

Chicks Dig the Long Ball, but GMs Prefer a High OBP **Robert E. Weir, Ph.D.**

In baseball, the homerun holds such allure that in 1996, Nike ran a television advertisement themed “Chicks Dig the Long Ball.” It featured two Atlanta Braves pitchers, Tom Glavine and Greg Maddux, furiously working out in the gym in the vain hope of acquiring the muscular development (and fawning female following) of St. Louis Cardinals slugger Mark McGwire.¹ It’s amusing because, though Glavine and Maddux are Hall of Fame pitchers, in a combined 45 years in the Big Leagues they collectively hit just six homers, about a third of what McGwire would hit in a single month in 1998.

Homerun hitters are often viewed as baseball’s “rock stars.” They attract media attention, (allegedly) command high salaries, and cultivate a devoted fan base. As it turns out, though, fans are often more impressed by homeruns than baseball scholars or Major League Baseball (MLB) general managers who sign players and negotiate contracts based upon assessments of a player’s total value to the team. Just because a player hits a lot of homeruns does not necessarily mean he will be win MLB fame. Consider this question: *Who holds the professional baseball record for homeruns?* If you answered Barry Bonds with his 762 career round trippers, do not pat yourself on the back. Bonds isn’t even close; the correct answer is Sadaharu Oh, the first baseman for the Yomiuri Giants of the Japan’s Central League, who cracked 868 in a career lasting from 1959 to 1980.

Oh never played MLB. Some analysts—“realists” to those in accord with them, and “snobs” to their critics—pay little attention to Oh’s record. They argue that (until

¹ The original commercial can be viewed on YouTube:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtgzlFiul_w

recently) the Japanese leagues were “professional” only in the sense that players were paid, and that for much of Sadaharu Oh’s career he played in smaller ballparks and faced pitching that was not comparable to that of MLB, or even that of top-level minor league franchises.

Sadaharu Oh raised a few eyebrows in 1974, when he lost a closely contested homerun contest to then-MLB career homerun leader Hank Aaron, but exhibitions such as homerun derbies are hardly analogous to live-game situations.² No one can say what Oh might have accomplished because he never sought to play MLB, but what of those prodigious sluggers who were in the MLB pipeline? The 73 home runs Barry Bonds hit in 2001 is a single-season professional record, but whose record did he break? It wasn’t the 70 clubbed by “Chicks Dig the Long Ball” hero Mark McGwire in 1998.

Until Bonds broke it, the professional record was 72, clubbed by Joe Willis Bauman of the Roswell Rockets in 1947. Joe who?



Photo: Used by permission of Sports Collector Digest

Well might you ask! Many of the greatest sluggers of the minor leagues were like Joe Bauman in that they are little more than asterisks in baseball history. Bauman never swung at a single MLB pitch. Such a statement baffles casual baseball fans and strikes them as patently unfair. Because so many fans glorify the homerun, it is frequently

² Aaron won the contest by hitting 10 homeruns to Oh’s 9. Homerun derbies are not, however, a true measure of much. In such events a pitcher lobs balls toward the batter with the sole purpose of making them enticing to hot over the fence. In a game, of course, a pitcher seeks to fool batters so that they make outs. Formats of homerun derbies vary, but in most, any pitch that isn’t hit for a homerun is an “out,” and the hitter continues swinging until he makes three outs. The number of three-out rounds also varies.

conflated with American ideals of meritocracy—the belief that hard work and prodigious deeds lead to success.³ Surely a player such as Joe Bauman deserved at least a chance to prove his mettle.

Unfairness is certainly a major theme of another popular culture product, the 1988 film *Bull Durham*. Kevin Costner played the lead role of Crash Davis, an aging catcher and power hitter. Davis had one short stay in MLB, and found himself a late-career hopeful playing in the high minor leagues. Instead, he is demoted to the A-level Durham Bulls to tutor talented, but petulant pitcher Calvin “Nuke” LaLoosh (Tim Robbins).⁴ Davis nurtures the raw LaLoosh to the point where he is called to the major leagues. For his meretricious efforts, Davis is released from the Bulls. He is so disgusted that he contemplates quitting professional baseball, but Davis latches onto a new team for the sole purpose of smacking his 247th homerun and setting the record for career minor league homers. Viewers are enticed to believe that Crash Davis was a good hitter who was cheated of his chance at major league fame.

