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# Just How Long Does the Average Baseball Career Last?

By [SAM ROBERTS](#)

Baseball lore is littered with one-game wonders, from Moonlight Graham, whose brief stint in the outfield for the [New York Giants](#) in 1905 was immortalized in “Field of Dreams,” to Larry Yount, whose major league career amounted to warming up as the announced relief pitcher for the [Houston Astros](#) in 1971 when his elbow popped.

Then there are baseball’s Iron Men, like [Pete Rose](#), who played in 3,562 games; Lou Gehrig, who filled in for Wally Pipp at first base and went on to play 2,130 consecutive games; Nolan Ryan, who played in 27 seasons; Eddie Collins and [Rickey Henderson](#), who celebrated silver anniversaries; and Minnie Minoso and Nick Altrock, whose careers spanned portions of five decades.

But while no player would ever admit to being merely average, how long a career can the average major leaguer expect to have?

After studying the 5,989 position players who began their careers between 1902 and 1993 and who played 33,272 years of major league baseball, three demographers have come up with an answer: On average, a rookie can expect to play major league baseball for 5.6 years.

Their study, which is being published in the August issue of Population Research and Policy Review, also found that one in five position players would play only a single season.

Fewer than half of all rookies remain long enough to play a fifth year. And only about 1 percent of players last 20 seasons or more.

Cognizant that pitchers are more prone to injuries and have volatile careers, the authors, William Witnauer of the State University of New York at Buffalo and [Richard Rogers](#) and Jarron Saint Onge of the [University of Colorado](#), excluded them from the study. They also excluded 618 players who made their debut after Sept. 1 and played only that season.

The authors found advantages in starting a major league career early. The probability of ending a career after one year is 10 percent for players starting at age 20, but rises to 13 percent for players who start at 21, and 36 percent for players who start at 28.

The probability of leaving the league is 20 percent in the first year, but drops to 11 percent or greater in every subsequent year. While a rookie can expect to play 5.6 years, a player in his third season can expect to play six additional years.

“Whereas a normal work career typically involves a gradual ascent followed by a slow decline, baseball careers are characterized by rapid ascent followed by rapid decline, or more accurately as an inevitably short time on a very slippery slope,” the study said. “The explanation lies in baseball’s extremely high selectivity.”

The study said careers had been lengthened by free agency and league expansion.

A rookie could expect to play 4.3 years in what the authors call the Early Era, between 1902 and 1945, 6.47 years in the Golden Age (1946-68) and 6.85 years in the Modern Era. The study does not include players whose careers began later than 1993, because many are still playing.

“One- and two-year careers were more common in the earlier parts of the century,” Rogers said, but gains in longevity have not been significant — from a median of three years in the Early Era to six years in the Modern Era.

“We can speculate that career length has increased because of better overall health, longer life expectancies, better sports training and medicine, better scouting and recruitment, higher salaries, higher prestige, league expansions, and fewer social and economic disruptions,” Rogers said.

Moreover, the authors wrote, the length of a career can be affected by other factors, including the willingness of teams to pay for better players; a player’s personal attributes, which might compensate for lackluster performance; and injuries, scandal and other personal problems.

Unlike most other careers, professional players “know (but do not necessarily accept) that the role is temporary, exit is often involuntary, and the elite status conferred by the role is difficult to achieve after,” the authors said.