

## Howling Ethical Malfeasance

by Brandon Kruse

In honor of the sad passing of [firejoemorgan.com](http://firejoemorgan.com), the place Where Bad Sports Journalism Comes to Die, I give you an homage to the FJM sentence-parsing style. Their potent mix of world-class comedy and baseball-stat-fueled sanity will be sorely missed, and I only hope that I can do justice to it. (Thankfully nothing brings out the crazy in sports columnists quite like the end-of-season baseball awards...).

### Phil Sheridan: MVP voting is out of whack

#### Ryan Howard was the most valuable player in the National League in 2008.

Uh, no. No, he wasn't. Howard ranked 39th in the National League in on-base percentage. You know, getting on base. Not making outs. The lifeblood of baseball. The game's whole goddamn raison d'être, as [Trey Wilson and the Coen Brothers](#) might say. If finishing 39th is best, then I believe that [Gene Amondson of the Prohibition Party](#) is our new president. Suck on that, Barack Obama! (Also: start hoarding booze, people!)

Howard wasn't even the most valuable player on the Phillies, though you wouldn't know it, given the gap in media praise between Howard and his teammate:

#### RYAN "LET'S HUG SOME KITTENS" HOWARD

.339 OBP  
124 OPS+  
111.0 Runs Created  
36.6 VORP

#### CHASE "LET'S RAPE SOME KITTENS" UTLEY

.380 OBP  
135 OPS+  
125.3 Runs Created  
63.7 VORP

Everybody gawks at Howard's 146 RBI, but he got those RBI in part because Utley got on base in front of him. And Utley played better defense at a much more valuable position. And with a .292 batting average, 33 HR and 104 RBI, he's even got some of that delicious eye candy that MVP voters love so much. (Of course, the sad truth is that MVP voters didn't love Utley; he finished tied for 14th in the voting, and didn't rank higher than 4th on anyone's ballot.)

Hell, Ryan Howard wasn't even the National League's Most Valuable *Ryan* in 2008:

Ryan Ludwick, 54.8 VORP  
Ryan Braun, 45.0 VORP  
Ryan Doumit, 38.4 VORP  
Ryan Howard, 36.6 VORP

Side note: There were 27 players with the first name Ryan who logged time in the majors last year. Some rogue GM (possibly while high) needs to get all these guys on one roster. (Truth be told, other than being a little short on quality pitchers, it wouldn't be that bad a team...)

#### That he was not voted MVP by the Baseball Writers' Association of America says more about the association than about Howard, Albert Pujols or America.

Yeah, it says that they finally got one right. In fact, with the selections of Pujols and Dustin Pedroia for MVP, Cliff Lee and Tim Lincecum for Cy Young, and Geovany Soto and Evan Longoria for Rookie of the Year, this was frankly of the better BBWAA showings in recent memory.

Wait... America?? How the hell did America get sucked into this?

#### Pujols was not an embarrassing selection, not with his excellent numbers, but was still the wrong selection. And that should embarrass the association

Gwaahh?? You just said that Pujols wasn't an embarrassing selection, yet the writers should be embarrassed for selecting him? I haven't seen that kind of whiplash turnaround of blame since...

MARGE: This is my fault. I tried to teach Bart about town pride, but the power of my words filled him with a sort of madness.

HOMER: Now, Marge, you can't blame all of Bart's problems on your one little speech. If anything turned him bad, it's that time you let him wear a bathing suit instead of underwear. And let's not forget your little speech!

Not that anyone would ever accuse [a sports columnist of engaging in cartoonishly absurd behavior](#).

#### It is ethically indefensible for the journalists who cover baseball to vote for official awards that have an impact on players' financial rewards.

Amount Albert Pujols has earned playing major league baseball: 64.7M, plus another 37M in guaranteed money over the next three years, and countless millions more in endorsements.

Amount he will receive for being named NL MVP in 2008: \$200,000. For someone who's worth more than 100M dollars, that's like twenty bucks.

