

The Eras of Baseball

An addendum to the blog,
“The Eras of Baseball.”

The 19th Century Era (1871–1899)

Baseball's earliest professional era was a time of rapid change. Rules were constantly being tested, adjusted, and standardized as the game took shape.

Some important developments:

- **The Fair-Foul Hit** was banned. Batters could no longer trick the defense with hits that landed fair and rolled foul.
- **Walks became easier to earn.** Early rules required nine balls for a walk—by 1889, it was down to four.
- **Pitching evolved.** The game shifted from underhand throws to overhand deliveries.
- **Flat bats** were allowed—briefly. The game would later settle on round bats only.
- **The balk rule** was introduced to keep pitchers honest with runners.
- **Batters could call their pitch.** Batters could ask for high or low pitches, and pitchers were expected to comply!

The Dead Ball Era (1900–1920)

This era was marked by low scores, strategic play, and tough conditions for hitters. Some notable characteristics:

- **Inconsistently manufactured baseballs** were often soft, loosely wound, and varied in quality due to inconsistent manufacturing.
- **Pitchers relied on** spitballs, shine balls, and scuff balls to gain an edge.
- **Dirty baseballs** were used until they unraveled, becoming dark, soft, and hard to see.
- **Small-ball style offenses** relied on bunts, steals, and hit-and-run plays.

In August 1920, Ray Chapman of the Cleveland Indians was hit and killed by a pitch in a game against the New York Yankees played at the Polo Grounds as it became dark (and the baseball parks had not lights). Witnesses say that he didn't flinch indicating that he didn't see the baseball that was covered with soil, licorice, and tobacco juice.

Ray Chapman's tragic death in is widely considered a **turning point**—*the symbolic end of the Dead Ball Era* and the start of the Live Ball Era.

- Chapman's death highlighted a serious safety issue with the dark, scuffed balls that were common during the Deadball Era.
- In response, MLB instituted new rules, including:
 - Replacing balls more frequently during games
 - Eventually banning the spitball (with some pitchers grandfathered in)
- That same year, Babe Ruth hit 54 home runs, a record-shattering number at the time, ushering in a new era of power hitting and livelier balls.

So historically, Chapman's death closed the Dead Ball Era, both culturally and procedurally, and helped launch the Live Ball Era in 1921.

The Live Ball Era (1921–1941)

Changes were made to improve safety and bring more consistency to the game. The result was a livelier style of play and a dramatic shift in offense.

- **Baseballs** were manufactured more consistently and replaced more often during games
- Spitballs and other trick pitches were banned (with exceptions for pitchers already using them)
- **Babe Ruth** hit 54 home runs in 1921, changing how the game was played
- Offensive stats surged, and **home runs became a regular feature** of the game
- Ballparks were built larger to accommodate growing crowds and the power game

The World War II Era (1942–1945)

During the war years, more than 500 major leaguers served in the military during WWII. Thousands of minor leaguers also enlisted. With many stars gone, teams filled rosters with older veterans and teenage prospects. Some of the most notable players who served:

- **Ted Williams.** One of the greatest hitters of all time, enlisted in the Navy in 1942 and trained as a pilot later serving as a Marine Corps flight instructor
- **Joe DiMaggio.** The Yankees' center fielder was perhaps "the reigning superstar," yet he enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Forces in 1943
- **Bob Feller.** Hall of Fame pitcher for the Cleveland Indians enlisted in the U.S. Navy the day after Pearl Harbor, and served as a gun captain aboard the USS Alabama
- **Hank Greenberg.** Detroit Tigers slugger and 2-time AL MVP was drafted in 1940, and re-enlisted after Pearl Harbor serving four years in the Army
- **Stan Musial.** Joined the Navy in 1945 missing only one season, but served with distinction
- **Pee Wee Reese.** Future Dodgers legend served in the Navy from 1943 to 1945
- **Johnny Mize.** First baseman for the Cardinals and Giants missed three full seasons while serving in the Navy
- **Warren Spahn.** Future Hall of Fame pitcher served in the Army, and saw combat in the Battle of the Bulge

The Integration Era (1946–1961)

This era marked the breaking of baseball's long-standing color barrier and the start of its transformation into a truly international and inclusive sport. Integration brought a massive influx of talent and diversity, reshaping the game on and off the field.

- **Jackie Robinson.** Broke the color barrier in 1947 with the Brooklyn Dodgers. Won the 1947 Rookie of the Year and 1949 MVP.
- **Larry Doby.** First Black player in the American League (joined the Cleveland Indians in 1947) was later a Hall of Famer.
- **Satchel Paige.** Legendary Negro Leagues pitcher who debuted in the majors in 1948 at age 42.
- **International Influence.** More Latino players began entering the league, especially from Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Venezuela.

