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# The Real Sabermetrics

Where baseball meets statistics.

By [DAVID ROHER](#) | 02/12/09

I should love Bobby Abreu.

At least I should according to Ed Wade, the GM of the Houston Astros. Wade told the New York Times that the former all-star is "a sabermetrician's dream, from the standpoint of what he produces statistically." Fortunately, Wade is not my most trusted source for baseball analysis. The only dreams real sabermetricians have about the right fielder these days are nightmares about his horrifying outfield defense.

But if we're using the unfortunate mainstream definition of sabermetrics, Wade is right on the money. Thanks in part to Michael Lewis' 2003 bestseller, *Moneyball*, most baseball fans have a limited definition of the term. It mostly conjures images of slow, colossal power hitters blessed with a 6th sense for taking pitches out of the strike zone. A lot of them generate enough wind from their frequent swings and misses to provide electricity for a small town. And for a player to truly be considered sabermetric, he has to be hated by scouts and anyone else who subscribes to a "conventional" method of analysis. Think Adam Dunn or Jason Giambi.

Yet, sabermetrics is so much more than this small subset of players. It can tell you anything from the average horizontal break on Josh Beckett's slider (2.85 inches in a May 5th start last year) to how much more important a bases-loaded, one-out jam in the bottom of the 9th inning of a tie game is than the same situation in the 4th inning (1.93 times more). Even if you're one of those people who dreads fulfilling a Quantitative Reasoning credit, sabermetrics still fits non-numerical studies — like the history of the Negro Leagues — right under its umbrella. According to Bill James, the father of sabermetrics, it is simply "the search for objective knowledge about baseball."

Let's take another look at Abreu, this time with a full range of sabermetric tools at our disposal. Thanks to a spectacular career in which he posted over 100 walks for eight seasons in a row with significant power numbers to boot, Wade and friends still have an image of Abreu as a great player.

But over the past two years, Abreu has declined precipitously. His offensive numbers have taken a significant hit and his defense has dropped off the table completely. One fielding metric, Ultimate Zone Rating, estimated that he cost the

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Yankees 25.2 runs compared to an average right fielder. To put that devastating figure in perspective, Minnesota Twins slugger Justin Morneau's total offensive production compared to the average player was 25.9 runs, and he finished second in AL MVP voting.

Granted, fielding metrics are still in their relative infancy and that figure may be a few runs smaller, but it helps to explain why no team has signed Abreu to a contract into the fourth full month of baseball's off-season. He would have to walk a hell of a lot more to make up for the lack of running he does in the field.

Now let's look at another right fielder, the Blue Jays' Alex Rios. Rios finished among the bottom 20% of qualified players in walk frequency. He hit just 15 home runs, but Rios's speed helped him to 47 doubles, 32 stolen bases (with an 80% success rate), and 18.2 runs above average saved in the field. With respect to the average Major League salary, FanGraphs.com (a great resource for many different kinds of advanced stats) estimates that Rios was worth \$22 million. Abreu? Just \$5.7 million. Even Ryan Howard, who led the league in homers by a wide margin, was worth only \$14.7 million.

This doesn't necessarily say that the slow-moving designated hitters and first basemen of the world are totally useless. It simply means that a player is going to have a much easier time being one of the most valuable guys in baseball if he can field well (or just be able to field a difficult position) in addition to being a great hitter. Including this part of the argument also brings statheads and baseball purists closer together, as they should be.

For instance, you might have seen your favorite crotchety beat writer argue that David Ortiz didn't deserve to win the MVP back in 2006 because he was a DH. Sabermetricians agreed, as players like Derek Jeter and Joe Mauer were more valuable because of their defensive contribution, even if their defense wasn't above average (not that any of it mattered, as the award inexplicably went to Morneau). Besides a few specific issues (you'd have a decent shot at starting the next World War if you brought up Jeter's fielding prowess), statistics and scouting have a lot more in common than what your average member of the mainstream media would think.

This is especially true for pitching, where in addition to calculating overall value, sabermetrics can dig deep and look at what specifically makes a certain pitcher successful. At FanGraphs, location, average velocity and frequency for different types of pitches are readily available. We can say that Mike Mussina was successful despite a below-average fastball because he fooled hitters into taking a league-leading 45% of his pitches in the zone for called strikes, even though he threw more pitches in the zone than all but four other pitchers. A scout might point out Mussina's wide arsenal of six or seven pitches (depending upon whom you ask) and his ability to locate all of them as an explanation for these figures. These two methods of analysis are in agreement with and help to explain each other; they certainly are not on two sides of an ideological divide.

There's still a lot to be done. 2009 marks the debut of a system known as "Hit-f/x" that will track the initial angle, trajectory, and velocity of batted balls (a system for pitches is already in place). This should give us information on precisely what kind of contact makes for a higher probability of getting on base and driving the

ball for power. Many sabermetricians are still hard at work at determining a more accurate system of measuring fielding, especially one for catchers. But given how far we've come already, the next time you hear a journalist, insider, or fellow-fan sing the "sabermetric" praises of a player simply because he walks (or used to walk) a lot, look somewhere else for an opinion.

*David Roher (roher@fas) '12 is a member of the Harvard Sports Analysis Collective, an undergraduate group dedicated to answering the interesting questions of sports with statistics, economics or anything else that is useful. Check out their blog at [hcs.harvard.edu/~hsac/Blog](http://hcs.harvard.edu/~hsac/Blog)*

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