As for Howard's financial leverage somehow being crippled by losing out on the MVP award... the man just set a record last year for the highest arbitration award in league history, at 10M dollars. That figure will be going up no matter what.

### **Imagine Howard's 2009 arbitration hearing.**

I'm picturing a tastefully-appointed conference room, with a gently trickling permanent waterfall installation on one side, a sparkling glass table, a bountiful basket of fruit and muffins, an overflowing tray of delicious chilled beverages and the ever-so-subtle scent of ocean breeze wafting through the air. All while powerful men in tailored suits argue whether I should be paid 12 million dollars for one year, or 15 million.

And now I want to live in that place for the rest of my life, because compared to that, the rest of us spend our days in 4x8 lean-to shanties made out of a crude mixture of shredded newspaper and bird feces, while roaming packs of wild dogs try to devour our children and the elderly. Thanks a lot, Sheridan! (Shaking fist in general direction of Philadelphia.)

### **It will be different because he finished second in this voting as opposed to first.**

He's right. Emboldened by the fact that Howard finished second rather than first in the MVP voting, his employer, the defending world champion Philadelphia Phillies, will offer their power-hitting All-Star first baseman eleven dollars in Chuck E. Cheese tokens to play for them next year. Howard and his agents, not being idiots, will refuse the offer, and Howard will sit out the 2009 season. Phillies fans, normally a sedate, contemplative bunch, will take to the streets to riot in protest. Cars will be overturned, stores will be looted, garbage cans will be set on fire, and it will all build to the horrifying moment when Mr. Gary Schmidt of Elkins Park, PA is caught having sex with the Liberty Bell. Do you see what your actions have wrought, you godless baseball writers?!

### **That alone is reason enough for the association to recuse itself from this annual charade.**

Yes, the BBWAA should fold immediately because they have theoretically taken away hypothetical money (but not really) from a 29-year-old man who has already made 11.2M dollars playing baseball, and millions more in endorsements, and who will, no matter what, make at least 12M dollars in 2009. For shame, BBWAA! For shame.

### **(Disclosure: I belong to the association because membership streamlines the credential process and because the organization works to improve conditions and access for reporters; I don't vote on anything.)**

Look, I only associate with these douchebag BBWAA guys because they make it easier for me to get the ID badges I need to enter clubhouses and get quotes from players, they fight to protect my right to enter those clubhouses, and they do what they can to make sure I have a comfortable work environment. What a bunch of douchebags.

Also, I don't vote on their stupid awards for girls. And if they ever dared to send me a ballot, I would wipe my ass with it, get it notarized, and mail it back to them. Take that, BBWAA's beliefs!

### **When I've written about this in the past, earnest members of the association have taken time out of their busy days to explain my ignorance to me. Their best argument goes something like this: If not us, then who? Who is better qualified to get it right than the (mostly) men who cover the game every day?**

Let's see... how about:

The players themselves  
Managers and GMs  
The Internet Baseball Awards  
Intelligent baseball bloggers  
Stupid baseball bloggers  
Drunken baseball bloggers  
The fans (many of them drunk)  
Peter Gammons  
Bill James  
The freakishly brilliant love child of Peter Gammons and Bill James  
Computers  
Robots  
Drunken robots  
Thousand monkeys at a thousand typewriters  
Circus-trained bears  
Circus-rejected bears  
Toonces, the Cat Who Could Drive a Car  
Aerosmith  
Wayne Brady  
Bruce Wayne (fictional)  
Lenny Bruce (deceased)  
The cast of *Two and a Half Men*  
Two and a half men (one is just a torso)  
All the ladies in the house!  
That dude with the glasses from the Verizon ads  
Hobbits  
Jawas  
Sand People  
Crab People  
Crabby people  
Tony LaRussa (see also: crabby people, drunken robots)

### **That argument is completely beside the point, of course.**

Oh come on! You couldn't have mentioned that 10 minutes ago?

