

## **In Defense of Baseball**

On Thursday afternoon, May 21, Madison Bumgarner of the Giants and Clayton Kershaw of the Dodgers, arguably the two premiere left-handers in the National League, faced off in San Francisco. The first run of the game came in the Giants' third, when Bumgarner led off with a line drive home run into the left-field bleachers. It was Bumgarner's seventh career home run, and the first Kershaw had ever surrendered to another pitcher. In the top of the fourth, Kershaw came to bat with two on and two out. Bumgarner obliged him with a fastball on a 2-1 count, and Kershaw lifted a fairly deep, but harmless, fly ball to center field. The Giants went on to win, 4-0. Even though the pitching matchup was the main point of interest in the game, the result really turned on that exchange of at-bats. Kershaw couldn't do to Bumgarner what Bumgarner had done to him.

A week later, the Atlanta Braves were in San Francisco, and the Giants sent rookie Chris Heston to the mound, against the Braves' Shelby Miller. Heston and Miller were even better than Bumgarner and Kershaw had been, and the game remained scoreless until Brandon Belt reached Miller for a solo home run in the seventh. Miller was due to bat second in the eighth inning, and with the Braves behind with only six outs remaining, manager Fredi Gonzalez elected to pinch-hit, even though Miller had only thrown 86 pitches. The Braves failed to score, and with the Braves' starter out of the game, the Giants steamrolled the Braves' bullpen for six runs in the bottom of the eighth. They won by that 7-0 score.

"Baseball," says Rule 1.01 in its Official Rules, "is a game between two teams of nine players each." The two Thursday games both evolved as they did because they were National League games, played according to Rule 1.01, with the pitchers in the lineups. The tension and excitement of both contests rested on that essential dimension. In the first of the two, the excitement came largely from Bumgarner's own performance at the plate. In the second, Belt's homer forced the Braves' manager to make the classic tradeoff — central to the nature of the game — between the desire to continue with a pitcher performing strongly and the urgency to try to score an equalizer late in the game.

Imagine the two games as American League contests, played with a designated hitter. A designated hitter would have deprived us of Bumgarner's home run, of course, but a DH would also have deprived Bumgarner of the opportunity to press his advantage when he pitched to Kershaw. In the Atlanta game, Belt's home run, rather than forcing the opposition to make a crucial strategic decision at a critical moment, would just have produced one run in the seventh inning. Far from adding to these games, the use of the designated hitter would have subtracted from them by relieving the pitchers of their influence on offense and by removing an essential source of the tension of the game. The designated hitter sterilizes and simplifies our game, our game whose interest and excitement derive in no small measure from its richness and complexity.

The American League adopted the designated hitter rule beginning in the 1973 season, presumably with the goal of injecting more offense into the game. How well has it worked? Let's look at some statistics<sup>1</sup> comparing results in the American and National Leagues for 2014. The figures are aggregate averages (for statistics like batting average); averages per team; or, if specified, averages per game.

Statistic – Season 2014	American League	National League
Runs scored per team, season	677.4	640.0
Runs scored/game	4.18	3.95
Runs allowed/game	4.14	4.00
Earned run average	3.82	3.66
Batting average	.253	.249
Home runs per team, season	144.1	135.0
Slugging percentage	.390	.382
Hits per team, season	1402.2	1370.8
Hits/game	8.66	8.46
Sacrifice hits per team, season	30.5	59.1
Walks received per team, season	472.7	461.9
Intentional walks rec'd/team, season	31.4	34.3
Plate appearances per game	37.94	37.75
On-base percentage	.316	.312
Runners left on base/team, season	1112.1	1109.7

The DH does seem to produce a bit more offense, but perhaps not so much as we might expect. American League teams produced 2.3% more hits, 2.3% more walks, 6.7% more home runs, and 5.8% more runs than their National League counterparts. Looked at another way, the AL's 31.4 extra hits and 10.8 extra walks per team translated into 37.4 extra runs per team. So AL fans, on average, saw their clubs produce about 1.2 extra hits and 1.4 extra runs — per week. As a bonus, each AL club hit about 1.5 extra home runs *per month*. Based on on-base percentage and runs scored, 34.9% of AL runners reaching base scored, against 33.6% for the Senior Circuit. Basically in the American League an extra hitter reaches base, and then scores, about six times a month.

The main way the designated hitter rule adds offense, of course, is by substituting a player we're to presume is a professional hitter for the pitcher, who isn't one, in the batting order. Yes, pitchers can be painful or comical to watch at the plate. But even in the National League, the conduct of the game limits how much we see them hitting. In 2014, pitchers took just 5.4% of all at bats in the National League — about one in every 18. When a pitcher is due to bat and a National League manager urgently needs a hit, we usually see a pinch-hitter.