There are several things wrong with this portrait. First of all, the real Lawrence “Crash” Davis was not a power hitter; director Ron Shelton stole his moniker because it “sounded” like a baseball name.⁵ The real Davis played in the minors from 1946 to 1952,

³ It should be said that the way the term meritocracy is used in popular culture conflicts with its sociological usage. The modern term is credited to British sociologist Michael Young who, in 1958, correlated intellect and effort with politicians rising through the ranks of Britain’s Labour Party. In Young’s view, meritocracy was an emergent antidote to the automatic privileges and standing associated the British social class system. The popular American understanding of the term often divorces intellect from the equation in favor of a simpler (and more palatable) formulation in which effort (of any sort) is expected to correlate with success. “Unfairness” occurs when hard work does *not* lead to success.

⁴ *Bull Durham*, Directed by Ron Shelton, Orion Pictures, (1998). For those unfamiliar, the minors are now ranked from lowest to most advanced by Rookie Short Season, A, Advanced A, AA, AAA; it used to go from D to gradations of AA.

⁵ Lawrence “Crash” Davis folder, National Baseball Hall of Fame, Cooperstown, NY. (Hereafter cited as HOF.) Note: A common problem using HOF materials is that the HOF has, in the past,

but hit just 51 homers in seven years. Second, the minor league record is considerably higher than 247. It is either 484 or 432. Like Sadaharu Oh's achievement, it depends on how one defines "professional" baseball. (See Tables 1 and 2.)

Table One: Top Ten Minor League Career Homerun Hitters

Player	Lat year Active	Primary League	Homeruns
Hector Espinso	1984	Mexican	484 (453 in MexL)
Nelson Barrera	2002	Mexican	479 (455 in MexL)
Alejandro Ortiz	2004	Mexican	458 (435 in MexL)
*Andres Morra	1997	Mexican	449
*Buzz Arlett	1937	Pacific Coast	432
*Nick Cullop	1944	Amer. Assoc.	420
*Merv Connors	1953	Low minors	400
*Joe Hauser	1942	Amer. Assoc.	399
*Bobby Prescott	1970	Pacific Coast League	398
*Jack Pierce	1987	Mexican	395

* Indicates got at least 1 AB in MLB

Table Two: Official Minor League Record Homeruns in Single Year⁶

League	Level	HRs	Player	Team	Year	Age
International	AAA	69	Joe Hauser	Minneapolis	1933	34
Pacific Coast	AAA	50	Ron Kittle	Edmonton	1982	24
Pacific Coast	AA	60	Tony Lazzeri	Salt Lake City	1925	21
Eastern	A	41	Ken Strong	Hazelton	1930	23
Eastern	AA	41	Rick Lancellotti	Buffalo	1979	22
Southern	AA	42	Tim Laudner	Orlando	1981	23
Texas	AA	62	Ken Guettler	Shreveport	1956	29

used clipping services to amass information, the vast majority of which failed to cite where the clippings appeared!

⁶ Sources for the above tables: Baseball-Reference.com; Bob McConnell, *Going for the Fences: The Minor League Home Run Book*, (2009)

Carolina	B	55	Leo Shoals, Jr.	Reidsville	1949	32
California	C	51	Bud Heslet	Visalia	1956	36
Longhorn	C	72	Joe Bauman	Roswell	1954	32
Florida State	D	33	Ed Levy	Sanford	1950	33
Florida State	A	33	Jim Fuller	Miami	1971	20
Midwest	Low A	42	Jeff Jones	Cedar Rapids	1982	24
South Atlantic	Low A	40	Russell Branyan	Columbus	1996	20
New York-Penn	Short Season	23	John Hennell	Utica	1982	24

Note: Mexican League will not be recognized as an official minor league until 1955. It obtained AAA status in 1967. Most pre-1967 Mexican League records are not entered into SABR records or in professional baseball's official records. Because it has no working affiliations and plays both a summer and winter season, records are still spotty. **Jack Pierce** is said to own the single season HR record with 54 in 1986.

