

LACK OF HITTING NOT A BIG HIT WITH FANS

What do the following people — Joe Musgrove, Spencer Turnbull, John Means, Carlos Rodon, Corey Kluber and Wade Miley — have in common?

Unless you're an avid fan of Major League Baseball, you might not know the answer is that the aforementioned sextet had pitched no-hitters in the first seven weeks of the 2021 season. The number would be seven if Madison Bumgarner's seven-inning no-hitter was counted, but MLB has said no-hitters won't be recognized if they happen in shortened games in doubleheaders.

Considering, for example, there were only two no-hitters thrown in all of 2018 and only one each in 2017 and 2016, having six occur in the first seven weeks of 2021 is rather remarkable. But it begs the question: What the heck is going on?

Easy. Pitchers are getting better, and hitters aren't.

The overall MLB batting average through May 23 was an abysmal .235. Used to be that it was an insult to call somebody a .250 hitter, but these days, that number would be well above average.

In 1968, the overall MLB batting average was .236, with Carl Yastrzemski's .301 good enough for the American League batting title. As a team, New York Yankees hit .214. Baseball took action, lowering the mound to minimize the dominance of pitchers, and tightening the strike zone. This isn't 1968, but MLB may decide to do something drastic once again to get more hitting, more offence, more excitement, into the game.

Fans are staying away — and not just because of COVID-19 restrictions — because games are dragging, not to mention the excitement level. Home runs are up; doubles and triples are down. Teams rarely bunt anymore. Pitched balls are put into play less frequently. Strikeouts are up, again. A record number of strikeouts has been set every year since 2007. Pitchers who threw 95 miles per hour 20 years ago were freaks. Now every team has a couple of them, with most teams rostering a pitcher or two who regularly zoom past 100 on the radar gun. Said Marlins' manager Don Mattingly: "Sometimes it's unwatchable."

No-hitters are fun to watch, but an 11-8 game featuring 27 hits, stolen bases, wild overthrows and spectacular catches in my mind provides much more entertainment. Baseball has to figure out a how to reduce the former and increase the latter.

- **Scott Ostler** of the San Francisco Chronicle, describing a night at the ballpark interviewing 'cardboard' fans: "At the A's ballpark, I interviewed one of those cardboard fans, the only one that was not smiling. Said the fan, 'I wasn't cut out for this.'"
 - Comedy writer **Alex Kaseberg**: "MLB has had six no-hitters already. Normally they only have two no-hitters a year and sometimes none. Who would have guessed a symptom of COVID-19 would be batters hitting like one of the Kardashian sisters?"
 - **RJ Currie** of sportsdeke.com: "Police in Ireland broke up a fight at a chess tournament after a player was found strategizing using a computer in the toilet. Imagine that: Plotting against kings and queens on the throne."
 - **Eammon Lynch** of GolfWeek, on the proposed Super Golf League: "Imagine **Gretzky** having quit because Dancing on Ice offered more money. Or **Jordan's** Bulls deciding that joining the Harlem Globetrotters was better than winning championships."
 - Comedy writer **Eric Stangel**, on Twitter: "While you were sleeping, nine more no-hitters were thrown."
 - Sports figure **Kyle Porter** of CBS, on Twitter, describing **Rickie Fowler's** outfit during Day 1 of the PGA: "Rickie looks like he's in disguise as an undercover investigator into a complex **Phil Mickelson** cryptocurrency enterprise."
 - **Patti Dawn Swansson**, on Twitter: "It isn't easy being green, but my favourite curler, **Chelsea Carey**, plans to see if the colour fits. Chelsea will be skipping a team from the Flattest of Lands next season, which means she'll be going after a rare trifecta — champion of Manitoba, Alberta and Saskatchewan."
 - **Dwight Perry** of the Seattle Times: "So, which NBA team will be the first to hoist a '2021 Play-In Champion' banner next season?"
 - **Patti Dawn Swansson** again: "It's official: The people at Guinness World Records have declared film of **Corey Perry's** knee hitting **John Tavares'** head to be the most dissected piece of video evidence since **Abraham Zapruder's** home movie of the **JFK** assassination."
 - Headline at fark.com: "Leafs captain **Tavares** removed from ice on stretcher. Expected to recover in time to make Leafs' tee time next week."
 - Another fark.com offering: "**Shohei Ohtani** is the most exciting player in MLB and will only see a World Series from the stands because he is on the Angels."
 - **Steve Simmons** of Sunmedia, on double threat **Shohei Ohtani** of baseball's Los Angeles Angels: "In simpler Toronto terms, he is **Vladimir Guerrero Jr.** and **Hyun-jin Ryu** all in one person."
- Care to comment? Email brucepenton2003@yahoo.ca*