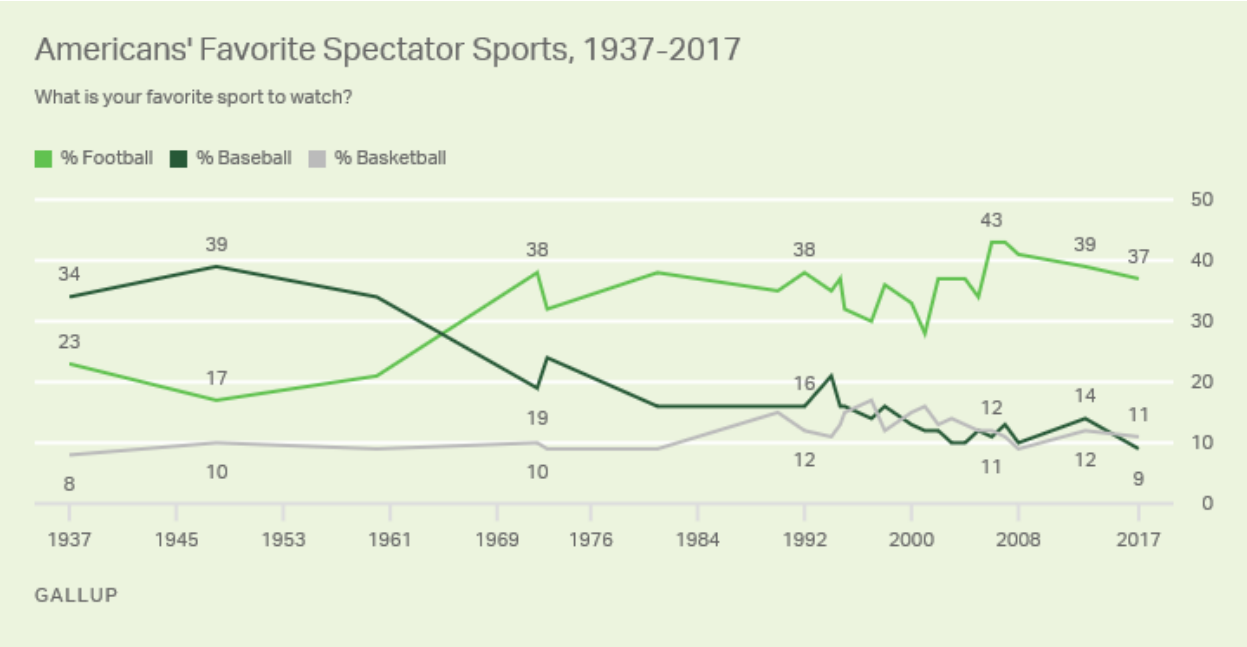
Why Baseball is the Greatest Sport

According to a http://news.gallup.com/poll/224864/football-americans-favorite-sport-watch.aspx 2018 Gallup poll, baseball (9%) ranks #3 in popularity of American sports, behind football (37%) and basketball (11%) when asked what sport is the favorite to watch. As a lover of America's true pastime, baseball, I am here to convince you why baseball is the greatest sport and America needs to come to its senses. This article will focus on comparing baseball to the two sports ranked above it, football and basketball. I will address several main arguments and take aim at some of the common gripes regarding the sport that have caused its popularity to decline over the past few decades.



"It's too slow"

The biggest complaint I hear from people about baseball is "it's too slow" or "it's sooooo boring." Baseball is a game unlike most other major sports because there is no game clock. A half-inning could take 1 minute or 20 minutes, and a game could last over 8 hours (May 8, 1984: White Sox vs. Brewers). However, the average game time of a baseball game (~3 hours, 5 minutest) is actually shorter than football (~3 hours, 12 minutes). Now the common response is, "but wait, baseball has a lot of standing around waiting for the pitcher to throw, while football is heart-stopping action!" But hold on a second, according to a Wall Street Journal article https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704281204575002852055561406 , the average football play lasts only 4 seconds for a total of only 11 minutes of action for the entire game. By comparison, there are approximately 18 minutes of action in a baseball game.