The difference in offensive production between the American and National Leagues may be smaller than we might expect, but two statistics stand out. National League teams received almost 10% more intentional walks than AL teams did, and

<sup>1</sup> Data are from Baseball Reference: <http://www.baseball-reference.com/leagues/MLB/2014.shtml>. Pitching and offensive statistics may not appear to balance because of inter-league play.

they executed nearly double the number of sacrifices. Pitchers were responsible for around 60% of the sacrifices in the National League. Both the intentional walk and sacrifice statistics speak to a second aspect of the National League game that is absent where the game uses a designated hitter — the special role of the #8 hitter in the lineup.

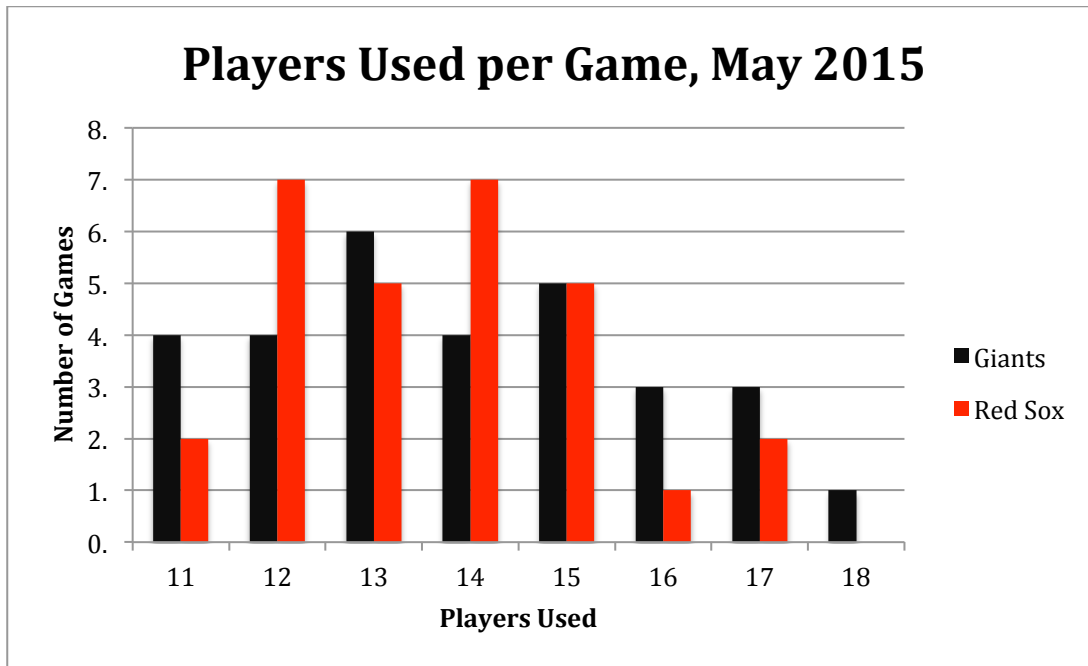
With the designated hitter, scoring runs is mostly a matter of stringing together enough hits from whoever happens to be due to bat. One inning is then much like another. In the nine-player game, though, the bottom of the batting order requires its own strategy, especially with respect to the eighth-place hitter. This difference adds a texture to the game that the designated hitter eliminates. In the early innings, if the eighth hitter comes up with runners on base and two out, the defensive team may elect to walk #8 and instead face the pitcher. That's why NL teams receive more intentional walks. The risk is that if the pitcher then reaches base, now the offense has the top of the order up, with runs in or the bases loaded.

With no outs or one out, and no one on base, the eighth-place hitter wants to reach base so that the pitcher has an opportunity to sacrifice. If #8 makes an out instead, chances are good that the one out will turn into two. Even with two outs, the eighth hitter can make an unusually large contribution just by reaching base, because even if the pitcher then makes the third out, it's the lead-off hitter, and not the pitcher, that will start the next inning. So while in the American League a manager might hide a weak or slumping hitter in the "eight hole," the nine-player game puts a premium on the #8 hitter's ability to reach base.