Even diehard baseball fans will find many of the names on the lists either unfamiliar or unimpressive. Indeed, the only one that had a Hall of Fame career was Tony Lazzeri, a second baseman who played between 1926 and 1939 (mostly for the New York Yankees). The vast majority of minor league sluggers were like Joe Baumann or the fictional Crash Davis—they never made it to MLB at all, or had brief appearances in “The Show,” MLB’s nickname in *Bull Durham*.

How can that be? Surely meritocracy ideals have been abused. Or have they? Actually, as the sluggers on the above tables suggest, there is surprisingly little correlation between minor league homerun prowess and MLB acclaim. Baseball fans will recognize some of the names but, unlike Lazzeri, they are not among MLB’s immortals. Andres Mora, for instance, played briefly for the Orioles in the 1990s, but could not

overcome cultural barriers and returned to Mexico.⁷ Ron Kittle could hit the ball hard, but often had trouble hitting it at all. In a career spanning 1982 to 1991, mostly with the Chicago White Sox, Kittle was just a .239 hitter. Table Two also includes Russell Branyan, a slugger nicknamed “Russell the Muscle.” Through 2012, he has spent 14 years shuttling between the minors and MLB. Branyan has hit 194 MLB homeruns, but his career .232 batting average and .329 on-base percentage are more than 30 points lower than his minor league numbers (.264/.364).⁸

Longtime MLB fans might also recognize the name Tim Laudner, a light-hitting catcher for the Twins between 1981 and 1989. Many minor league sluggers were like Laudner, second-rate players whose peak performance occurred in the minors and really weren’t cut out to be major league stars. Laudner, for instance, hit only .225 with 77 homeruns in eight seasons. The latter total is only 35 more homers than he hit in a single minor league season in 1981. Laudner’s MLB .292 lifetime on-base percentage (OBP) would not have kept him in the majors for very long were it not for the fact that he was a good defensive catcher who often ranked above the league average in throwing out potential base stealers. In short, he had a great arm, not a great bat.

The sexiness of homeruns notwithstanding, general managers (GMs) tend to prefer high on-base percentages (OBP) to homeruns. OBP is the number of times a player reaches base by any means divided by times at bat. The importance of OBP is manifest in how players are ranked. For example, despite the fact that he hit 755 homeruns, Hank Aaron’s lifetime OBP was a respectable but not head-turning .374. Many baseball

⁷ Good sources for Latino players include: Alan Klein, *Baseball on the Border: A Tale of Two Laredos*, (1997); John Krich, *El Beisbol: Travels Through the Pan-American Pastime*, (1989); Pedro Treto Cisneros, *The Mexican League: Comprehensive Player Statistics*, (2011).

⁸ Baseball-Reference.com is the best source for major and minor league statistics. All other performance statistics mentioned in this paper come from that source.

scholars rank Aaron as a hitter below Mickey Mantle, who hit 219 fewer homeruns but had a .421 OBP.

Slugging percentage (SLG)—the total bases a batter attains divided by times at bat—further complicates matters. Aaron had a marvelous .567 lifetime SLG mark, but it pales in comparison to Barry Bonds' .607, and baseball purists continue to insist that Babe Ruth is baseball's greatest hitter, though he hit 41 fewer homers than Aaron and 48 fewer than Bonds. Why? Because Ruth had a lifetime .484 OBP, and slugged at an astounding .711 rate.

