



Press Clips

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FROM THE ATHLETIC**'Cold Hard Cash': How Brian Cashman played the long game and used analytics to transform the Yankees' culture**

By Marc Craig and Eno Sarris

The imperious voice boomed from the speakerphone, its ferocity intact on the journey from George Steinbrenner's mouth in Tampa to Brian Cashman's ears at the old Yankee Stadium. The team had won on a getaway day, as it would many times during the 2003 season, but it hadn't been pretty. In need of work, Mariano Rivera pitched the final inning with a lead too big to be credited with a save. As was often his habit in those situations, he gave back some of that leeway. The Yankees ultimately won, but not by enough. The phone rang right after the final out.

"You're the worst fucking GM in baseball!"

Steinbrenner launched into a tirade. Cashman waited for an opening. He rarely shies away from speaking up, his confidants are quick to note, a quality that has guided him during two decades as one of baseball's most influential executives. When he sensed a break in the tongue-lashing, he snapped back, reminding the owner of the Yankees' standing in first place. "I don't really know what else you want me to do," he said. Steinbrenner paused — briefly — before resuming his offensive. Cashman listened, all the while keeping his eyes on a larger task ahead.

Those Yankees were a far-flung kingdom of fiefdoms, fraught with competing ideas on how to run a baseball team. As emperor of this realm, Steinbrenner viewed conflict as a sign of independent thought. He invited it, surrounding himself with a rotating cast of advisers who took turns falling in and out of favor. For better or worse, decisions sprang from a volatile mix of impulse and emotion. Standing at the eye of the storm was Cashman, who first assumed the general manager post in 1998, right in the middle of a dynasty.

But soon, all around him, there were signs that the game was changing. There would come a time when financial might would not be enough. Cashman worried about falling behind. His response to that fear became a crowning achievement of his tenure.

"He basically changed the operating protocol of the biggest franchise in baseball," said Billy Eppler, a long-time Cashman lieutenant who now runs the Angels.

It was a massive, methodical, and often merciless undertaking. At times, the constant battles brought anxiety. But just as he'd done during the Boss' tirades, Cashman stood his ground, beating back wave after wave of resistance. The end result has been the transformation of the Yankees from an empire of warring factions under George Steinbrenner to a thriving technocracy under the late owner's son, Hal. The instrument of change? Analytics.

Other clubs were first to embrace the data-driven concepts described in "Moneyball," the book that cast the free-spending Yankees as the antithesis of efficiency. For a long time, they seemed content to paper over their mistakes with dollar bills. But in recent years, few teams have poured more resources into the data than the Yankees, and few executives have been more invested in its success than Cashman. The

Yankees are no longer playing catch-up. Instead, they exemplify the power of the numbers, with one rival executive likening the size of the team’s analytics department to a “third-party research and development arm.”

The Yankees have emerged as a pioneer in the age of super bullpens. They identified the tools required to find pitchers who could withstand the launch-angle revolution. They revamped an aging roster without enduring the indignity of losing. Perhaps most importantly, they have streamlined an organization once known as much for infighting as it was for winning. The change has been driven by a shift in culture, one that is now accepting of new ideas. Many have been evident throughout the Yankees’ march toward a 100-win season and a matchup with the A’s in Wednesday night’s American League wild-card game.

“The key aspect is that Cash provided the backing for it the whole way,” said Michael Fishman, the mathematical guru who built the Yankees’ analytics department from the ground up. “Everybody knew the GM was backing the Yankees’ use of analytics... Without the GM’s backing, you’re on your own.”

The marriage of bucks and brains took time, and it has not come easily. Traces of tension still linger in some corners, with fears that analytics have become too influential a force. In recent years, Goose Gossage, the Hall of Famer and longtime spring training instructor, has loudly assailed Cashman for leaning too heavily on the numbers.

Cashman was given a contract extension. Gossage was exiled.

There is no longer any doubt about the religion of the empire.

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More is not always better, but it’s clear the Yankees have dropped some serious coin on their analytics squad. We asked around, and it seems that nobody beats them when it comes to the size of their research and development departments.

Team	Analysts	Team	Analysts
American League		National League	
Yankees	20	Dodgers	20
Astros	15	Braves	15
Rays	15	Brewers	11
Angels	10	Reds	11
Tigers	9	Phillies	10
Rangers	8	Nationals	8
Mariners	7	Pirates	8
Royals	7	Padres	7

Twins	7	Cardinals	6
Blue Jays	6	Cubs	6
Red Sox	6	Giants	6
Indians	5	Marlins	6
Orioles	5	Dbacks	5
Athletics	3	Rockies	4
White Sox	2	Mets	3

There are caveats here, most of which stem from the fact that teams are becoming increasingly protective of this sort of information.