Proponents of the designated hitter rule sometimes argue that the rule allows the best players, the ones we fans most want to see, to stay in the games longer. Player use certainly does differ between the leagues. If we look through the box scores of the San Francisco Giants and the Boston Red Sox for the month of May 2015, an interesting pattern emerges. Even though the Red Sox started each game with ten players (though I like to think of it as eight-and-two-halves) and the Giants nine, the Giants used an average of 13.93 players per game, while the Red Sox averaged 13.58. The Giants also exhibited much more variability in the number of players they used. The chart below shows a histogram<sup>2</sup> of the number of times the Giants and Red Sox each used different numbers of players in that month's games. The Giants had more games with unusually few or unusually many. The Red Sox used 12, 13, 14, or 15 players in 24 of their 29 games, while the Giants used from 12 to 15 in just 19 of 30.

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<sup>2</sup> Based on my manual count from box scores in MLB.com Gameday. I may have made errors.



The variability in the Giants' use of players speaks to the flexibility a National League manager has to preserve to respond to the evolution of each particular game. That unpredictability adds complexity and interest to the game, and the need to anticipate more possibilities provides the thoughtful fan an extra layer of speculation to add to the analysis and enjoyment of the contest. In a National League game, almost any member of each team (aside from starting pitchers) has to be ready to enter the game at any time. In an American League game, the list of players unlikely to see action in a particular game is longer. That predictability means that one American League game is much like another. Add to that the greater uniformity of the lineup, which makes the innings more alike too, and the designated hitter rule ends up making the game less interesting, not more.

The proposition that the designated hitter allows us to see more of the best players isn't even correct. The Texas Rangers reached the 2010 World Series with Vladimir Guerrero as their designated hitter. Guerrero was once an excellent outfielder, but at age 35, he had lost enough range that he mostly stayed out of the field. In 2010 he hit .300 in 593 at bats, but only accepted 31 fielding chances. In Game 1 of the World Series in San Francisco, Guerrero played right field, where he made two errors in three chances. That performance was unworthy of a top player, and the Rangers realized that they couldn't afford to have Guerrero in the lineup for Game 2. Guerrero filled the designated hitter role for the Orioles in 2011, and then retired, having fielded only sparingly for three full seasons. The designated hitter rule induced the Rangers and Orioles to keep the aging Guerrero on their rosters, rather than open a spot that could have gone to a younger, more exciting prospect.

Watching the best players is surely part of the pleasure of the game, but who are the best players? Matt Holliday of the Cardinals is an excellent hitter (a .308

lifetime average and 274 home runs to date), but he has never excelled in the field. He's still an asset to the Cardinals, but Cardinal fans, properly, have mixed feelings about him. In contrast, for Albert Pujols, once of the Cardinals but now of the Angels, preparing for games often includes taking practice ground balls at first base so that if the opportunity arises to start a double play, he will have a chance to be successful. Pujols understands that fielding well is an essential part of being a top player.

The view that the designated hitter allows us to see more of the top players also misses a deeper, more important point. Baseball is unusual among team sports in the way it spotlights individual efforts, but it is still a team sport. There are thrills and excitement in individual efforts, but the true beauty of the game is in the contest between the two teams. The designated hitter game shifts the emphasis from the teams to a subset of the clubs' individual players. As such, it is a stripped-down version of baseball where each team's game is a sequence of individual efforts by players wearing the same uniform. If we want to watch baseball at its best, what we should want to watch are good teams, not two loosely affiliated collections of good players.

Brandon Belt's home run in that Thursday game against the Braves epitomizes the difference in emphasis between the designated hitter game and the full-team game. Belt's home run forced the Braves to pinch-hit for a strong pitcher. In the designated hitter game, the starting pitcher would have been able to continue. In the full team game of baseball, Brandon Belt's home run becomes a blow that forces a strong pitcher from the game, and benefits Belt's whole team far beyond the single mark on the scoreboard. Belt's home run changed the entire strategic aspect of the game — a far more interesting development than being able to see Shelby Miller pitch for another inning.

So you may keep your extra home run and a half per month. Keep your superannuated sluggers that can't field any more, and your younger bats that never could. Keep your simplified strategies, where managers can always use the pitchers they want, regardless of how the opposition has altered the tactical balance of the game. No, keep your stripped-down, sterilized shadow of the game, and give me baseball. Baseball, with its endless combinations of possibilities, and the need to anticipate all of them. Baseball, where the eighth place in the batting order is a battleground. Baseball, where a team is incomplete without a Joachin Arias, who can play any infield position when the need arises to make a double switch. Baseball, where every player really has to be able to play the game. Baseball, where each at-bat matters not as a showcase of individual abilities, but as an event embedded in a complex, multidimensional contest — that sublime game between two teams of nine players each.

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