OBP and SLG are statistics favored by sabermetricians. Sabermetrics is the use of mathematical models to measure the overall effectiveness of a player and his value to the team. It was pioneered by statistician Bill James, began attracting attention in the late 1970s, and came to broad public attention in 2003, with the publication of Michael Lewis's book *Moneyball*, which was made into an eponymous film in 2011.⁹ Lewis recounted how the 2002 Oakland A's used sabermetrics to build a bargain basement roster after numerous star players bolted for free agency riches following the 2001 season. In defiance of all conventional odds and experts, the 2002 Oakland A's won 103 games, including 20 in a row. To simplify, sabermetricians argue that, for hitters, data such as OBP and SLG are sometimes better indicators of a player's worth than homeruns or runs batted in. Baseball teams only win by scoring more runs than their opponents, hence hitters with a high OBP and/or SLG percentage are more likely to be on base and have the opportunity to score as well as drive in runs.

⁹ Bill James, *Bill James Baseball Abstract*, (Yearly 1977-1988); Michael Lewis, *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game*, (2003); Tom Tango, Mitchell Litchman, and Andrew Dolphin, *The Book: Playing the Percentage in Baseball*, (2007); Gabriel Costa, Michael Huber, and John Saccoman, *Understanding Sabermetrics: An Introduction*, (2008).

Another statistic used is that of “peak performance.” Sabermetricians argue that most players have their most productive years when they are 28 or 29, and that their greatest value lasts 4-5 years on either side of that age. They also discount “streaks,” those statistical anomalies that are of little predictive value in calculating what a player will do in the long run. An example would be Laudner’s 42 minor league homeruns when he was 23; he never again came close to duplicating that total. Sabermetrics is controversial. David Lamb, for instance, argues that baseball as played on the field has too many variables to fit contrived models. More than predicting outcome, he charges, sabermetrics has led to bad contracts. He writes, “There is no longer much relationship between performance and remuneration in baseball...[M]ediocrity has become not only acceptable...but generously rewarded.”¹⁰

Lamb’s remarks suggest that parts of a team’s major league roster tend to be antithetical to meritocracy. In essence, Lamb agrees with popular sentiment and sees high salaries as responsible for a roster clutter of marginal talent that denies Crash Davis-like sluggers their shot at “The Show.” For the most part, though, data fails to validate Lamb’s critique.

Perhaps the most blatant case in Lamb’s favor is that of Russell Loris “Buzz” Arlett, a 6’3” 225-pounder whose 432 homeruns is the highest minor league total recognized by Major League Baseball. His 19-year minor league career took place from 1918 to 1937. Despite a career .341 batting average in the minors, and an astronomical .604 slugging percentage, he got just one year in the major leagues. In 1930, Arlett hit .361 for Oakland, cracked 31 homeruns, and knocked in 143 runs. When he was finally

¹⁰ David Lamb, *Stolen Season: A Journey Through America and Baseball’s Minor Leagues*, (1991), 153.

called up to the Phillies, he remarked, “It’s about time.” He hit .313 for the Phils with 18 homers and 72 RBIs during the 1931 season—a very good year for a team that finished sixth in the eight-team National League.

Yet the next year he was back in the minors and he never again played in MLB, despite monster years in the American Association between 1932 and 1936. Newspapers called it “puzzling” that he remained in the minors. The Phillies never finished above fourth between 1918 and 1949, and seemingly could have used a hitter of Arlett’s prowess. Buzz Arlett had, however, three strikes against him. He spent his first five years in pro ball as a run-of-the-mill pitcher; when he got his only shot with the Phillies he was 32, very old for a rookie. Second, he had a reputation as a hot head and was involved in several altercations with umpires, including one so animated that the umpire hit him with his mask and put Arlett out of commission for ten games. Moreover, Arlett was said to be a mediocre fielder who lacked success at either first base or the outfield.¹¹

Although sabermetrics had not yet been invented, big league managers knew bad fielding when they saw it. The same problem kept slugger Smead Jolley on an up-and-down shuttle between the minors and MLB. Between 1922 and 1941, Jolley hit 336 homers in the minors but his .954 fielding average meant he got just 473 at-bats in the majors. In four years in the majors (1930-33), he hit 46 homers and attained an impressive .475 SLG, but he also had more errors (44) than assists (43).¹²

Another career minor leaguer with impressive numbers was Nick Cullop, nicknamed “Tomato Face” because he turned bright red when he was angry, but also “King Kong” for his homerun prowess. He clouted 420 round trippers in 20 minor league

¹¹ “Buzz Arlett,” HOF.

