

# Baseball: What a Boring Game

by Phillip W. Weiss

On August 23, 2018, I attended a baseball game at Citi Field Baseball Park. The Pittsburgh Pirates defeated the New York Mets by the score of 3 to 1. The game was tedious. The fans were disengaged. Throughout the entire game, people were leaving their seats to purchase food and other concessions or were using the cell phones to engage in conversations while the game was going on. To spark fan interest in the game, the park resorted to all kinds of garish audio and visual props. All that did was produce intensely annoying and irritating noise that made the entire banal experience even more unpleasant. The game ended anti-climatically in the bottom of the ninth inning with the umpire calling the final batter of the game out on strikes. It was the nineteenth strike out of the game for both teams. Each team has five base hits; each team hit one home run. Lots of strikeouts, and two home runs. A typical game for major league baseball.

At the ballpark, it is easy to fall asleep while watching a baseball game. It is easy to lose interest in the game. At the ballpark, fans often are more interested in chatting with each other than in watching what is occurring on the field. In the past, before all the electronic gadgetry employed at baseball parks today, baseball games were far more interesting to watch. Sound props were not necessary. The game itself kept the fans' interest. Why the change? Why are baseball games today so boring?

One reason offered is the current trend for major league baseball teams to employ a defensive maneuver called The Shift. What is The Shift? It is ~~a stacking~~

a

repositioning of three or more infield players to either the left or right side of the infield. Its purpose is to reduce the chances of a batter pulling the ball through the infield for a base hit. For a right-handed batter, the second baseman moves to the left of second base (relative to home plate) and the shortstop moves into the shallow portion of left field. For left-handed batter, the shortstop moves to the right side of second base and the second baseman moves into the shallow portion of right field. In either case, the second baseman and shortstop are now playing away of their normal positions. Teams employ The Shift based on the presumption that the batter will try to pull the ball.

While it is true that The Shift can cause pitchers to work the inside part of plate and thereby yield more bases on balls, it alone does not account for the paucity of action. First, despite The Shift, there has been no marked increase in the number of walks per game. Second, shift or no shift, batters go to the plate to hit the ball, not negotiate bases on balls. Third, today's baseball players have the athleticism and skill to hit the ball to all fields WHEN THEY WANT TO, regardless of where the pitcher places the ball. Baseball players are fully capable of successfully handling all kinds of pitches and driving the ball to the opposite field.

It is reasonable to presume that if a team decides to leave half of the infield virtually undefended, then a batter would want to hit the ball into the area vacated and thereby gain an easy base hit. If that is the case, then why is it that batters generally do not hit the ball away from The Shift? The answer is this: it has to do with the culture of baseball that assigns the highest priority to the home run as

the preferred method of scoring a run. This is not surprising. A home run is the quickest and most efficient way to produce a run. It eliminates the need to use two, three or more batters to eke out a run, when one batter with one swing of the bat can achieve the same result. Also, by hitting the ball over The Shift, it decisively defeats The Shift. In addition, most players are capable of hitting home runs and fans enjoy watching players hit home runs, so teams opt to go for the home run.

However, that decision comes at a price. It increases the likelihood of a batter striking out. Paradoxically, while hitting a home run is one of the most thrilling feats in sports, few events in professional sports deflates interest in a game more quickly than watching a batter strike out. It is one of the most public demonstrations of failure, and one of the most prolonged.

During a baseball game, it is common for a batter to remain at the plate for as long as ten minutes before striking out. When this scenario keeps repeating itself, it produces a mental malaise. I call this condition Cerebral Mental Asphyxiation, or CMA. Due to lack of stimulation, cerebral cells begin to lapse into a semi-comatose state and the cerebellum quickly takes control of the body. This produces a rapid onset of mental fatigue and distractibility combined with an uncontrollable urge to eat foods high in starch, drink beverages with high alcohol content, blabber loudly and incessantly, and then lapse into a semi-stupor state. No one is immune to CMA. Since, at any given game, the chances of watching batters strike out multiple times is almost an absolute certainty, the chances of

acquiring CMA at a baseball game is high. Discontinuing exposure to the game will reverse the symptoms. In extreme cases, it is recommended that the fan avoid watching baseball games altogether for at least one week. Of course, as in the case with any other addiction, during this period of abstinence only trained personnel should monitor the fan to prevent relapse.

