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Swarthmore College Statistics Professor Finds Baseball 'Religious War'
Good for the Game - and the Field of Statistics

SWARTHMORE, Pa. -- A "religious war" is raging in professional baseball as the major leagues launch the new season. As is often the case in such battles, this war is between faith and reason -- faith in the old way of evaluating talent and building teams and reasoned commitment to a new approach based on the scientific evaluation of statistics.

The battle has been nasty at times, but Swarthmore College statistics professor and baseball maven Steve Wang thinks the debate is healthy -- not just for baseball, but for the scholarly field of statistics.

"There is a new interest in baseball in using statistics systematically to discover knowledge, rather than to rhetorically bludgeon those who disagree with you," says Wang, whose own research has delved into baseball statistics. "Since baseball is one of the most visible contexts in which statistics is applied, I think this new approach can go a long way in showing people the value of statistical analysis in all sorts of fields."

Read interview with Steve Wang on this subject

The scientific collection and evaluation of baseball statistics has been around for decades, but the issue reached new prominence the past two years with the publication of -- and passionate reaction to -- the book Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game. In the book, writer Michael Lewis chronicles the story of Oakland Athletics' general manager Billy Beane and his unprecedented, highly successful application of statistical analysis to building a team on a tight budget.

Lewis pulls no punches in his criticism of old-school baseball thinking, and those on the receiving end of his barbs were quick to fire back. Lewis has continued to do battle with his and Beane's critics, most recently in a sharply worded piece in the March 1 Sports Illustrated on what he terms the sport's "religious war."

"What's especially exciting right now is that there are differing degrees to which teams have adopted the so-called Moneyball approach," Wang says. "Oakland, of course, as well as Boston and Toronto, seems to have wholeheartedly embraced this statistical approach, and the Dodgers just hired Billy Beane's former assistant GM, Paul DePodesta, away from the A's. On the other hand, most teams continue to espouse a more traditional view that stresses scouting based on athleticism and so-called 'tools.'"

A quintessential old-school concept, "tools," in baseball parlance, refers to the physical ability that meets the scouts' eyes -- a player's speed, throwing strength, batting power, even his physical bearing. Beane and
other new-school baseball people put more emphasis on statistics compiled by prospects in college and minor league competition, including the traditionally under-valued ability to draw walks.

The competition of paradigms in today’s game makes for an exciting, real-life experiment, in Wang’s view. “For the first time there's a real competition between these differing philosophies of how to build a baseball team,” he says. “Twenty years ago, when teams didn’t use statistical principles, this debate would not have existed. Twenty years from now, it may be the case that all teams use such principles. But right now, because teams have different strategies, there's an interest in seeing which ones will eventually prevail on the field, and I think that’s great for the game.”

If the history of science is any guide, don’t expect *Moneyball* critics to convert, Wang says. If the new philosophy is to become dominant, it will more likely happen by attrition as old-school executives retire and are replaced by new-breed people like Beane.

“In many ways, what's happening in baseball parallels the process outlined by Thomas Kuhn in his classic work on the history of science, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,*” Wang says. “Kuhn found that in scientific revolutions, what happens is not that people convert from the old paradigm to the new paradigm. Instead, the revolution is completed when a new group of scientists replaces the existing group.

“That process is taking place in baseball today. The new-breed GMs -- Paul DePodesta in LA, J. P. Ricciardi in Toronto, Theo Epstein in Boston -- grew up reading [baseball statistics pioneer] Bill James in the 1980s and find statistical analysis a natural part of baseball. Along with Billy Beane, they are the ones who are leading the *Moneyball* revolution. It will be interesting to see how far this revolution leads and to compare it to the other revolutions that took place on the field in the last few decades. Will statistical analysis take over baseball just as the five-man rotation and relief specialization did, or will it retreat as the stolen base revolution in the 70's has? I think the former will happen, but I'm looking forward to finding out.”

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