 games. His 25 homers put him into exclusive company — only the seventh player under the age of 21 to bash at least 25 in a season. The first six to do so — Eddie Mathews, Orlando Cepeda, Al Kaline, Conigliaro, Frank Robinson and Mel Ott — are all in the Hall of Fame, according to MLB.com.

MVP talk may be foolish for someone playing only two-thirds of a season, but Acuna has been the best Brave during the past month, when they broke open a close NL East race to establish a big lead over the Phillies and Washington for the division crown. As first baseman Freddie Freeman has slumped of late, Acuna and fellow rookie Ozzie Albies have carried the Braves to lofty heights.

With young stars like Acuna, Soto and Guerrero, who hit 20 homers in 95 minor league games this year, baseball's future is in great hands.

- **RJ Currie** of sportsdeke.com: "For a while this season, Astros ace **Justin Verlander** was flirting with a sub-2.00 ERA. Not nearly as much fun as previous seasons when he was flirting with **Kate Upton**."
- Currie again: "The Massachusetts golfer who bit off part of another player's finger is out on bail in the amount of \$10,000. That doesn't include the tip."
- **Dwight Perry** of the Seattle Times: "Mariners relief pitchers have posted a 5.19 ERA in seventh innings this season. Or as it's otherwise known in these parts, the seventh-inning stench."
- **Patti Dawn Swansson** in the River City Renegade, on Blue Bombers struggling quarterback **Matt Nichols**: "He couldn't be less popular if he made rabbit stew out of the Easter Bunny."
- **Pete Abraham** on Twitter: "Our great country is divided. But the Red Sox and Mets fans at Fenway Park just joined together to chant 'Yankees suck.' Truly heartwarming."
- Comedy writer **Alex Kaseberg**: "After his miraculous 20-point comeback win over the Bears, **Aaron Rodgers** is having a hard time rehabbing his injured knee. He wants to get into the exercise pool, but he keeps walking on top of the water instead."
- **Jimmy Fallon** of NBC's Tonight Show: "After losing all 16 of their games last season, the Cleveland Browns' first game of the year ended in a tie. Yep, the Cleveland Browns: Even when they don't lose, they don't win."
- Coaching legend **Lefty Driesell**, not taking anything for granted at age 86 during his Basketball Hall of Fame induction speech: "The older you get, all you do is try to remember names and go to the bathroom."
- ABC's **Jimmy Kimmel**, on America's love of fantasy sports: "Most of the guys I know studied harder for their fantasy-football draft this year than all of high school and college combined."
- **Brad Rock** of Salt Lake City's Deseret News, after a calm.com poll suggested that the duller sports to watch are golf, cricket, soccer and baseball: "Synchronized swimming officials are demanding a recount."
- Comedian **Eric Stangel**, via Twitter, on the downside of having 73 fantasy-football teams: "I'm rooting for and against every player on every play."
- **Patti Dawn Swansson** again: The Maple Leafs have scrapped their ban on beards. Most excited about the new directive is forward **Mitch Marner**. It gives him something to look forward to when he finally reaches puberty."

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