“I can’t tell you how many R&D people we have because that number is, itself, proprietary,” one front office official said.

We did our best, however, and got two or more sources for most of the numbers above. There is still room for error: some teams consider their software developers to be part of the analytics staff, and some don’t. Some teams counted consultants, and some didn’t. Even as we tried to limit it to just R&D employees, decisions had to be made on a team-by-team basis.

Still, as far as we can tell, the Yankees have the most analysts in baseball. That sentiment was shared by most respondents — often unprompted.

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When “Moneyball” was published in the summer of 2003, the Yankees’ analytical efforts consisted of a part-time college intern toiling away in the underbelly of the old Stadium. He was tasked with taking statistics from ESPN.com and averaging them to determine where the team ranked in specific offensive categories. The exercise was crude.

In Oakland, Billy Beane turned the art of finding undervalued players into a science. In Boston, Theo Epstein quickly followed suit. In New York, Cashman realized that data “was a specific tool that we were choosing to ignore up to that point, and that made no rational sense.” That changed in 2005, when Steinbrenner finally approved Cashman’s request to hire a full-time analyst.

The search ended in the summer, when Cashman noticed the résumé of a job-seeker whose application also included an eye-opening presentation on how to improve advance scouting. But what intrigued him most was a name listed under the references. It was Beane’s.

Earlier that year, the A’s needed an analyst. Beane hired Farhan Zaidi, who would later go on to be general manager of the Dodgers. But the runner-up proved to be just as impressive. When Cashman called to follow-up, Beane raved about a Yale-educated insurance actuary who was hoping to break into baseball. His name was Michael Fishman.

“I already had been impressed with the work product that was attached to the résumé,” Cashman said. “Now I had a famous general manager in major league baseball sanctioning him as someone to be valued.”

Fishman joined the Yankees and encountered a foreign environment. As a kid, he enjoyed exploiting loopholes in games of Strat-O-Matic baseball. Now, he was sharing space with salty baseball lifers and recently graduated bros. His new colleagues in the organization took to challenging Fishman to do math problems in his head, and then marveling when the answers checked out on a calculator.

The organization lacked consistency, particularly in its decision-making, which Cashman described as “haphazard.” While the Yankees did plenty of winning, sustained success was becoming more difficult to attain. Cashman viewed insight from data as a great equalizer. It could be used to revamp scouting and player development. It could also be used to bridge the communication gap of an organization that was split between the team complex in Tampa — Steinbrenner’s longtime base — and the major league operation in New York.

“It’s recognizing that there were some problems that we had and we needed to reinvent ourselves,” Cashman said. “That starts first and foremost with culture and process. I think that we improved the process while at the same time changing the culture.”

It was a big job. It required buy-in from every department in baseball operations, some of which didn’t even report directly to Cashman. Fishman had already begun demonstrating his credentials. During that first season, he implored the Yankees to bring back Carlos Peña, then a minor-league free agent they had let go. He’d seen something in the numbers. But the Yankees weren’t convinced. Peña signed with the Rays the following season and hit 46 homers.

Much of the sport was still set in its ways, and Fishman’s ideas were both new and threatening. Resistance was inevitable. But to begin re-shaping the organization, Cashman was willing to dig in. He saw two wars brewing simultaneously: The fight to challenge the tenets of the data-driven philosophy, and the fight to defend it. At the beginning, he chose his battles carefully. Playing the long game proved to be a shrewd move. It would lead to the steady growth of what became an analytics powerhouse, one that moved the Yankees ahead of the curve.