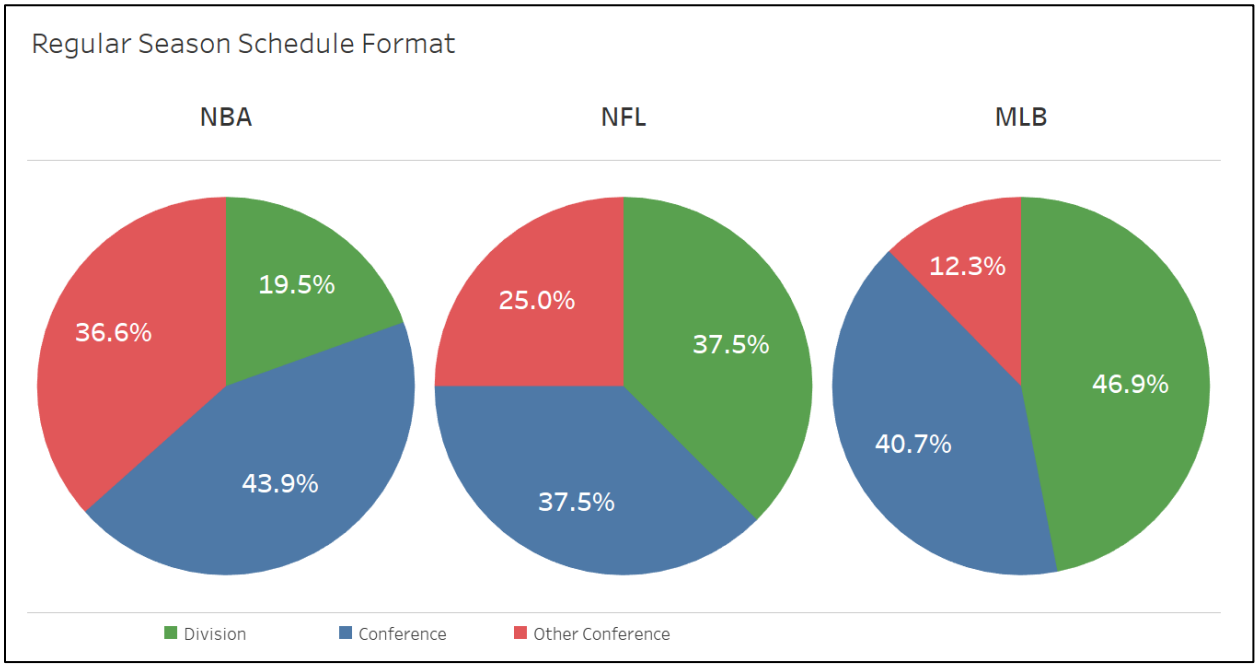
"You don't have to be athletic"

Another thing I hear a lot is that baseball players aren't very athletic. Look at basketball players, they can dunk; and football players are strong and fast, running around all game. However, baseball is an incredibly athletic sport, requiring fast-twitch movements for plays that only last several seconds and a 5.5-ounce ball that travels over 100 mph out-of-the-hand and off the bat. Have you ever tried going to a

batting cage and hitting a ball that travels even 80 mph? How about going out to a baseball diamond and fielding a ground ball hit 80 mph at you? The lateral movement and quickness required to figure out where a 100 mph ball will land, and then catch it is incredibly difficult. Baseball player speeds are on par with athletes in both football and basketball.

League alignment actually matters

The MLB, NFL, and NBA all have a division and conference alignment of their teams. Each has two conferences with either three or four divisions in each conference. There have been talks recently of eliminating conferences and divisions in the NBA because of the imbalance of power. The reason why divisions and conferences exist is to determine seeding in the playoffs. However, of the three sports baseball's division alignment makes the most sense, while the NBA's is basically irrelevant. The way the MLB designs its schedule makes the divisions actually matter. Division winners in all three sports get an automatic top seed in the playoffs. The premise of the playoff format is that the best teams in each division (plus the best of the rest) play each other to determine who is the best in their conference. Then the best team in each conference plays the other to determine the champion. So winning a division should mean that team is the best in the division *compared to the others*. Let me explain with a chart:



Each sport designs its schedule so that each team in every division plays the same teams throughout the year. However of the three sports, the MLB has the highest percentage of total games played against teams *within* the division (46.9%) while the NBA only has a measly 19.5%, less than one-fifth of the games. This means that in the MLB, more of a team's records reflects head-to-head games against teams within their division. So the team that has the best record at the end of the season has a larger proportion of its record determined by a direct comparison to its division. Thus baseball gives the most meaning to the premise of a "division winner," while in basketball only makes division opponents slightly more important than everyone else.

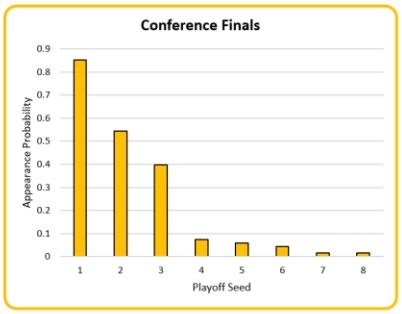
Similarly, the MLB has the lowest percentage of games played against the other conference (in baseball it's called a "league") with just over 12%, while the NBA is highest at 36.6%. This creates a truer separation between the two leagues in baseball, as the vast majority of games played are against a team's own league. Therefore, in the World Series the teams who face off to crown a champion really are "the best team in their league" as they have proven throughout the season and playoffs that they are consistently better than the other teams in their league. On the other hand, maybe it does make sense to throw away divisions and conferences in the NBA and seed everyone just 1-16 since their schedule is the most balanced, playing everyone in the NBA relatively equally compared to both the MLB and NFL.

Across both of the previous discussions, the NFL ranks between the MLB and NBA.

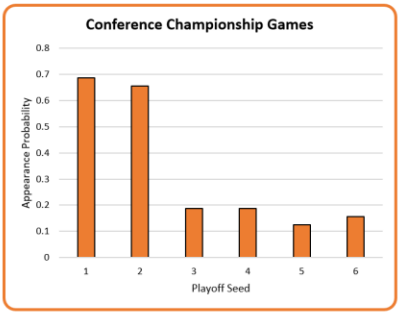
Playoffs are the most competitive

Not only does the regular season make the most sense, but in baseball the playoffs are the most competitive and worth watching. Again, basketball is the most pointless, and football has its issues too. In football, because of the nature of the game, each playoff round is a single game. On a given day, any team could win, so there is a good deal of chance that is inherent in the NFL playoffs. Let's take a look at a bunch more graphics to help me paint this picture. The following graphs show the distribution of champions:

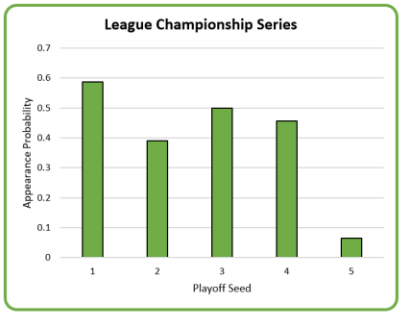
NBA



NFL

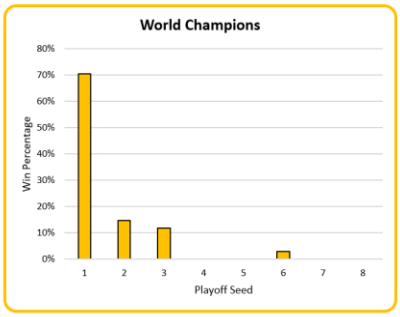


MLB

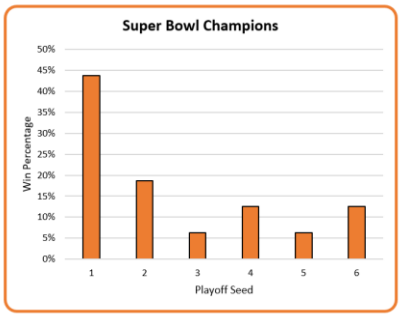


All stats are taken from the first year of the current playoff structure for each sport. I know there's a lot to look at. Let me help focus you on some important points to notice. The MLB has the most even distributions for both measures, with the league championship round more or less being equally likely for seeds #1-4. On the other hand, the NFL championship games lean heavily toward #1 and #2 with teams seeded #3-6 having a less than 20% chance of making the championship game. Furthermore, the NBA is a joke with predominantly #1-3 seeds having more than a prayer to make the conference championship game (20% for all other seeds combined). Now let's look at the chances of making the conference finals by seed for each sport:

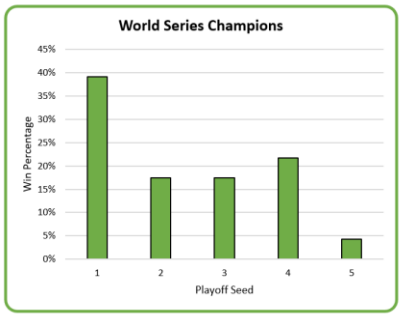
NBA



NFL



MLB

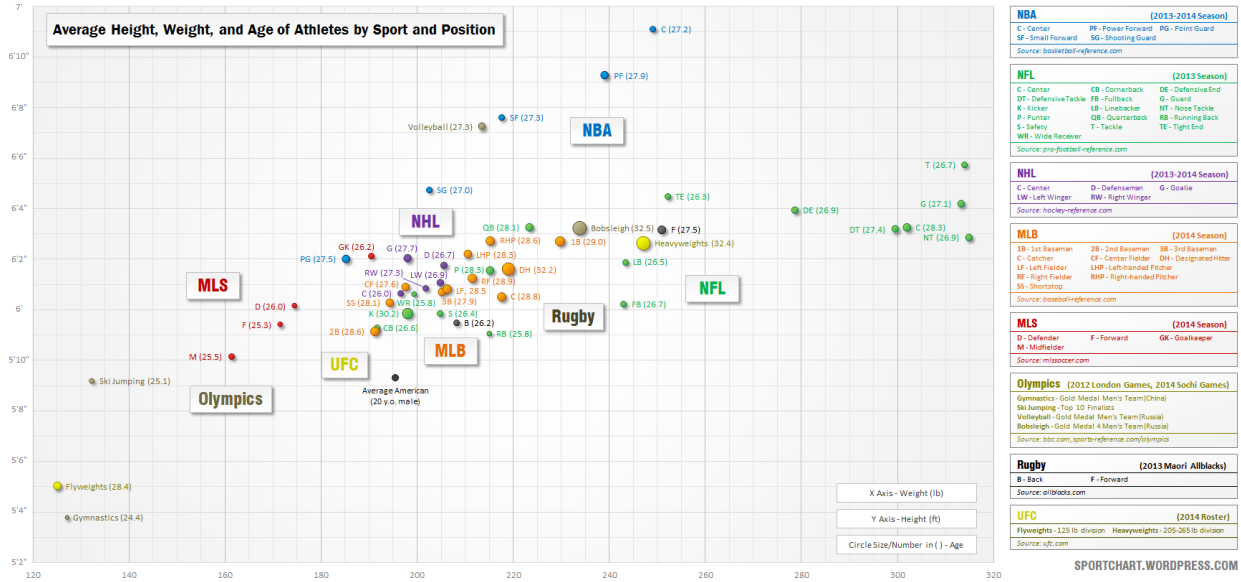


In terms of champions, greater than 70%(!) of the time a #1 seed wins the NBA championship, and >97% of the time a #1-3 seed wins it all. Basically, if you're not a top-3 seed you have no real hope of being NBA champion. In case you're wondering, the only non-top-3 seed to win was the 1994-95 Houston Rockets who were a #6 seed…but also had two Hall of Famers in Clyde Drexler and Hakeem Olajuwon. The NFL is slightly more interesting with a #4 and #6 seed having won twice each. But the numbers are still skewed heavily toward the top-2 seeds, with all others winning only a little better than landing heads on a three-sided coin. When we look at the MLB, the baseball champion is actually more likely to be a #4 seed than a #2 or #3 seed.