The Expansion Era (1962–1972)

A period defined by growth, experimentation, and foundational changes, this era saw Major League Baseball stretch geographically, diversify its player base, and adapt to the influence of mass media.

- **League Expansion.** MLB grew from 16 teams in 1960 to **24 teams by 1969**. Expansion diluted talent (at first). Teams began scouting and signing more players from Latin America, Japan, and the Caribbean laying the groundwork for a truly international player base in the years to come
- **Rule Changes and Competitive Balance.** Dominant pitching stats prompted concerns about offense disappearing resulting in lowered mound height (in 1969) from 15 to 10 inches. The strike zone was also redefined.

Baseball was not immune to **Cultural & Structural Shifts**. Television brought games into homes **fueled interest** in new markets. And, **Curt Flood** challenged MLB's reserve clause which restricted player movement between teams. His battle was ultimately fought in the Supreme Court and led to **free agency**.

The Free Agency & Designated Hitter Era (1973–1993):

The early 1970s ushered in two major changes that shaped baseball for the next two decades: the introduction of free agency and the American League's adoption of the designated hitter. These shifts — along with ongoing expansion and evolving ballpark environments — significantly influenced how teams built rosters and scored runs. While offense initially surged in the AL due to the DH, the 1980s would bring a downturn, as dominant pitching reasserted itself and the league took steps to control run scoring.

- **Designated Hitter (DH).** The American League adopted the Designated Hitter removing pitchers from the batting order and immediately increasing offense.
- The **Messersmith-McNally decision** marked the start of true **free agency**, allowing players to change teams more freely after six years of service.
- Expansion brought the league total to **26 teams** and causing pitching talent to be spread thinner.
- An **anomalous spike in home runs** (and offense overall) occurred in 1987, possibly due to a livelier “juiced” baseball.

The Steroid Era (1994–2004):

This period is defined by an unprecedented surge in offensive output — a stark contrast to the low-scoring environment of the late 1980s and early '90s. Multiple factors contributed: a renewed focus on power hitting, smaller ballparks, changes to the baseball itself, and the widespread **performance-enhancing drug (PED)** use. It was a time when records fell, home run totals soared, and RPG rose to heights not seen since the 1930s.

- Expansion increased the number of teams to **28**. Denver's high altitude at Coors Field became synonymous with inflated offensive stats.
- **1995:** Offense resumed where it left off. Many teams **emphasized home run hitters** and de-emphasized stolen bases and small ball.
- **Smaller ballparks** were built or retrofitted — Camden Yards (1992), The Ballpark in Arlington (1994), and others — creating more **hitter-friendly environments**.
- **Steroid/PED use.** Though not officially acknowledged at the time, later investigations revealed widespread use. The **Mitchell Report (2007)** and other retrospectives tied this era to PEDs.

In 2003, MLB began **testing for steroid use** marking the transition from the Steroid Era to the Post-Steroid Era.

The Post-Steroid Era (2005–2014):

Following the offensive explosion of the 1990s and early 2000s, Major League Baseball entered a period of **increased drug testing, stronger penalties, and a sharp focus on restoring competitive integrity**. As PED use declined, so did run scoring.

- MLB implemented **mandatory steroid testing with penalties**, and offensive production dropped noticeably and immediately.
- Teams began emphasizing **bullpen strength, defensive shifts, and matchup-based relief pitching**.

The Analytics Era (2015–Present)

Still taking shape, this current era of baseball does not yet have a universally accepted name. Some refer to it as the Analytics Era, others the Statcast Era, or even the Launch Angle or Velocity Era. Whatever it comes to be called, it is marked by a transformation in how the game is understood, strategized, and played — a transformation driven by data.

In 2015, MLB implemented **Statcast**, a player- and ball-tracking technology that records things like **exit velocity**, **launch angle**, **spin rate**, **route efficiency**, **sprint speed**, and much more. This ushered in a new frontier for both front offices and on-field decision-making.

Where previous eras relied on scouting and traditional stats, this one is **dominated by analytics** — from **roster construction** and **lineup optimization** to **pitch sequencing** and **defensive positioning**. The entire game is now viewed through a quantifiable lens.

- **Advanced analytics influence every aspect of the game**, from identifying undervalued players to optimizing bullpen usage and defensive alignments.
- **Statcast data** gives teams measurable insight into player performance and biomechanics, pushing the boundaries of player evaluation.
- **Strategies. “Launch angle” hitting philosophy** emphasizes home runs and hard contact; **The Three True Outcomes (strikeout, walk, home run)** lead to fewer balls in play.

This era may still be **in the process of being defined**, but its legacy will undoubtedly be tied to data. Regardless of what it ends up being called baseball has been reshaped in ways that few eras before ever have.