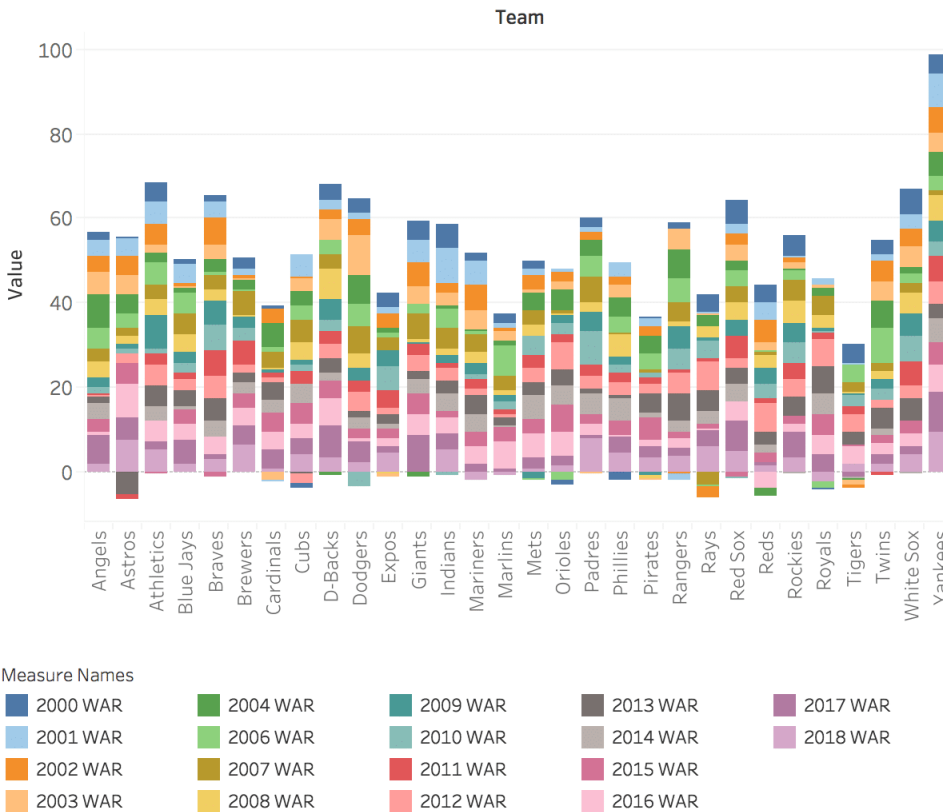
“Cash brought in Fish but it wasn’t just like ‘Hey, here’s our data guy, he’s going to tell everybody what to do,’” said Will Kuntz, the lone intern who had once represented the Yankees’ analytical effort. “It was sort of a very slow-drip feed into the clubhouse, into the coaching staff, into the organization. It was something that took years and years and years and years, something that really needed to be earned. And that’s a credit to Fish and the job he did.”

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Everyone’s talking about the importance of the bullpen these days. Guess who has been producing the best bullpens in baseball since forever?

Team Bullpens Over Time

Team bullpen WAR by year (color) and in aggregate



Each of those colors represents a year, and you'll notice that when it comes to the Yankees, there is no color lacking. They haven't put together a single below replacement bullpen since 2000 — they always have contributors when judged by Wins Above Replacement.

Since the turn of the century, they've consistently put together very good bullpens under Brian Cashman's leadership. And now they're turning out great ones. The Yankees this year featured the best bullpen of all time by WAR ... and they also own two of the top three, four of the top ten, and six of the top twenty bullpens of all time.

The super reliever wears pinstripes, which is fitting because the best reliever of all time did, too.

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Fishman soon found allies in the revolution.

Billy Eppler had been transferred to the Yankees' New York office after spending the previous year at the team's Tampa complex. His familiarity with both places would prove helpful. A former college pitcher with a degree in finance, he was introduced to analytics while working with the Rockies early in his career. In many ways, he'd come to represent a Yankee ideal. He possessed both a scouting

background and a firm command of the numbers, making him comfortable speaking either language. Bound by curiosity, Eppler and Fishman became fast friends. They weren't alone.

Will Kuntz had been a college intern for the Yankees, initially scoring the job by cashing in on a connection to Steinbrenner, a fellow Williams College alum. Upon graduation in 2006, he was hired full time. Like Eppler, Kuntz was comfortable thinking along with the data, using it to inform his early work as a scout. Steve Martone, another intern-turned-staffer, gained an understanding of efficiency and technology with the Marines.

All of them were young and eager. When they weren't at their laptops, they could be found playing in pickup basketball games across the street from the old Stadium. Craving the competition, Cashman often joined, just as he did with various fantasy leagues that sprang up around the office.

"If it wasn't the New York Yankees, you would have thought it was a start-up company," Eppler said.

The Yankees sought to revamp every area of their baseball operations. The first battleground was scouting. With that in mind, Fishman began constructing a massive database that the organization still uses as a one-stop shop for videos, scouting reports, and other bits of granular information on thousands of players. Teams of interns worked in shifts to scrape data and add it into the Yankees' system. It was named the Baseball Analysis and Statistics Engine — or B.A.S.E.