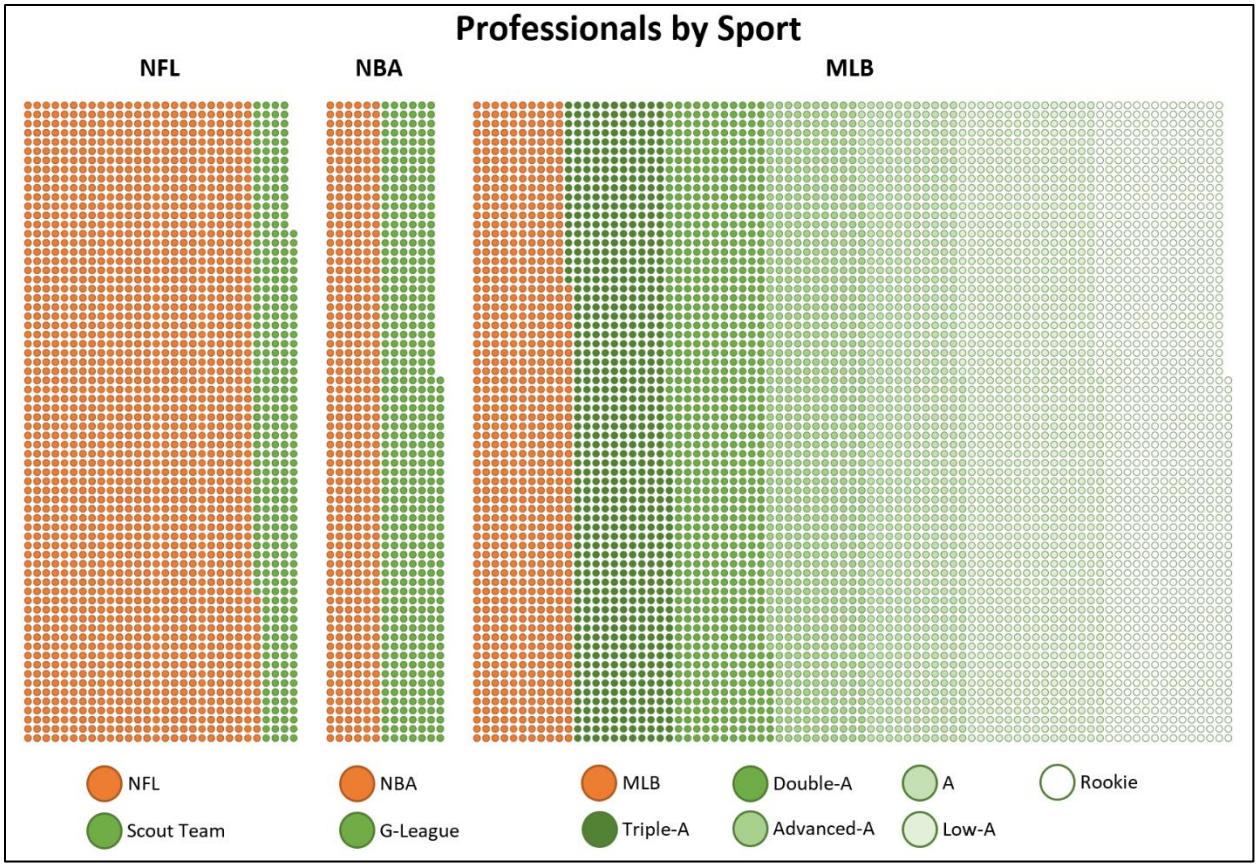
What this tangibly means is that baseball playoffs are the most competitive among all the teams that make the playoffs, and that making the playoffs (sans the #5 seed which was only introduced in 2012) gives you a decently good chance of winning it all. Comparatively, the NFL is slightly worse, but skewed toward the #1 and #2 seeds who get a first round bye, and the NBA should really think about reducing the number of playoff teams from eight to four. I mean, c'mon, the NBA playoffs take forever and the end result is the same without #5-8.