**If the MVP is the player with the best all-round statistical season, a computer could figure that out. And a computer might well have spit out Pujols' name this season. He was terrific. But Howard got hot in September, hitting 11 home runs and driving in 32 runs to carry the Phillies into the playoffs. That's the very definition of valuable.**

Look, no one's going to dispute that Howard had a great month of September, and the fact that his great month coincided with the Phillies push into the playoffs makes for a great story. But what about the September table-setting of Jimmy Rollins (.411 OBP) and Shane Victorino (.378 OBP)? What about Cole Hamels and Jamie Moyer, who combined for a 3.05 ERA in 10 starts? What about Clay Condrey, Brad Lidge and Ryan Madson, who combined to post a 0.76 ERA in 35 IP of relief? You going to tell those guys Howard carried them? (If so, please let us know where and when, because who doesn't enjoy watching a good pummeling?)

And if you're going to anoint Howard as Lord of Baseball for September, shouldn't you also take him to task for his .234/.324/.490 line from April through August? No, of course not, that takes away from the narrative, and after all, this is the Most Valuable Story award (previous winners: *Jimmy, the Dog Who Loved Smallball*, *The Magical Hustle of L'il Gritty*, and *How Veteran Leadership Saved Thanksgiving* .)

**The group-think association argument for Pujols, if I'm smart enough to get it right, is that he single-handedly kept the Cardinals in the wild-card race. That is brilliant, except it ignores the presence of Ryan Ludwick, Rick Ankiel and Troy Glaus (so much for "single-handedly"), and the fact that the National League wild-card race was a watered-down farce.**

That is brilliant, except it ignores the fact that Ankiel hit .245/.319/.415 with just 5 HR and 21 RBI after the All-Star break. It also conveniently ignores that Howard was surrounded by Utley (who had a season comparable to Ludwick), Pat Burrell (who had a season comparable to Glaus), and Jimmy Rollins and Shane Victorino, who each had a season roughly comparable to Ankiel. It also ignores that the Phillies had a better pitching staff than the Cardinals, allowing 45 fewer runs on the year.

**Replace Pujols with an average NL first baseman and what happens?**

Millions of Cardinals fans weep tears of utter despair. Also, Pujols's wife and kids get pretty freaked out.

(The irony of Sheridan's hypothetical question is beautiful, because essentially, what he's asking is the definition of VORP – Value Over Replacement Player – a stat he's just about to decry. So the answer is: the Cardinals lose nearly 100 runs scored and finish dead last in the NL.)

**The association seamheads love to throw around stats - OPS, VORP, ASPCA - to make a case for Pujols.**

Zing! In one fell swoop, you make fun of stat nerds' penchant for acronyms *and* stick it to those chumps over at the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Way to help animals, chumps! Classic.

**That's all great. Yes, he struck out less and hit for a higher average.**

It's perplexing and a little sad that you think this is the crux of the stat nerd argument.

**But Howard won actual baseball games in an honest-Abe pennant race.**

As opposed to Pujols, who lost fake jai alai matches in a crooked-as-Nixon battle for last place.

**He had 11 more home runs than Pujols, scored five more runs than Pujols, and drove in 30 more runs than Pujols.**

Uh-oh, looks like another "association seamhead" is throwing around stats!