Every season, the Yankees must evaluate scores of players, whether they're major free agents, intriguing trade targets, or flotsam and jetsam on the waiver wire. It could take hours to craft a detailed report on a player. With B.A.S.E., that process could take just minutes. Scouts were expected to make use of the technology. The system also kept tabs of how often a scout had accessed the information.

Even the structure of scouting reports themselves was subject to scrutiny. The Yankees eventually changed their methodology, adding a weighting system informed by data. In meetings, they challenged scouts to rank the top 20 players at each position in the league, and then replicate the exercise using only OPS or wOBA. It was designed to reinforce the similarity of the chosen players — despite the use of different methods.

As expected, there was blowback. The scouting staff entered a period of turnover. Some quit while others were fired. But with Cashman's backing, the modernization of the department continued.

"He was always very adamant about saying that we're doing this to get better," Kuntz said. "That's always the key. We're not doing this to take anybody's job away. We're doing this to help our decision-making process more than anything else."

When Fishman sought out opportunities to add staff, Cashman responded with more resources. The Yankees aimed high. With the team looking to fill an analyst position in 2009, Kuntz recalled sitting in with Fishman on a job interview. David Grabiner, the prospective hire, couldn't divulge details of his previous work except to say it involved probabilistic modeling, part of an effort to create a shield against ballistic missiles.

“He was basically, ‘yeah, I can either make the country or the world more safe by being able to accurately shoot missiles out of the sky,’” Kuntz said. “Or I can track the flight of a baseball 60 feet, 6 inches and maybe help us win a World Series.”

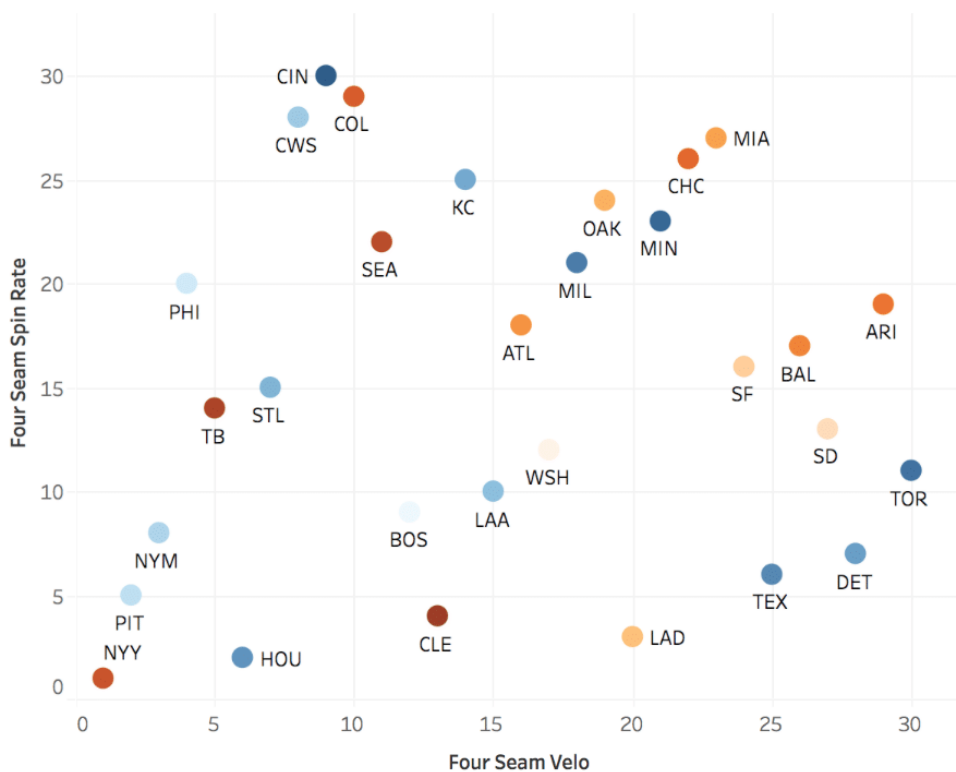
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One thing you might notice in the Yankees’ clubhouse is how large the players on this team are. Strong, tall, and beefy, these guys are athletes in the traditional sense. They lead the league in exit velocity on liners and fly balls and just broke the all-time record for most home runs by a team.

So maybe it’s not surprising that the Yankee pitchers throw the fastest fastballs in the big leagues. But they also lead the league in a stat we couldn’t even measure until four years ago.