¹² “Smead Jolley,” Baseball-Reference.com

seasons, and hit .312 in a career spanning 1920 to 1944. His 1,824 RBIs might be a minor league record.¹³ But Nick Cullop got into just 173 major league games. Why? One reason was circumstantial; for much of his time he was a first baseman in the Yankees organization. From 1925 into 1939, the legendary Lou Gehrig not only occupied that position; from 1926 on, Gehrig played 2,130 consecutive games at first. But Cullop also faced an internal obstacle: an inability to hit big league pitching. He hit 11 homeruns in short stints with MLB clubs, but managed just a .249 average. Said one Dodgers observer, Cullop had such trouble laying off high pitches that “if he was at the plate long enough, Nick would be jumping three feet into the air trying to hit the ball.” Another noted that he “struck out three times on Opening Day and hardly improved after that.” After four unremarkable seasons in the American League, Cullop was traded to Brooklyn, where he was saddled with the label “major league bust of 1929.” Cullop earned a return to MLB with Cincinnati after an astounding 1930 season at Minneapolis—then an American Association minor league franchise—in which he hit .359 with 54 homers. He had a decent season for Cincinnati in 1931, but not good enough to avoid spending his remaining 13 years of pro ball in the minor leagues.¹⁴

In 1933, Joe Hauser smashed Babe Ruth’s professional record of 60 homeruns by cracking 69 for the Minneapolis Millers. Hauser was also a powerful minor league slugger. He slammed 49 the year before he tallied 69 and hit 399 in 16 years, though he was slight for a power hitter at 5’11” and 180 pounds.¹⁵ That he and Nick Cullop both hit lots of homers for the Millers in the 1930s was no accident; the Millers played in Nicollet Park, whose right field line was just 279’ from home plate, a tempting target for the left-

¹³ Minor league statistics for the pre-World War II era were not always kept carefully.

¹⁴ “Nick Cullop,” HOF.

¹⁵ “Joe Hauser,” HOF.

handed Hauser.¹⁶ Hauser was a decent hitter, but his career OBP for the minors was just .309. He played in the majors between 1922 and 1929, hitting a respectable .284 in 629 at-bats with a total of 80 homeruns in parts of six seasons. His best MLB years were 1922 to 1924, between his 23rd and 25th birthdays.

Sabermetrics suggest that neither Cullop nor Hauser were unfairly denied big careers. Hauser was simply unfortunate. He was on his way to a middling career when he broke his leg before the start of the 1925 season. He missed all of 1925 and, in limited action, hit just .192 in 1926. Hauser was demoted to the minors for the 1927 campaign. He made his way back to the majors in 1928 but was, by then, viewed as an extra outfielder. Hauser's peak performance year in the minors occurred in 1930, by which time he was also 30, an age at which MLB players typically declined in performance in a period before spectacular advances in equipment, nutrition, and sports medicine. Hauser's big years in the minors occurred between the ages of 31 and 35, but this was widely perceived as anomalous and unlikely to be duplicated in the majors. Insofar as MLB was concerned, Hauser's time had passed. Although Hauser quipped that when he was hitting well all the stadiums "were bandboxes," clouting homeruns in compact Nicollet Park may have harmed his chances at resuming an MLB career.¹⁷

Age was also Joe Bauman's enemy. He was a big man who stood 6'5" and weighed 235 pounds. A 1998 *Washington Times* article noted that Bauman "never got a serious look in the big leagues, not even with his record-setting '54 season," one in which he hit 72 homeruns, hit .400, walked 150 times, and drove in an incredible 224 runs. His

¹⁶ Stew Thornley, "Nicolett Park," http://stewthornley.net/nicollet_park.html Accessed December 6, 2012; Phil Lowry, *Green Cathedrals*. 1992.

¹⁷ Robert Obojski, *Bush League: A Colorful, Factual Account of Minor League Baseball from 1877 to the Present*, (1975), 295-97. Qtd in Neil J. Sullivan, *Minors: The Struggle and Triumph of Baseball's Poor Relations from 1876 to the Present*, (1990), 120.

