

BASEBALL'S MOST UNBREAKABLE RECORD

STANLEY DAVID GEDZELMAN

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Every Olympics testify that "Records are made to be broken." Growing world population, improved health and nutrition, greater participation, and earlier training make it likely that where the race is against the clock, records will continue to be broken. Indeed, the oldest world record in men's track (the 400 m hurdles) was set in the 1992 Olympics while the oldest record in man's or women's swimming (the 400 m Men's Individual Medley) was set in the 2008 Olympics.

Changes in rules and advances in technology have boosted record breaking in track and especially in swimming, where, for example, underwater dolphin kicks have lowered times in all events. Technology has done more. Starting blocks have an improved design, and the materials of the track and shoes reduced slippage. For a few years, swimmers used body suits that reduced drag (and led to a spate of records). But technology has also poisoned many records, compliments of performance-enhancing drugs. Women's track and men's field are littered with steroid-produced records, not proven, of course, except by statistics. The spate of women's track and men's field records in the 1980's testify to that.

Steroids, rule changes, and technology aside, baseball records are inherently different from those in track, field, and swimming, which are made against the clock or the tape measure. As athletes get faster, stronger and more numerous those records will fall. But Baseball records are made against others. So, as baseball players get faster, stronger, and more numerous, greater competition statistically levels the field, making records harder to break. Therefore, in Baseball, at least, it may well turn out that some records are meant to be eternal.

Several measures can indicate how difficult it is to break a record. One measure is how many seasons of recent major league leading performance are needed to break a lifetime record. Let's start with the batting records, where the categories are runs, hits, doubles, triples, home runs and walks. Consider first home runs, baseball's premier symbol. The all time career record is a drug tainted 762. Over the recent 10 year relatively drug-free period (2006-2015) the average major league leading home run total was 48.8. At that rate it would take 15.6 seasons to break the home run record, making it the second easiest record to break next to doubles at 15.3 seasons. By this measure, the two most difficult records to break are the record for walks and for triples, which would take 20.9 and 19.9 years respectively to break. The record for walks is drug tainted because pitchers became so timid of facing the drugged home run king that they walked him with greatly increased frequency.

Any baseball aficionado would recognize at least one fatal flaw in this measure. A mere glance at all time leaders shows that there is something distinct about triples, where not one major leaguer who played within the last 40 years has even half Sam Wahoo Crawford's record of 309 or even makes the list of the top 50 all time leaders. Indeed, that list looks like an Irish telephone book, with most of them born before 1890.

So, I assert that the most difficult batting record to break is that of triples, and for good reasons. (Statistics, by its nature, never gives reasons for anything.) The game has changed since the days that triples were more common. Baseball fields are now symmetrical. In the old days the fields had nooks, crannies, and some great depths that drove fielders mad, giving hitters more time on

the base paths. Second, baseball gloves now are so much larger than before that they resemble parachutes that can trap anything. Third, the baseball was softer and was kept in play so long it became mushy. A softer ball meant fewer long flies and home runs so that outfielders took much shallower positions, which made it more likely for an occasional hard-hit ball to pass them and take longer to retrieve. Sam Crawford hit every one of his 309 triples in that dead ball era. Finally, since triples require great running speed and since batters lose speed before they lose power, their prime years for triples are more limited than for the other categories. Incidentally, by these standards, the record for inside the park home runs (56) might be eternal. The most by any modern player (Willie Wilson) is 13.

Running speed brings stolen bases to mind. At the current major league leading rate it would take 22.25 seasons to break Ricky Henderson's record of 1406. Considering the loss of both speed and acceleration with age, this is a record that ain't going to be broken in my lifetime. Sam Crawford's triple record will hold forever because the game has changed forever. Ricky Henderson's stolen base record will hold for a long time because he was simply so extraordinary.

Turning to pitching, Cy Young's 511 wins has often been touted as Baseball's most unbreakable record. Indeed, it would take 24.33 seasons at the major league leading rate to top it. Nolan Ryan's strikeout record is also formidable, requiring 22.4 years at the major league leading rate to top. But these records pale by comparison with Baseball's most unbreakable record – that of complete games. Today's pitchers are pulled the second they appear to tire, or if a right hand pitcher must face a lefty batter or if a pinch hitter is needed (in the National League). At the current average major league leading rate of 7.2 complete games, it would take over 100 seasons for a player to break Cy Young's record of 749. Come to think of it, this is easily breakable. All we have to do is extend the duration of the physical prime of life by a factor of about 6. Genetic engineers are working on it.