Yet, despite these deleterious effects, major league baseball seems unwilling to address this issue. There are more strikeouts today than ever before. For the first time in the history of the game, the average number of strikeouts per game is now virtually equal to the average number of base hits per game. Consider the following statistics. In 2018, in the National League, through 1,908 games there have been 8.46 hits per team per game and 8.57 strike outs. In the American League, through 1,906 games the figures are 8.49 and 8.29 respectively. Compare these stats with those from previous years. In 1995, in the National League the figures were 9.03 and 6.61 and in the American League 9.40 and 6.00. In 1960, in the National League the figures were 8.68 and 5.51 and in the American League 8.66 and 4.85. Today fewer base hits and more strikeouts, and more CMA.

To make the game more exciting to watch, major league baseball could revise its rules, such as increasing the number of pitches needed to strike out a batter or reduce the size of the infield diamond, but that would fundamentally change the nature of the game. However, there are certain actions that baseball can take while keeping current structure of the game intact. First, replace the current hard ball with a deader ball. Today's baseballs simply have too much bounce, perfect for hitting home runs, and for striking out. Use of a deader ball

would make it harder for a batter to hit a home run but increase the likelihood of keeping the ball in play. Second, increase the weight of the bats. That would make it harder to pull the ball. Third, move the fences back or make the fences higher.

Each one of these moves would make a home run harder to hit and incentivize players to go for base hits instead. This would keep more balls in play per at bat and thereby make the game more interesting for both the players and fans, and obviate the need for loud noises and other ear shattering and eye straining gimmicks, prompts and distractions to keep the fans engaged and awake.

## Sources

Use of defensive shifts in baseball is spreading — because it works  
<http://www.latimes.com/sports/la-sp-baseball-defensive-shifts-20150719-story.html#>

Time for Major League Baseball to ban the infield shift  
<https://www.axs.com/time-for-major-league-baseball-to-ban-the-infield-shift-13962>

The Shift has given the shaft to our enjoyment of baseball  
<http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sports/columnists/nick-canepa/sd-sp-canepa-shift-baseball-0429-story.html>

Yankees manager Joe Girardi would like to ban shift from baseball  
[http://www.espn.com/mlb/story/\\_/id/15389059/joe-girardi-new-york-yankees-ban-shift-baseball](http://www.espn.com/mlb/story/_/id/15389059/joe-girardi-new-york-yankees-ban-shift-baseball)

Baseball Therapy: Why The Shift Persists  
<https://www.baseballprospectus.com/news/article/36897/baseball-therapy-shift-persists/>

Quantifying the Effect of the Shift in Major League Baseball  
[https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.bing.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1275&context=senproj\\_s2017](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.bing.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1275&context=senproj_s2017)

MLB myth-buster: The shift isn't curbing runs; it's creating them  
[http://www.espn.com/mlb/story/\\_/id/24265798/mlb-myth-buster-shift-curbing-runs-creating-them](http://www.espn.com/mlb/story/_/id/24265798/mlb-myth-buster-shift-curbing-runs-creating-them)

Scully on the history of the defensive shift  
<https://youtu.be/hyBsVs5Y4a4>

MLB The Shift Robbing Batters Of Hits  
<https://youtu.be/5cvLDncwAyE>

Analyzing the “baseball is boring” stigma  
<https://www.foxsports.com/mlb/just-a-bit-outside/story/is-baseball-really-boring-020515>

If MLB wants more fans, baseball must shed the 'boring' label  
<http://www.sportingnews.com/us/mlb/news/mlb-baseball-rule-changes-2017-rob-manfred-pace-of-play-boring/5qgsv4ptn4ko1ws7wdbwgiun9>

The Simpsons – Baseball's boring  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIORWhsJjNM>

Baseball-Reference.com - Official Site  
<https://www.baseball-reference.com>