OBP was over .700!¹⁸ But Bauman was 32 when he accomplished this feat and was playing in C ball for the Roswell (NM) Rockets. His career was interrupted by three years of playing semipro ball when he was young, and four years of military service during what would have been his peak years. The thin desert air and Roswell's elevation of 3,573 feet contributed to his homer total, as did Park Field's shallow centerfield of just 387 feet. Bauman admitted, "It's easy to hit balls out of here. The ball carries so good."¹⁹

Bauman knew he would never make the big leagues and owned a gas station at which he made more money than when playing ball. Said he, "There were thousands of minor leaguers in those days and we knew most of us would never get to the big leagues." When the Braves tried to transfer him and cut his salary in 1956, Bauman just walked away and pumped gas, despite slamming 46 homers the year after his 1954 outburst.²⁰ Bauman claimed that his biggest thrill was hitting number 70 in 1954, because Roswell had a custom known as the "money fence" in which fans stuffed dollar bills through the wooden slats to reward homeruns. "I got close to \$800 that night," he noted.²¹ Bauman also lived long enough to see Barry Bonds break his record and remarked simply, "Nothing lasts forever. I never thought it would last this long, to be honest."²²

Merv Connors was another minor leaguer who knew his time had passed. He got into 52 games for the White Sox in 1937-38 when he was 23 and 24, played decently, but was shipped back to the Texas League in 1939, where he hit just .229. Poor performance at AA1 ball got him shipped back to C and B ball for much of 1940 and 1941, then World

¹⁸ *Washington Times*, September 10, 1998.

¹⁹ "Joe Willis Bauman," HOF

²⁰ *Ibid*

²¹ Richard Stevens, *Albuquerque Times*, September 23, 1998.

²² *New York Times*, October 11, 2001.

War II broke out. He returned to AA ball in 1946, aged 32. Connors played until 1953, when he socked his 400th minor league homer for a Class C team; he was 39 by then.²³

In more recent times, minor league sluggers have found sabermetrics to be a harsh mistress. George Bertrand “Bobby” Prescott hit 398 homeruns in the minors between 1972 and 1970, 193 of which were in the Mexican League. He got a brief call up from Kansas City in 1961 and had but one hit in 12 at-bats. The Panamanian-born Prescott was officially 30-years-old. Labeled a below-average fielder and Kansas City saw no future in him, especially since the Panamanian Prescott was rumored to be 5 to 8 years older than his stated age, well beyond his projected peak performance years.²⁴

Jack Pierce was a 6’3” 215-pound first baseman that the 1973 Braves thought might become a mainstay in their lineup. Alas, he failed his Braves audition and collected just 2 hits in 29 at-bats in 1973 and 1974. He had his best shot with the Tigers in 1975 and hit 8 homers in 194 at-bats, but had just a .235 average, struck out an average of once every 4.8 at-bats, and made 13 errors in only 49 games. Pierce expressed confidence that he could hit “if they played me every day,” admitted he “had a horse-manure year fielding,” and claimed it was an anomaly. Manager Ralph Houk disagreed and called Pierce “expendable.” When the Tigers released him, Pierce announced that he was “sure ... a lot of people could use a talented, power-hitting first baseman.”²⁵ He was wrong and spent the next 13 years kicking around the minors. His major claim to fame came in 1986, when he swatted 54 homeruns for León in the Mexican League and shattered the single-season record held by local legend Hector Espino.

²³ “Merv Connors,” HOF.

²⁴ “Bobby Prescott,” HOF.

²⁵ “Jack Lavern Pierce,” HOF. The quotes are from an unaccredited clipping dated October 11, 1975.

Rick Lancellotti also had a reputation as a player who could hit homers in the minors, but couldn't handle major league pitching.²⁶ Not that he got many attempts—just 65 at-bats in 36 games spread over eight years and three teams. His .169 MLB average impressed few. Lancellotti's problem was that he could hit homeruns, but not much else. He swatted 276 homers in 15 minor league seasons, but had just a .252 average and an



unremarkable .336 OBP. He hit 41 homers for Buffalo in 1979, his best year in the minors. At age 34, the Red Sox named Lancellotti their minor league player of the year when he hit 21 homers for AAA Pawtucket in 1991.