Four-Seam Velocity, Spin, & Usage by Team

Four-seam velo & spin rank (1=best for both) & four-seam percentage (color, red=high)



The Yankees are first in four-seam velocity, but they are also first in four-seam spin rate ... and as a consequence, their percentage of four-seamers over all fastballs is highest in the big leagues. They spin it better — or at least more — than anyone.

The league as a whole has gone to the strikeout over the ground ball. The Yankees may have gotten there early by promoting the high-spin, high-velocity four-seamer over the groundball-inducing sinker.

“In running through this with analytics departments I have worked with over the last 14 years,” Angels General Manager Billy Eppler told Bill Shaikin this summer, “velocity is the No. 1 predictor of success.”

Looks like the Yankees analysts — Eppler’s former front office teammates — have known that for some time. And maybe they also know a little something about spin.

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Every analyst added meant more studies that might help the Yankees gain an edge. Some ideas were turned away, deemed too extreme for real-world application, even when the numbers suggested that they might make sense. Others eventually influenced the way the Yankees evaluated players, or constructed their bullpen, or shaped trades, or maximized the unique dimensions of their ballpark.

No idea was too unconventional for discussion. As the influence of analytics began to spread throughout the organization, the expectations of the people leading various departments became clear. Eppler likened the change to a football coach bringing in assistants versed in his specific system. For the Yankees, that meant a comfort level with data.

“They don’t have to be able to set up and run a regression analysis and be able to do predictive modeling,” Eppler said. “They don’t have to do that. They have to understand how it’s done, so they can explain it to their people. The challenge in the chair that Brian’s in is having the department heads understand it, explain it, teach it, and get people on board — or figure out who might not be on board, and what we have to do to get them on board.”

The newly-reshaped scouting department helped take the lead on an initiative that changed the way the Yankees targeted pitchers. Using insights from scouts, an effort was launched to determine a precise line of demarcation for elite fastball velocity. It proved successful enough that it led to adjustments in their scouting grades. Velocity has since increased around the sport. The Yankees were among the first to respond to the shift, as evidenced by the performance of their relievers in recent years.

Since the days of Gene “Stick” Michael, the architect of the Yankees’ last dynasty, the franchise has placed an emphasis on reaching base and hitting for power. The Yankees have used data to refine their methods for targeting players to fit that formula.

A lunchtime debate amongst the Yankees’ early analytic-leaning staffers led to the team’s early adoption of catcher framing metrics, which have since become widespread around the sport. Most recently, the Yankees’ blend of scouting and analytics led them to target their most impactful offensive addition before the trade deadline. They noticed favorable quality of contact data and an opposite-field approach that would work well at Yankee Stadium. So, Luke Voit wound up going from the Cardinals to the Yankees. He has since supplanted Greg Bird at first base by hitting 14 homers with a 1.095 OPS.

Discussions about better ways to maximize roster spots led to the gradual beefing up of the bullpen. It informed their decision in 2014 to sign Andrew Miller to a four-year, \$36 million deal. At the time, it was the largest contract ever for a reliever who was not primarily a closer. It has since become regarded as one of the game’s great bargains.

Indeed, the 2014 season marked a turning point in the reshaping of the Yankees under Cashman. The hiring of Gary Denbo to lead the player development department eliminated the last vestiges of the fissures that once plagued the Yankees. When Denbo joined Derek Jeter with the Marlins, he was replaced by Kevin Reese, an ex-Yankees player who came of age as a scout as the organization began its transformation. He was yet another member of the hierarchy to show a willingness to adapt.

Said Cashman: "We're in alignment from top to bottom."

For years, Cashman had intentionally moved slowly to incorporate data-driven ideas. But with each passing season, that process has sped up. Fishman was promoted to assistant general manager, making official his longtime post as one of Cashman's most trusted lieutenants. Earlier in Fishman's career, Cashman served as somewhat of a go-between, taking ideas from the club's analytics group to coaches. But Fishman has since taken a more forward-facing role. It is not uncommon to see him interacting directly with coaches by the batting cage before games.

Two years ago, the Yankees took a lounge that was adjacent to the manager's office at the Stadium and renovated it into a war room, outfitted with large screens for pregame meetings between analysts and coaches. This season, the Yankees added an analyst to the club's traveling party for the first time. On the road, analyst Zac Fieroh huddles with manager Aaron Boone, who was hired partly for his open-mindedness toward the numbers.

Within the clubhouse, some players make use of the analytics while others steer clear. But the presence of data has become an everyday reality for those playing in the organization.

