Headline: Freddie Freeman's Path to the NL MVP
Subheader: Although conventional numbers scream MVP, here is why Freeman really was the National League's best player.

The stage couldn't have been bigger.

It was the bottom of the 13th inning in a first-round playoff matchup between the Atlanta Braves and Cincinnati Reds. With a runner on first and third base, Braves star first baseman Freddie Freeman lined an 86-mph slider into center field.

The runner from third scored. Ballgame over.

The walk-off hit not only gave the Braves a 1-0 series advantage over the Reds, but it also exemplified one of Freddie Freeman's greatest strengths: hitting a line drive. More on that later.

Fast forward two months after the playoff game, Freddie Freeman was selected as the National League Most Valuable Player. The thirty-one year old defeated two finalists, Dodgers right fielder Mookie Betts and Padres third baseman Manny Machado, and won 28 of out 30 first-place votes. He's the first Atlanta Brave to claim MVP honors since former teammate Chipper Jones won the award in 1999.

Freeman played in all 60 regular season games for the Braves, batting second or third in the lineup each game. He batted .341 (2nd in NL), scored 51 runs (1st in NL), drove in 53 RBI (2nd in NL) and had 23 doubles (1st in NL). These conventional numbers alone would center Freeman in the MVP conversation, yet exploring more specific statistics emphasize Freeman's 2020 season dominance.

Late Game Production

Freddie Freeman was the most productive hitter in the late innings for the Braves this season. Officially, the split is called "eighth inning or later." I call this the "clutch stat." Below is a table of some statistics (source: MLB.com) of the three NL MVP finalist performances after the eighth inning.

Stat (late game prod.)	BA	2B	R	OBP	OPS	BABIP	GIDP
Freeman	**.393**	**6**	**51**	**.605**	**1.319**	**.417**	**0**
Betts	.250	4	47	.283	.896	.189	1
Machado	.378	2	44	.442	1.098	**.417**	1

While Freeman had a statistical advantage over Betts and Machado in the late innings, I will focus on three (doubles, OPS, and GIDP) for the purposes of this article. Freeman had six doubles in late innings, two more than Betts and four more than Machado. Freeman, the major league leader in doubles, was a two-bagger machine regardless of the inning. But under the most pressure late in a ballgame, Freeman delivered.

Next, OPS. OPS stands for On-Base-Plus-Slugging percentage. This number is merely the sum of a player's On Base Percentage and their Slugging Percentage. The statistic tracks how often a player is on base and their overall power. Freeman's 1.319 OPS was the best in baseball and 0.221 greater than Machado and 0.423 better than Betts.

Finally, although not an "advanced metric," Freeman did not ground into a single double play after the eighth inning in a regular season game this year. Betts and Machado, to their credit, were not far behind with one GIDP. Each out can be detrimental in the late innings, especially when your team is trailing. Freeman's dominance was not just what he did (hit doubles, home runs, etc.) but it was also what he didn't do (ground into double plays).

A Mookie Counterargument

I think it is important to recognize that Mookie Betts' production during the season led to him receiving two first-place votes in the NL MVP voting. Let's explore why. Any argument for Betts as the MVP should center around "WAR". WAR stands for "Wins Above Replacement." According to MLB.com, WAR measures a player's value in all facets of the game by deciphering how many more wins he's worth than a replacement-level player at his same position. Although Freeman led the NL in many advanced metrics, Betts did have the better overall WAR than Freeman or Machado (see table below). And it wasn't even particularly close.

Stat	**WAR**
Freeman	2.9
Betts	**3.4**
Machado	2.8

Betts' 3.4 WAR was the best in baseball and one of the main reasons why the Dodgers gave him the second-richest contract in MLB history. Due to Betts' batting skills coupled with superb fielding, an argument could be made that he is the hardest player in baseball for a team to replace. Ultimately, Betts didn't win the NL MVP for three reasons: 1) he wasn't as productive in the late innings as Freeman, 2) he wasn't as efficient as Freeman when their respective team's were trailing, and 3) he didn't have as impressive advanced metrics as Freeman.

When The Braves Were Trailing

When the Braves were trailing in a game, Freeman was the player you wanted digging into the batter's box. As exemplified by the below table, Freeman had a better batting average and OPS than Machado and Betts when their teams were trailing. Machado and Freeman were tied with six home runs when playing from behind.

Stat (when team is behind)	**BA**	**HR**	**OPS**
Freeman	**.368**	**6**	**1.177**
Betts	.286	4	.935
Machado	.351	**6**	1.098

A Deeper Dive Into the "Metrics"

If Freeman's greatness in the late innings and when the Braves were trailing wasn't enough to solidify his MVP status, below is a table of seven advanced metric categories (source: Rotowire) that demonstrate Freeman's advantage over Betts and Machado.