Sunday Journal Magazine, June 6, 1991

They also released him; his average was a paltry .209.²⁷ Lancellotti's last year of professional ball was in Italy.²⁸ Because the power-hitting Lancellotti was in the minors when *Bull Durham* was in theaters, he was often cited as a living Crash Davis. Lancellotti embraced the comparison. "If nothing else I've got that," said he. "I'd like to meet Kevin Costner. The guy stole my role! Maybe I can help him out with *Bull Durham Part Two*."²⁹

²⁶ Baseball insiders sometimes refer to players who are very successful at the upper levels of the minors but can't quite make the MLB grade as AAA+ players.

²⁷ "Minor Leaguer Who's Seen it All Gets Hour in Majors," *USA Today*, August 10, 1990; "Richard Anthony Lancellotti," HOF; Sean McAdam, "Just Missed: Rick Lancellotti's Life in the Minors," *Sunday Journal Magazine*, June 6, 1991. The above image comes from that source.

²⁸ "Lancellotti Adds Spice to Italian Baseball," *USA Today Baseball Weekly*, October 7-13, 1992; David Cataeno, *Boston Herald*, August 18, 1990.

²⁹ "Lancellotti," HOF

Phil Hiatt sandbagged his own career. He hit 314 minor league homeruns between 1990 and 2004, and got 422 at-bats in the majors. He might have caught on as role player, but the Washington Nationals quietly dropped him when his name showed up in the Mitchell Report as a *seller* of HGH and steroids. The taint of steroids has thus far kept “Chicks Dig the Long Ball” star Mark McGwire out of the Hall of Fame; drugs ended Hiatt’s MLB career altogether.³⁰

The current minor league career homerun leader is Mike Hessman, a 6’5” third and first baseman in the Houston organization. Through the 2012 season he has cracked 370 homers in the minors, but is error-prone as a fielder, has hit just .188 in 109 games in the majors, and will turn 35 before next season. His chances of making even Houston’s anemic roster are exceedingly slim.³¹

The top three minor league homerun kings of all time mostly cleared fences in the Mexican League. Hector Espino (1939-1992) is a legend in Mexico for whom stadiums, boulevards, and babies have been named. He played from 1962 to 1984. Espino considered MLB, but only briefly. He was invited to spring training by the Cardinals in 1965, but was shocked by the racism he encountered in Jacksonville, Florida, struggled

³⁰ “Philip Farrell Hiatt,” HOF. The Mitchell Report is officially called the Report to the Commissioner of Baseball of an Independent Investigation into the Illegal Use of Steroids and Other Performance Enhancing Substances by Players in Major League Baseball. It was a 21-months long investigation into drug use in MLB and was headed by former U.S. Senator George Mitchell. The report was released in 2007, but the 83 names mentioned in it leaked to the press in advance of the report’s official release. This caused consternation, as the citations in the report are, officially, allegations. The Major League Players’ Association and several lawyers complained that players were being convicted in a court of public opinion before they were confronted with charges against them.

³¹ “Michael Hessman,” HOF.

with English, and was too proud to report to the minor leagues, preferring his hero status in Mexico to being viewed as a prospect in the United States.³²

Andres Mora also experienced culture shock, though he exhibited some power in parts of three years for the Orioles between 1976 and 1978. He had trouble cracking an Orioles' outfield that included established players such as Pat Kelly, Ken Singleton, Elliott Maddox, and Al Bumbry and went back to Mexico in 1979. Mora played 8 games for the Indians in 1980, and then returned to Mexico for good.³³ Nelson Barrera, who broke Espino's all-time *Mexican League* homer record but not his career mark, had an even briefer American tryout. He left Buffalo, a White Sox affiliate after just 25 games in 1985. Alejandro Ortiz played just two games for Rochester in 1987, but hit 435 homeruns in the Mexican League.³⁴