That influence is clear with Boone. His daily press conferences have been littered with ideas rooted in sabermetrics, whether he's discussing his team's reliance on homers to score runs, or explaining his aggressive use of the bullpen.

"It always used to bug me as a player when people were so staunch in their (ideas), like 'this is just how you do it,'" Boone said. "I always feel like on some level as players, as coaches, as people in the sport, sometimes we're a little resistant to something new, especially when it doesn't get a result right away. So, it's like huh, why are you trying to re-invent the wheel? But I think you're a fool if you ignore all of the smart information and the progress that continues to be made that ultimately gives you a competitive advantage."

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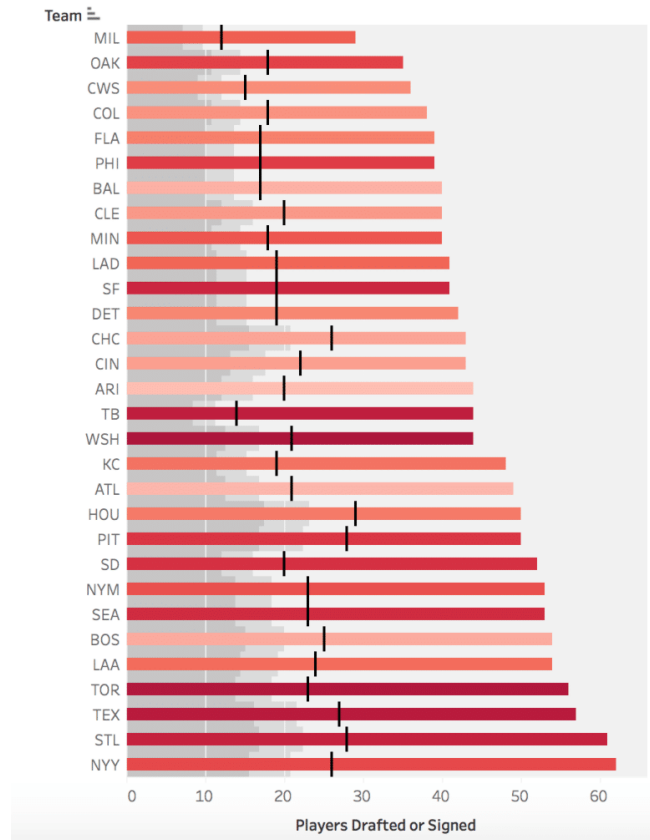
With the organization emphasizing the data more with every passing year, it's tempting to wonder if the Yankees have left scouting behind. You can stop wondering. While other organizations have been cutting their scouting departments, the Yankees have been bolstering their own.

Turn on a game, any game, and you'll see their scouts are still doing good work. You'll likely find yourself looking at more than a few former Yankees, no matter which team you're watching.

That's because the Yankees have signed or drafted more players in today's game than any other team in baseball.

Who Drafted Today's Players?

Number of 2018 players signed or drafted by team



The Yankees are stronger in some areas than others— they’ve signed the second-most international position players (10) and drafted the most pitchers (30) — but on the whole, they’ve been successful at identifying future major leaguers in every category. Their weakest aspect (drafted hitters) still produced 13 major leaguers and a couple of dudes named Aaron Judge and Brett Gardner.

With all the trading they do, plenty of these players are on other teams by now. That doesn’t change the fact that the Yankees were the first to identify more major leaguers than any other team.

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Cashman’s father, John, ran a standardbred farm in Kentucky. As a kid, one of his jobs was to feed the horses. When he brought out buckets of oats, he noticed how they’d naturally come to him. Recently, he conjured that memory as he rehashed his original vision for how the Yankees would use analytics.

“It’s just a collection of helpful information, that was our bucket of oats,” Cashman said. “If people wanted to feed and live, they’d gravitate to good quality information to help guide positive decision-making and improve the process. The horses that were willing to come and feed were the ones that were demonstrating open-mindedness, and willing to change and improve. The ones that were resistant and said ‘forget this,’ they’re the ones that died off and were unwilling to be interested in any higher ground.”

Cashman's circle is an example of the open-mindedness he has championed. Fishman's roots are in analytics. Jean Afterman, a lawyer by trade and the team's assistant GM since 2001, is the highest-ranking female executive in baseball. Vice president of baseball operations Tim Naehring is a former big league player and scout. Special assistant Jim Hendry is an ex-general manager. Pro scouting director Dan Giese began his career as a pitcher, then retired to serve as a police officer, before coming back into baseball as a scout before his promotion.

