

Sabermetrics and UK Baseball

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The author is one of the most experienced scorers in Britain, having carried out this role both in the National League and in US semi-pro baseball.

Joe Gray's recent article on sabermetrics raised the interesting question of whether the use of this enhanced system of baseball statistics has any useful application to British baseball. Well, it does and it doesn't.

Firstly, it is not an alternative method of scoring. Secondly, it has a different object from traditional scoring, which is based on keeping a statistical record of all games played and the performances therein and does not, intrinsically, make any attempt to subjectively evaluate an individual player's ability to perform in any given circumstance. This is not to say that some gauge of past performance is not subliminally established; rather that little consideration is given to establishing a player's future worth. This is a shortcoming that sabermetrics were designed to resolve.

In the world of professional baseball such considerations are obviously of vital importance in considering trades, salaries, and suchlike. Teams that overlook measures such as on-base average and slugging average – just two of the statistical innovations that are now readily accepted – when evaluating a player, are likely to end up as bottom-feeders in the league.

However, here in Britain, we do not have such considerations. It is an amateur sport, and we are essentially more interested in having a record of how each player has performed – what his achievements have been, rather than what they might be. Thus it is of more interest to know that Player A had so many RBIs rather than what his "secondary batting average" might be.

It is accepted that many of the traditional statistics we use are flawed, but they have served the game well for over a hundred years. A pitcher's win-loss record doesn't actually give any information about how well he has pitched unless looked at in conjunction with other stats that we maintain, such as number of innings pitched per game and ERA. The aforementioned RBIs are also, of course, an inaccurate method of assessment in that a player can be getting plenty of hits without runners on base; and yet they do go some way to answering the often raised question of ability in "clutch" situations. These are just two examples – there are many others.

When Henry Chadwick devised his scoring system, he used that of cricket as his template. His most contentious innovation was the concept of the error. This was an attempt – as was ERA – to achieve the goal of differentiating between a run scored by batting skill as opposed to fielding error. This is indicative of the approach he took to the task, which is based on a different viewpoint and ethic than sabermetrics. (Those of us who sit on the edge of the diamond recording happenings on the field must be grateful to have the opportunity for some subjective input! For my part, I just wish that he had included the concept of a mental error.)

I have, for many years, been keeping score with a computerized scoring system. This enables me to input everything into a PDA for later downloading to my computer. I only mention this because the program automatically produces a whole range of stats both traditional and sabermetric (as well, incidentally, as such benefits as a play-by-play record). All the teams I have scored for have, therefore, received OPS, fielding percentages, pitch location charts and other details as a matter of course. In my experience this has appeared to have much more relevance across the pond than here.

Sabermetrics, as stated above, are designed to do far more than record events, and their esoteric analyses have even led to changes in the way the game is played. We hear far more in MLB today about the requirement for patience at the plate, rather than the aggressive approach which has been advocated in times past. I doubt if such conclusions could be drawn from a league with such varying levels of ability in both pitching and hitting as there are over here.

I would, therefore, be hesitant in advocating that we plunge into a wholesale acceptance of the need for producing sabermetric-type studies for British baseball. Of course, Joe does not propose this course and I agree wholeheartedly with the adoption of OPS and WHIP as standard stats to be maintained. Fielding percentages are easily produced but do not tell us much without the extra input (impossible outside MLB) required for sabermetric stats. I am a little less sure about DIPS, but only because there is still uncertainty amongst advocates themselves about the relative weightings.