Espino, Mora, Barrera, and Ortiz did not make their mark in MLB, but one must ask why it recognizes Arlett as the minor leagues' career homerun champion and not these four talented Mexicans. Although ethnocentrism may play a role, MLB's delicate relationship with the Mexican League probably has more to do with their exclusion. After World War II, Mexican entrepreneur Jorge Pasquel tried to set up a rival major league by raiding both MLB and the Negro Leagues. After several years of mutual recrimination, accusation, and bad blood, a formal agreement between the two was hammered out in 1949. That agreement brought peace, but not closure. The Mexican League did not obtain official AAA status until 1955, and even now many baseball experts do not consider it a true minor league. Analogous to those who downplay Sadaharu Oh's achievement in

³² Stanley Meisler, "Beisbol," *Los Angeles Times*, July 31, 1974; Peter Bjarkman, *Baseball with a Latin Beat*, (1994); Bruce Baskin, "Maestros of Mexico—Hector Espino," January 4, 2007, www.oursportscentral.com Accessed July 14, 2012. Cisneros, *The Mexican League*.

³³ "Andres Ibara Mora," HOF.

³⁴ Bjarkman, *Baseball with a Latin Beat*; Cisneros, *The Mexican League*.

Japan, critics claim the pitching is poor, that ballparks are substandard, and that record keeping is sloppy. Moreover, there is no real oversight as Mexican League teams lack MLB affiliations. The Mexican League is, officially, a minor league, but it operates in a semi-autonomous gray area in which contracts are purchased by MLB teams upon the recommendation of scouts, some of whom confirm the league's past practice of spotty record keeping.³⁵

Who should be crowned homerun "king" is contestable, as it how foreign-born players might have fared if MLB and its minor league affiliates had been more culturally sensitive. What is more certain is that the meritocracy system has worked better than one might imagine in separating one-dimensional players from those with skill sets necessary to excel in MLB. With the possible exception of Buzz Arlett, the unfortunate Joe Hauser, and those who opted not to pursue an MLB career, most of the top minor league sluggers were, at best, marginal prospects.

To be sure, homeruns are sexy. The Nike ad spotlighted homeruns in 1986, when 17 players hit more than 40 homers, with McGwire topping the list at 52. Two years later, McGwire and Sammy Sosa enraptured sports fans as they both eclipsed Roger Maris's single-season record of 61 homers. In 2001, Barry Bonds shattered the new standard by clubbing 73 in a single season and, in 2007, claimed the career homerun record. Homeruns became such fan favorites that we subsequently learned that many of the sluggers were using what Phil Hiatt allegedly was selling.³⁶

³⁵ Klein, *Baseball on the Border*.

³⁶ As this draft was revised in December of 2012, neither McGwire nor Barry Bonds—both of whom were named in the Mitchell Report—have been elected to baseball's Hall of Fame. Sammy Sosa's name is also in the Mitchell Report and on the current Hall of Fame ballot. He is not expected to win election. Nor has steroid-tainted Rafael Palmeiro and his career 569 homeruns done so to date.

Perhaps they shouldn't have bothered. In 2012, just three of the 20 highest-paid players—and just one of the next 30—are primarily homerun hitters. Twenty-one of the top 50 are pitchers, adding irony to the Glavine and Maddux commercial. The rest are better known for having produced high on base percentages and impressive OBSP lines (on base + slugging).³⁷ The general managers who sign players and negotiate their contracts seem to prefer a high OBP to a large number of homeruns. As for minor league sluggers, unless they can impress the sabermetrics crowd, Crash Davis clones will impress “chicks” far from the bright lights of The Show.

³⁷ “Top 50 Highest Paid MLB Players,” http://www.aneke.com/countries2.php?t=Highest_Paid_MLB_Players&table=table_mlb_players&pages=2&unit=*&order=desc&orderby=table_mlb_players.salary&dependency=independent&cntdn=n&r=&c=&measures=Name--Team--Salary&units=*--*-%24&decimals=*--*--*&file=highest_paid_mlb_players&number=50 Accessed December 6, 2012.