Stat	**K %**	**BB %**	**BABIP**	**wOBA**	**GB %**	**LD %**	**ISO**
Freeman	**14.1**	**17.2**	**.366**	**.465**	**31.6**	**31.1**	**.299**
Betts	15.4	9.8	.289	.399	32.4	21.4	.270
Machado	14.6	10.2	.297	.405	37.4	22.1	.276

For the purposes of this article, I will be focusing on four statistics (BABIP, wOBA, LD%, and ISO).

First, BABIP. BABIP is a player's "Batting Average on Balls In Play." The stat measures a player's batting average exclusively on balls hit into the field of play, removing outcomes not affected by the opposing defense (namely home runs and strikeouts). Freeman's BABIP was 0.069 higher than Machado and 0.077 higher than Betts. The stat is useful because it shows how effective a player is at getting on base when they make contact with the ball. Freeman, Betts, and Machado were all productive "contact-hitters" this season, meaning they didn't strike out often and would consistently put the ball in play. But Freeman reached base more than Betts and Machado when he made contact with the ball.

Now, wOBA. This stands for "Weighted On Base Average." The stat is a version of on-base percentage that accounts for how a player reached base -- instead of simply considering whether a player reached base. Freeman's .465 wOBA was much higher than Betts and Machado and shows that when Freeman would get on base, it wasn't always walks and singles--most of the time, it was extra base hits or home runs.

Lastly, LD%. The stat stands for "Line Drive Percentage." The stat simply represents the percentage of balls hit into the field of play that are characterized as line drives. Line drives don't always equate to hits, but typically show that a player is making solid contact with the baseball. Freeman's 31.1 LD% exemplifies a goal to line the ball into play rather than hacking at the ball hoping to hit a home run. Typically on Braves telecasts, the announcers would talk about how Freeman's approach to hitting was a "line-drive approach." Instead of trying to hit a home run, Freeman said his goal was always to hit a line-drive. This way, he had a better chance of not flying or grounding out. And sometimes, Freeman would even hit line drive home-runs. With such a high LD%, it is not surprising to see the highly efficient offensive numbers Freeman possessed in 2020.

Yet Freeman's ascendance to the NL MVP award did not come without any hurdles. In July, Freeman tested positive for COVID-19. He said he had a temperature of 104.5 degrees and that he "prayed for his life." After recovering, Freeman frequently spoke on the dangers of COVID-19 and urged fans not to take the virus lightly. From the coronavirus to NL MVP, I'd say Freeman had quite a year.

"His presence, who he is and what it means to our organization, on the field, in the clubhouse, off the field, the man he is," said Braves manager Brian Snitker about Freeman.

It seems that Freddie Freeman is admired both on and off the field. If he keeps putting up 2020-like numbers the rest of his career, Freeman could win another MVP or two, and potentially solidify a spot in Cooperstown.

Glossary:

WAR = WAR measures a player's value in all facets of the game by deciphering how many more wins he's worth than a replacement-level player at his same position (e.g., a Minor League replacement or a readily available fill-in free agent).
K % = Strikeout rate represents the frequency with which a pitcher strikes out hitters, as determined by total strikeouts divided by total batters faced (the lower the better).

BB% = Walk rate represents the frequency with which a pitcher walks hitters, as determined by total walks divided by total batters faced (the higher the better).
BABIP = measures a player's batting average exclusively on balls hit into the field of play, removing outcomes not affected by the opposing defense (namely home runs and strikeouts).
wOBA = a version of on-base percentage that accounts for how a player reached base -- instead of simply considering whether a player reached base. The value for each method of reaching base is determined by how much that event is worth in relation to projected runs scored (example: a double is worth more than a single).
GB% = represents the percentage of balls hit into the field of play that are characterized as ground balls. Each ball that is hit into the field of play is characterized as a line drive, a fly ball, a ground ball or a pop-up.
LD% = Line-drive rate represents the percentage of balls hit into the field of play that are characterized as line drives.
ISO = measures the raw power of a hitter by taking only extra-base hits -- and the type of extra-base hit -- into account.
BA = is determined by dividing a player's hits by his total at-bats for a number between zero (shown as .000) and one (1.000).
2B = A batter is credited with a double when he hits the ball into play and reaches second base without the help of an intervening error or attempt to put out another baserunner.
OBP = OBP refers to how frequently a batter reaches base per plate appearance.
GIDP = A GIDP occurs when a player hits a ground ball that results in multiple outs on the bases.