



Fans prepare for the opening festivities of the Kansas City Royals and the Milwaukee Brewers spring training at Surprise Stadium March 25. **Michael Patacsil** | *The Lumberjack*

Major League Baseball and the dawn of the Statcast era

PETER KERSTING

Cold, calculated and precise, the numbers tell all. Efficiency is the bottom line, and governs decisions. It's nothing personal. It's part of the business, and it has its place in the game.

But the players aren't robots, and that's a good thing, too.

Major League Baseball is a sport that continues to evolve as it expands. A unique aspect of that evolution has always been the analytical side of the game. Stats have played a major role in baseball from the beginning, but the more traditional stats like batting average, slugging percentages and Earned Run Average have been overshadowed by the emergence of advanced sabermetrics and Statcast.

Sabermetrics is a type of advanced stat system created specifically for baseball analysis and the measurement of in-game activity.

A state-of-the-art tracking technology, Statcast has found its way into all 30 Major League ballparks, and has been measuring nearly every aspect of players' games since its debut in 2015.

Although its original debut may have seemed underwhelming, Statcast gained traction as a tool for broadcasters to illustrate elements of the game in a way never before possible. That aspect of the system viewers already know, but as Statcast continues to grow and compile player data, many teams are beginning to employ entire analytics departments to find new ways to exploit the advanced sabermetrics.

Art Stewart, senior adviser to Royals general manager Dayton Moore, knows all about metrics.

A legendary scout, Stewart has been involved in professional baseball for 65 years and is responsible for the drafting of more than 70 Major League athletes, including Bo Jackson

and Carlos Beltran. Stewart has been with the Kansas City Royals from the beginning in 1969.

"Every club has them," said Stewart as he watched the players take batting practice on a side field at Surprise Stadium. "We have a large department that deals with the analytics and sabermetrics and everything. We place high value on it when we are talking trades and things like that. That input is part of the equation on whether you make the deal or not."

"What's happened in the last number of years with the high tech, so to speak, part of baseball that has come about, it's become very important," Stewart said. "And every club is into it [sabermetrics] and using it. Some go a little further than others. It's an age that we are in now. We had the money-ball age, and now we are into the analytic and sabermetric, the high-tech age. We've gotten a lot of good value out of the people we have, and we have some good people."

Stewart, the longest-tenured associate in the Royals organization, became the 23rd member of the Royals Hall of Fame as well as the Professional Scouts Hall of Fame in 2008 in recognition of his contributions to the game. Stewart understands the game at a fundamental level and offers a unique perspective of America's pastime.

"I've been with the Royals since the beginning," said Stewart. "We have things available; [with sabermetrics] it's for the betterment of the game. We have information now that we never had before — so many things that have helped the game. It plays an important role in the game as we know it today ... In baseball they can tell you Joe DiMaggio holds the record for 56 games, Ted Williams is the last guy to hit .400, .406. Baseball is and always has been a game of statistics, going way back. It's just to the point now that you gather so much

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information.”

The overwhelming amount of new data that Stewart refers to is a goldmine for Major League front offices. It has been pointed to as an integral part of the development of championship caliber teams like the Red Sox and Cubs under Theo Epstein.

On top of the free-agency and scouting value Statcast and sabermetrics have provided, organizations are searching for new ways to use the data to enhance player development and injury prevention. But while the value of advanced metrics and Statcast data has become

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JASON HAMMEL

undeniable to the business of baseball. The players don’t appear as thrilled.

The general consensus gathered in the Royals spring training clubhouse in Surprise, Ariz., was one of indifference to the stats phenomenon. Several players in the clubhouse declined to even comment on the subject.

“I don’t really know,” said Royals centerfielder Billy Burns. “I don’t really get all into it, but I guess it could be beneficial in certain areas. I just don’t know enough about it to comment.”

Those who had more to say expressed skepticism on the value it had for the players.