Game for the common people

There's a reason why baseball is considered America's pastime. It's a game that brings people together and one that anyone can be a professional in. The following chart was put together by SportChart: https://sportchart.wordpress.com/2014/05/30/athlete-sizes-update/



The black dot in the middle shows the average 20-year-old American male. As we can see, the distribution of MLB players is the closest to that of the average male in the United States. Most NFL players are taller and a lot heavier than baseball players, while basketball players are among the highest percentiles in height. A random person who aspires to be a professional athlete can immediately be disqualified in the NBA and NFL simply due to size. Baseball on the other hand does not have as much of a bias toward common folk. Furthermore, the developmental league in the MLB versus the NFL and NBA is much larger, providing more people the opportunity to be a professional athlete. For comparison, the NFL during the season has 32 teams with a 53-man active roster and 10 extras on the practice squad for a total of 2,016 professional football players. The NBA has 30 teams with an average of 14 players per team plus 26 additional G-League teams with a max of 13 players each for a total of 758 professional basketball players. Comparatively, while the NFL and MLB only have one level of “minor league” development, the MLB has an expansive hierarchy of minor league teams, from lowest to highest: Rookie, Low-A, A, Advanced-A, Double-A, Triple-A. The top four levels have a 25-man active roster limit, while the lower two have a 35-man active roster limit. When you add in the 25-man Major League roster for each of the 30 teams, there are a total of roughly 5,850 professional baseball players!



Ultimate team game

Finally, although all of these are team sports, baseball is the least reliant on superstars and most based upon a collective team effort. Let's start with the easiest one, basketball. In the NBA, even one all-star can drastically affect the fortunes of a team. Take LeBron James and the Cleveland Cavaliers, for instance. In the twelve seasons between 2005 and 2017, the Cavaliers won at least one round of the playoffs, including making the finals in four seasons, in every year except 2010-2014 when LeBron was on the Miami Heat. In fact, in those four seasons they didn't win one round of the playoffs, they didn't even make the playoffs. Similarly, the Lakers even with Kobe didn't win another championship from when Shaq left until Pau Gasol joined the team. With only five players on the court at a time, one player can have a significant impact on a game. For example, on November 5, 2017, with points scored and assists James Harden accounted for 91 points or 67% of the Rockets' points that night.

Now I will not try to argue that football doesn't require a great deal of teamwork from the offensive line to the linebackers and secondary communication and having three different units. However, like basketball one superstar can have a huge impact on a team. In particular, a quarterback or defensive lineman can transform an offense or defense. A quarterback touches the ball every offensive snap and most teams struggle without a quality quarterback even if the rest of the team is comprised of good players.

Baseball, however, is a game which is uniquely resistant to any individual player having a huge impact on a team. Players in football and basketball that have the biggest impact are those who are involved in the most plays per game. In baseball that would be a starting pitcher. But because of physical limitations,

starting pitchers can only pitch every five or six games which limits their overall impact. Even the best pitchers still have bad outings, and whether the team wins their starts also depends on how many runs their offense scores. For instance, in 2010 Felix Hernandez won the AL Cy Young with a 13-12 record, barely above .500. On the other side of the ball, an excellent offensive player only impacts the game with three or four at-bats per game, and only gets a hit every third at-bat. There are many variables that affect his ability even to have an *opportunity* to impact the game: runners on base, getting walked or hit by a pitch, and score of the game. Baseball relies on a combination of defense, the ability to string together hits by multiple players, and multiple pitchers being able to limit an opposing offense.

Conclusion

Baseball is the greatest sport. Hitting a round baseball with a round bat has been called the most difficult thing to do in sports. A hitter has about a quarter of a second to identify a pitch type, determine its location, and figure out whether to swing. Fast-twitch reactions, speed, and power are necessary to play the game at a high level. The division and league alignments have real meaning through the scheduling of games. The playoffs are the most competitive, giving every team a tangible chance of becoming champion. Baseball is not a game that requires elite genes to reach the upper echelon of the sport, and it encourages teamwork more than other sports. Oh, and that's just scratching the surface…