Payton McAlice | Business | Jul. 6, 2022, 12:00 AM

**Banning The Shift Is Bad for Baseball**

Major League Baseball continues to look for ways to curb analytics-based strategy. They should be embracing it.

The irony of the situation is that the game known for being at the forefront of sports analytics is now doing its best to move backwards. Coming out of the 2021-22 renegotiations of the Collective Bargaining Agreement between team owners and the players union, Major League Baseball has announced [plans to roll out a number of new regulations in 2023](https://abcnews.go.com/Sports/wireStory/inning-twinbills-extra-inning-runners-2022-78822032). Amongst these changes are rules about pitch clocks, automated strike zones, and of course, the fielding shift. The fielding shift is a strategy in which the team on defense will adjust where players are standing on the field to be in better position to field balls hit by a specific batter (usually rooted in data regarding where said batter tends to put the ball in play). [Although it has implementations dating back to the 1920’s](https://www.mlb.com/news/infield-shift-a-definitive-history), shifts today have become more frequent and more extreme. It is no longer rare to see three infielders on the same side of the field. These developments are a result of the advancements in analytics within baseball; teams now have hyper-specific optimal positions for every fielder to be for every opposing hitter.

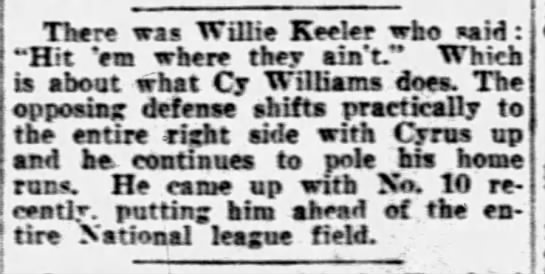
MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred has been a champion of banning the fielding shift ever since he assumed office in 2015. He believes that restricting how fielders can position themselves on the field will create more offense and more excitement. However, Manfred is doing this at the cost of disrupting the natural evolution of the sport in the modern era. Contrary to what is being said, the fielding shift is not a new development, nor does it negatively affect the entertainment value of the sport. Instead of trying to impose rules that disallow these new data-driven strategies, MLB should be embracing the evolution of its sports and fanbase.

**The Shift Has Precedent**

Speaking to the Baseball Writers' Association of America before the 2021 MLB All-Star Game, Commissioner Manfred said regarding his plans to ban the shift, "Remember, the game evolves, right? What we play today don’t look all that much like 1971. And the question is, which version would you like to get to?” Manfred describes the ban as less of a “change” and more of a “restoration” to what the game of baseball used to look like.

The fielding shift is not new. It has been part of this game longer than the designated hitter, which is a position that Manfred himself has gone out of his way to protect. Against 1920’s slugger Cy Williams teams often implemented a fielding shift reflective of his tendencies. In the 1940’s, manager Lou Boudreau used the shift against superstar Ted Williams by fielding seven of his eight fielders on the same half of the field.

The availability of pitch-by-pitch data has allowed analysts to optimize fielder location for every position and for every opposing hitter. The shift is not a product of analytics; analytics have been used to make the shift the best it can be. If Manfred’s argument for banning the shift is a “restoration” of how baseball used to be played, then it’s a moot point because the shift has a well-documented and long-standing history with the game.

[](https://www.newspapers.com/clip/33316635/untitled/)

*Courtesy of newspapers.com*

**The Shift Is Not Boring**

Proponents of banning the shift often cite that fielding shifts are simply frustrating to watch. The argument is that fans don’t want to see a ball hit hard up the middle of the field be turned into a routine groundout. Banning shift turns that grounder up the middle into a base hit again, or as Rob Manfred says, “It makes the game look like what it looked like when I was 12 years old.”

Per batting-average-on-balls-in-play (BABIP), which measures the probability a ball put in play turns into a base hit, the rate at which contact is being turned into hits has not significantly increased or decreased over the past few decades. [Since 2002 it has always been within 0.010 of 0.300](https://blogs.fangraphs.com/what-banning-the-shift-does-and-does-not-accomplish/). The number of hits is not significantly changing, regardless of shifting. What’s changing is what kind of contact is going for hits and what kind of contact is going for outs. Those hits up the middle that used to make for excitingly close plays are still present, they’re just being hit somewhere else on the field. Whether intentional or not, hitters are adjusting to the shift and are continuing to find ways to generate offense. The game is shaping around the fielding shift, and it would be a disservice to analytics and the sport to step in the way of its natural progression in the interest of turning back the clock.

**The Sport Evolving Is a Good Thing**

It is true that shifting today is not the same as shifting in the 1940’s. Shifts used to be reserved for the most dangerous hitters like Ted Williams, while today there is a shift for just about any player in any lineup. However, sports are constantly at the mercy of new revolutions in strategy and the shift is nothing more than that.

In the early years of professional basketball, offensive production was comparatively much lower than it is today. In the 1940’s and early 1950’s the league’s average scoring never rose above 84.1 points per game. Starting in the mid-1950’s however, the fast break offense was popularized by [teams like the Boston Celtics](https://www.nba.com/celtics/history/Recap_1950s.html). Their new style of play emphasized aggressive moving of the ball that allowed offenses to score before the opposing defense could even set themselves. Scoring throughout the league skyrocketed; [by the 1957-58 season teams were comfortably averaging more than 100 points per game](https://www.basketball-reference.com/leagues/NBA_stats_per_game.html).

The National Basketball Association could have introduced regulations restricting to what extent the fastbreak could be implemented; they could have enforced some sort of grace period that allowed the defense to set itself up before the next play began. They did not, and the league is better for it. Gameplay is now more dynamic with an emphasis on maneuvering the ball and players around the court rather than passing back and forth between stagnant players.

Watching sports evolve is what makes them beautiful. Sports are not meant to look the same as they did fifty years ago. If they did, it would mean that nobody cares enough to push them to their limits. If nobody is testing the bounds and conventions of the game, then what is the point in still playing them? The fielding shift is as much of a part of baseball now as catchers having special gloves and pitchers throwing breaking balls. Instead of being seen as some taboo issue, it should be treated as an integral part of the game and its strategy.

The fielding shift has long been used as a scapegoat for peoples’ frustrations about how analytics are allegedly hurting the traditions of baseball. However, the fact of the matter is that baseball has been and will continue to be at the cutting edge of sports analytics. Shifts are a reflection and love letter to what this sport has evolved into becoming all about. Banning them would be a disservice to not only the work of analysts today, but to anyone who’s ever done anything to push forward the game of baseball. These advancements should be celebrated and encouraged because they show how a game that is well over a century old can still be studied and expanded.

**Author’s Note**

I’m choosing to model my opinion piece after those on Wired. I had spent some time looking for a reputable sports analytics website with op-eds but was unsuccessful. I felt that Wired made the most sense after that as it looks at technology and how it affects different industries.

This is the opinion piece I structured my piece after: <https://www.wired.com/story/assassins-creed-valhalla-rant/>