“I don’t pay any attention to them,” said Royals starting pitcher Jason Hammel. “I’m sure there is a math equation for everything, but math was one of my strong suits in school, and I don’t feel like it really parlays anything into throwing a baseball, or hitting one.”

Hammel, 34, signed a two-year contract worth a guaranteed \$16 million with the Royals this offseason that included a mutual option for a third year. Hammel is coming off a 2016 World Series campaign with the Cubs where he pitched himself to a 3.83 ERA in the regular season.

Hammel wasn’t sold on the idea that Statcast could help with development or injury prevention.

“Everybody is different,” Hammel said. “... I could see how it would work if we were robots,

but we’re not. Everybody is different. Everybody throws the ball different, different irks here and there. We’re not all the same thing doing it always in the same exact motion or frame or whatever you want to say it as. But I know that each guy has his goods and his bads in the way he throws a baseball or hits a baseball. So it’s tough. I don’t really pay too much attention.”

Hammel acknowledged the likelihood that sabermetrics may have had a role in his signing.

“I’m sure, yeah. All I know is what I bring to the table and what’s on paper and me as a guy,” Hammel said. “That’s basically how I sell myself. I’m not at home doing math problems to figure out how to get the next guy out. I am sure that something was done in the offseason to say, but the majority of it was ‘Was I healthy or not?’ That was kind of the biggest factor in how this offseason went for me.”

First baseman Eric Hosmer echoed Hammel’s sentiments on advanced metrics.

Hosmer is coming off a successful run in the World Baseball Classic (WBC) where he helped team USA win it all against team Puerto Rico.

He batted .375 with three doubles, one homer and five RBIs in seven WBC games and was featured by Statcast on MLB.com where they showcased his speed from first to home.

Hosmer is entering his free-agency year with the Royals but isn’t concerned with how stats may affect his value.

“I don’t really pay too much attention to that stuff,” said Hosmer. “As players, you just go out and focus on what you can control, and that’s how you prepare for a game and what type of effort you give out in every game. I think that’s something for a lot of people that do a lot of research in the game and work outside the game that focus on that a lot.”

There is a definite discrepancy in how the Royals players value statistics compared to their front office, but that’s normal. Sure it adds value to the game, but for the players the game is too fast to worry about metrics.

“That’s above my paygrade,” said Brandon Moss, Royals left fielder and first baseman.

Moss is an athlete caught in the middle of the sabermetrics dilemma. A player with amazing raw power coupled with a high strikeout rate, Moss is an all-or-nothing hitter who receives as much flack, or more, from a fan base when he enters a slump as he does fanfare when he’s mashing.

“I think sabermetrics — I played in Oakland for a while — so you learn a lot about that there because it’s used to make everyday decisions. So I think it definitely has a place,” Moss said. “You can use it to tell part of a story of a player. I think that there is information that can be used, but I also think that just like any

new stat that comes along, ala WAR, people lean too heavily on stupid stats.”

Wins Above Replacement is a sabermetric stat.

“I think if you want to get a general idea of a player, take his tendencies like you would get from sabermetrics. Take what you see on an everyday basis, and put them together, and you’ll get an idea of the player,” Moss said. “But baseball is a game where you can go to a four-game series and watch Miguel Cabrera play against, even myself, and you can comaway thinking that I am a way better player than Miguel Cabrera, which is just simply not true.

But in four games anything can happen in baseball.”

The value of Statcast is documented and real. Major league front offices and fan bases have embraced the new era, and for good reason. It plays a major role in the game. But it is imperfect and it is cold, calculated and cruel.

Players aren’t robots, and they shouldn’t have to be. Baseball is frustrating enough as it is — a game filled with failure, adjustments and counter-adjustments. Athletes at the highest level don’t have time for math.

For the full photo gallery, visit jackcentral.org.



Top: Royals first baseman Eric Hosmer steps to the plate during a spring training game against the Brewers at Surprise Stadium March 25. **Bottom:** Second baseman Whit Merrifield signs autographs before the game in Surprise, Ariz. **Michael Patacsil | The Lumberjack**