Cashman has surrounded himself with people from diverse backgrounds, says Naehring, and given them all a say. "He takes a step back," says Naehring. "He gives you the ability to work. He gives you a voice in the room. That's all you can ask for."

Eppler has since graduated, becoming general manager of the Angels in 2015. He hired away Martone, installing him as assistant GM. Just as they had with the Yankees, they established what is now a growing analytics department. Kuntz left baseball to work for Major League Soccer. He has since become assistant general manager of the expansion team LAFC, where he's working to incorporate some of the data-driven ideas he learned in baseball.

Of course, there is no taming a game of randomness. And for all their attention toward process, the Yankees haven't won the World Series since 2009. Last summer, they traded prospects to the A's for Sonny Gray, whose struggles this season will keep him off the playoff roster. Jacoby Ellsbury's seven-year, \$151 million deal signed in 2013 may go down as one of the worst missteps in Cashman's tenure. And on Wednesday night, it's possible that the Yankees' entire postseason could last just nine innings.

During a quiet moment in spring training, beneath the sunshine of a new season, Fishman mused about how a team could theoretically sign the best player at every position and still face relatively long odds of winning the World Series. But he relished his role in stacking the deck.

"We have the opportunity to really impact the Yankees' chances of winning," he said. "Every little step we take, every small study an analyst does, or key piece of information we're providing, it gets us one drop closer. Everything we do is increasing that probability of winning the World Series now and in the future."

About a decade ago, Eppler recalled media reports referring to Cashman as "Cold Hard Cash." Eppler seized upon the moniker, using it in jest whenever Cashman needed to have a difficult talk with someone resistant to the new ideas in the front office. "Here comes Cold Hard Cash!" Eppler would say, when that side of Cashman made an appearance.

"I think early on, you take baby steps," Cashman said. "You've got to crawl before you walk, and walk before run, and run before you sprint. If you're turning the clock back, when we started making some changes, I'd say we were in the crawling, infancy stage. But I'd like to think right now, we're sprinting."

Sprinting, he said, means having the discipline to maintain the culture. That often means tough conversations — moreso now than before. Tension points still remain. But during flare-ups, it's Cashman who addresses any issues. Just as he did during the days of Steinbrenner, Cashman maintains his directness. When it comes to the acceptance of analytics, he's unequivocal.

He describes being in a perpetual state of war for — and with — his philosophy.

“You have to deal with things straight-up and head on,” Cashman said. “You have to. Or, what are you doing this for? It’s a house of cards. It’s always going to be a house of cards. Because if you don’t, before you know it, everything you’ve worked hard for — everything you’ve built — will crumble.”

FROM BASEBALL AMERICA

Trout Delivers ‘Best Year’ Yet, Wins Player of the Year

By Kyle Glaser

In many ways, 2018 was the best year of Mike Trout’s illustrious career. In others, it was his most challenging.

Trout raised his game yet another notch this season, posting a 1.088 OPS that not only led the majors but also was the second-highest by any player this decade. He finished fifth in MLB in batting average (.312), first in on-base percentage (.460), third in slugging percentage (.628) and tied for fourth in home runs (39). And he did it all without making a single error in the field, something no other center fielder who played at least 120 games can claim.

For his all-around excellence, Trout is the 2018 Baseball America Major League Player of the Year.

“I think just the total package, offensively, defensively, this was my best year,” Trout said during the Angels’ final series of the season in Anaheim. “Being up here for seven, eight years now, I’m facing guys over and over again I’ve seen before. And just knowing my swing, I’m learning how to prevent the long durations without feeling good at the plate. Defensively, what I needed to work on, it’s come together and it’s shown.”

Trout, 27, has now played in 1,065 career games. Through the same amount of games, he has more hits than Cal Ripken Jr., more home runs than Barry Bonds, more runs scored than Ty Cobb and more total bases than Ken Griffey Jr.

And he’s getting better. Trout’s on-base percentage and OPS this season were the best of his career. His home run total and slugging percentage were second-best. He stole 24 bases in 26 attempts, the most successful rate of his career.

Then there is his defense. In spring training, Trout declared his goal of winning his first Gold Glove this season. He sharpened his skills getting jumps off the bat every day in batting practice during camp, and by the time the regular season rolled around, he noticed a distinct difference.

“I’ve surprised myself a couple times this year with balls I didn’t think I could catch and I caught,” Trout said. “I wouldn’t say it was one particular drill. I think just over time, even in BP when you’re not shagging everything, you’re getting that first step, getting that reaction time and tell yourself catch everything. I think that’s been the biggest thing.”

