The Downside of Baseball's Data Revolution--Long Games, Less Action; After years of 'Moneyball'-style quantitative analysis, major-league teams are setting records for inactivity

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FULL TEXT

The owners of America's baseball teams, gathered at a Houston hotel last year, were discussing once again how their games had become so plodding. This time, however, the explanation was different.

Two Major League Baseball officials and a statistician told the group that the sport was being brought to a standstill by the very phenomenon that has revolutionized it in recent years--the embrace of data analytics to drive strategy.

Baseball has never been more beset by inaction. Games this season saw an average gap of 3 minutes, 48 seconds between balls in play, an all-time high. There were more pitcher substitutions than ever, the most time between pitches on record and longer games than ever.

A confluence of hitting, pitching and defensive strategies spawned by the league's "Moneyball" revolution have all played a role. That makes baseball, whose early use of big-data strategies was embraced by the business world in general, a case study in its unintended consequences.

"The sport is going down a path that is a byproduct of very smart people figuring out the best strategies to win," says San Francisco Giants Chief Executive Larry Baer. "It's up to the owners to say, 'What's the impact on the consumers that are watching?' "

For now, as the postseason begins, there is little economic incentive for owners to change. MLB remains buoyed by a combination of lucrative, long-term television-rights agreements and taxpayer-funded stadiums. League revenues exceeded $10 billion in 2016, a record. Attendance remains strong, with regular-season games drawing around 30,000 fans on average.

The issue is where MLB is headed. Baseball's television audience, the oldest among major North American professional sports, had a median age of 57 in 2016, according to a study of Nielsen data by the ad-buying agency Magna Global. That age, which has remained about the same in 2017, is up from a median of 52 in 2006.

Only 7% of baseball viewers were between the ages of 2 and 17 , according to the study, which puts MLB closer to horse racing (5%) than to professional basketball (11%).

MLB spokesman Pat Courtney says television audience isn't the sole measure of the league's future health, since such audiences tend to skew older. He points to a recent uptick in youth baseball participation, after a long-running decline , and the popularity of MLB's mobile app, which is opened more than eight million times a day.

Even optimists in the industry agree that youth interest and pace of play are related to one another and central to MLB's future. The long-term concern is that baseball teams, which rely on ticket revenue for a larger portion of overall income than other pro team sports, could eventually have difficulty filling the seats in their stadiums.

The league is considering installing a pitch clock in 2018 to penalize pitchers who take too long to throw the ball, among other measures.

"We all want to shorten the game and make it more appealing," says Houston Astros general manager Jeff Luhnow. "We want baseball to be popular with generations to come. We absolutely care."

The use of analytics, which has increased dramatically since the early 2000s, is one of baseball's most acclaimed developments. Team front offices, once the domain of ex-players, are more commonly staffed with Ivy League graduates. Data science has become an integral part of many teams' decision-making. Top executives have landed seats on corporate boards and given paid speeches to business groups.

The search for competitive edges in a growing trove of information has also resulted in the kind of game MLB didn't intend to create.

On July 30, the Tampa Bay Rays took 3 hours, 51 minutes to defeat the New York Yankees, 5-3, in nine innings. Six times, the game was halted in the middle of an inning for a pitching change. There were more strikeouts and walks than balls in play, which came about once every 5 minutes, 47 seconds.

Statistics showing precisely when starting pitchers become less effective have prompted teams to remove them from games earlier than before. That has increased one of the biggest drags on pace of play: pitching changes. Regular-season games this year saw an average of 8.4 pitchers used between both teams, an all-time high. That's up from 5.8 pitchers a game 30 years ago.

Moreover, the pitchers being added are the slowest: The average reliever takes 1.5 seconds longer between each pitch than the average starter. Though most measures of pace of play have been kept for decades, pitch-tracking cameras have enabled more detailed analysis for about the past 10 years.

Analytics, in promoting strikeouts as an optimal outcome, have extended the battle between pitcher and hitter. Teams increasingly value pitchers who can generate swings and misses , because other kinds of outs require varying degrees of good defense and good fortune. Strikeout levels have reached record highs for 10 years in a row.

Pitchers "are not allowing you to put the ball in play as much as they used to," says Yankees third baseman Chase Headley. "That's a huge change."

Hitters aren't as interested in routine ground-ball hits, either, a trend driven in part by two analytic insights. The first was more data on hitters' tendencies, which prompted teams to position their fielders in extreme ways. That so-called defensive shifting has made a ground ball less promising as a means of reaching base.

The second was a revelation born of a statistic that only recently came into existence--the launch angle. Radar and camera measurements of the angle at which balls leave the bat have shown that the optimal swing angle looks more like an uppercut than many hitters preferred. Hitters, in turn, have started swinging for the fences in droves. Home runs this season reached a record level.

That all-or-nothing approach means that between each home run there is a lot of standing around and waiting. Some classic displays of athleticism--a daring attempt by a runner to advance more than one base on a teammate's hit, for instance--have become rarer.

"I get excited for those plays, but they are getting lost," says former major-league pitcher and current TBS broadcast analyst Ron Darling. "There's a real collective, conservative style of play that doesn't lend well to the aesthetics of the game."

More than one-third of all plate appearances this season ended in either a home run, a strikeout or a walk, the most ever. There were around 3.9 pitches thrown per batter, also the highest on record.

Proponents of analytics are unapologetic for the kind of baseball they have helped create. "I wouldn't call that bad. I would call that progress," says Billy Beane, the longtime Oakland Athletics executive featured in the 2003 book "Moneyball" and portrayed by Brad Pitt in the 2011 film adaptation. "I just think the game is as good as it's ever been."

There are anecdotal signs that even older, avid fans are growing impatient. Shannon Prior, 48 years old, of Morristown, N.J., has written a blog about his favorite team, the New York Mets, since 2008. This year, in addition to watching fewer games, he made a rule. At 10 p.m., typically just short of three hours after the first pitch is thrown, he would stop watching, regardless of the score, which caused him to miss the end of all but a handful of

games. He cited the abundance of pitching changes.
"I put the game on and I'm fine," Mr. Prior says. "Then we get to the fifth or sixth inning and we're changing pitchers every batter and the game grinds to a complete halt. The game stops."
Baseball executives don't expect general managers or field managers to alter their strategies, given that their job is to find the best way to win, irrespective of the impact on the game.
Instead, league officials have looked to the rules of the game for remedies . Earlier this year, MLB commissioner Rob Manfred appointed a 16-member committee comprising owners, team presidents, general managers and field managers to suggest potential changes.
According to one member, the committee has explored a range of possibilities that could diminish some of the impact analytics have had on pace of play. Among the options discussed were a ban on defensive shifts, restrictions on pitching changes and shrinking the strike zone, this person says.
The changes Mr. Manfred is pushing for are less dramatic. In addition to the pitch clock, he said at a recent news conference, MLB is discussing with the players' union a limit on visits to the pitcher's mound and shortening breaks between innings. He declined to comment further.
Those tweaks would represent a more conservative approach than some other professional sports leagues have taken. When the National Basketball Association wanted to improve its style of play, it changed its defensive rules. When the National Football League wanted to create more of a highflying spectacle, it added an array of new restrictions on defense.
Even baseball, bound by traditions as it is, lowered the pitcher's mound in 1969 to boost scoring.
"Other sports are always tinkering with the game to make it more entertaining," says Mets general manager Sandy Alderson. "We don't do any of that."
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