The results followed. In addition to his errorless play, Trout led all American League center fielders with four double plays started and ranked fourth with seven assists.

According to Fangraphs, Trout's eight defensive runs saved led all qualified American League center fielders and was tied for third in MLB overall.

Both Trout's arm and his glove were previously considered the weak points of his game. This year, they became among the best in baseball.

"When Mike evaluates himself and if there's maybe a deficiency, he takes it on as a personal challenge," Angels manager Mike Scioscia said. "He's a Gold Glover in center field, there's no doubt in my mind."

"I take pride in defense and to see where I ranked, I just told myself I had to be better," Trout said. "I sat down with (third base and outfield coach) Dino (Ebel) and a couple of the coaches, got some data over the course of last year that compared me with the top center fielders. I tried to base my jumps off theirs and see where I could get better and it worked out."

That Trout was already considered the best player in baseball and somehow managed to get even better was impressive, but not surprising for those around him on a daily basis.

"It's his humility, his open-mindedness and his curiosity," Angels general manager Billy Eppler said. "Those things help drive him and put him in a position where he'll grab myself, grab Dino Ebel, grab (hitting coaches Eric Hinske and Paul Sorrento) and say, 'How can I get better at this? I want to get better at "X" or I want to get better at "Y", what do you got, what do you have for me?'"

"That kind of humility and open-mindedness and curiosity, that doesn't come around in a lot of players, let alone star players."

But as much as Trout considers 2018 his most successful year on the field, it was one of his toughest off of it.

In mid-August, Trout's brother-in-law Aaron Cox, a former pitcher in the Angels' minor league system, died from what a New Jersey State Police spokesman said was a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Trout, who was on the disabled list with right wrist inflammation at the time, returned home to New Jersey with his wife for a week to grieve the loss of not just a family member, but also the man Trout described as his best friend.

"It was probably the toughest time of my life so far as a professional," Trout said. "Just in general in life, you know you have people that pass, family members that pass that are expected to pass out of old age. You never think that a 24-year-old kid can pass."

"It's bigger than baseball. We come here every day and try to perform at a high level but we still got family and we still have life. To lose a close friend and close family member like that, it was tough."

When Trout returned to Angel Stadium on Aug. 24, he took the field wearing a jersey with "A. Cox" on the back, honoring his brother-in-law during Players Weekend.

With Cox's name on his back, Trout went 2-for-3 with a triple in his return.

"The first couple of days back were tough because obviously I want to be with my family, I want to be with my wife," Trout said. "(Playing again) kind of got my mind off it a little bit but he played baseball as well, so everything I did on a baseball field, I think about him.

"But it was special when I came back it was Players Weekend and I got to honor him. Obviously, it's been a tough last couple months for me."

There was both satisfaction and pain for Trout in 2018. There was development both as a person and a professional.

At the end of it all, what Trout cares about most is that he feels like he's grown the most he ever has, both as a player and a person.

"Every year I grow more," Trout said. "Baseball standpoint, every year you learn new things. Once you think you got this game figured out it comes back and kicks you in the butt. You just gotta keep pushing, keep working, and that's been my mentality since I got up here. And as a life standpoint, life's short. You gotta love your family, love your friends, respect people. You don't know what you got 'til you lose somebody."

FROM BLEACHER REPORT

The 2018 Blunder Each MLB Team Must Fix This Offseason

By Jacob Shafer

Ten MLB teams qualified for the 2018 playoffs. Many others had decent-to-promising campaigns.

Yet all 30 teams committed at least one significant blunder—a move they made, or didn't make, between last offseason and today that could haunt them going forward.

Let's assess every team's most costly misstep and why it must be fixed in the months ahead.

Los Angeles Angels: Not locking Mike Trout up long-term

In September, Fancred's Jon Heyman reported the following: "The Angels are expected to try again to make Mike Trout a lifetime Angel when they discuss a contract this winter."

Trout might take the bait and could become MLB's first \$500 million man in the process.

On the other hand, Trout might have soured on the notion after yet again missing the playoffs. He's the best player on the planet and has taken a scant 12 at-bats on the biggest stage.

The Angels should have made their strongest pitch after they landed two-way Japanese star Shohei Ohtani in December 2017 and excitement was high.

Trout is locked in with the Halos through 2020. Can they convince him to stay in Anaheim for the long haul after another also-ran finish? They'd better try.

****Article edited to include only Angels-related material.*