**Notice there are no decimal points involved there, only whole numbers that made a difference in real baseball games.**

Let's just take a minute to review the highest-scoring teams from each season over the last 10 years in the NL and see where they ranked in OBP and HR:

2008 Cubs: 855 runs scored, .354 OBP (1st), 184 HR (5th)  
2007 Phillies: 892 runs scored, .354 OBP (1st, tie), 213 HR (2nd)  
2006 Phillies: 865 runs scored, .347 OBP (2nd), 216 HR (3rd)  
2005 Reds: 820 runs scored, .339 OBP (2nd, tie), 222 HR (1st)  
2004 Cardinals: 855 runs scored, .344 OBP (4th), 214 HR (3rd)  
2003 Braves: 907 runs scored, .349 OBP (2nd), 235 HR (1st)  
2002 D-Backs: 819 runs scored, .346 OBP (1st), 165 HR (6th, tie)  
2001 Rockies: 923 runs scored, .354 OBP (1st), 213 HR (2nd)  
2000 Rockies: 968 runs scored, .362 OBP (1st, tie), 161 HR (13th)  
1999 D-Backs: 908 runs scored, .345 OBP (7th), 216 HR (2nd)

Five times in the last ten years, the team with the most runs scored also had the highest OBP. That only happened twice with homers. The average OBP rank for these highest-scoring teams was 2.2 (2nd). The average HR rank was 3.8 (essentially 4th). The truth is that the best offenses have both on-base skills and power, but studies a lot more rigorous than this one have shown over and over that OBP is the stat most correlated with run production, even if it does have that silly old decimal point.

**That takes care of the logic.**

(Sheridan claps his hands in a self-satisfied "that's the end of that" manner, gets up from his desk, does a lap around the *Philadelphia Enquirer* newsroom while giving everybody he sees that "my finger is a gun that I'm shooting at you" gesture, stops in the break room, buys a celebratory Fresca and a Zagnut bar, returns to his desk, and sighs contentedly.)

**Now let's look at the process. Of the 32 MVP voters (two from each chapter, which means two from each NL market), only one failed to put Howard on his ballot at all. Rich Campbell of the Fredericksburg (Va.) Free Lance-Star was contacted by my astute colleague Todd Zolecki. He had no comment.**

Are you sure? Because I suspect his comment was actually "Who the fuck is Todd Zolecki??"

**Howard's next-lowest spot - 10th out of 10 - was on the ballot of Mark Zuckerman of the Washington Times. Zuckerman and Campbell both cover the Nationals. They both cast ballots utterly out of step with the norm, at least regarding Howard.**

Mark Zuckerman has posted a column explaining why he put Howard 10th on his ballot. In it, he cites Howard's low OBP, good-but-not great slugging percentage, 14th-ranked OPS and his terrible defense. Mark Zuckerman is my new hero. Songs will be written telling of his greatness. Statues will be erected in his honor. Stat-loving women everywhere will line up to bear his children.

Rich Campbell has also posted a column explaining his ballot. In it, he too cites all the things Zuckerman did, then goes on to mention Win Shares, Runs Created, OPS+, VORP and Equivalent Average. Then he adds this:

"If those seem like a foreign language to you, you're not alone. Stop right now, open a new window, Google the stats and learn what they mean."

Rich Campbell is the sun. All will fall in worship of him at the start of every morning, and again at the end of each day. He will warm us with his glowing goodness. He will make life bloom all around us. We will marvel at his guiding presence in our lives.

(Seriously though, both of these guys cover the Nationals – how unbelievably lucky are Nationals' fans to be able to get baseball writing of this caliber in their daily newspaper coverage? Lucky bastards.)

**It's easy to pick on the Nats' beat writers. They were no doubt numb after watching that team for a full season. But the point is that the association's voting is rife with personal agendas, flawed logic, favor trading, and plain old sloppiness.**

As is your column, Phil. Zing!

Jokes aside though, you want to know what's sloppy, Phil? Not bothering to talk to Campbell and Zuckerman yourself (rather than sicking your goon Todd Zolecki on them) to understand their reasons for not picking Howard before you launched into a vitriolic column questioning their integrity as baseball writers. A column that also happens to reek of flawed logic and a bit of a personal agenda. Zing?

**Three members of the association cast rookie of the year votes for Reds pitcher Edinson Volquez, who was not a rookie this year. If the howling ethical malfeasance weren't enough to shut this farce down, that should do the trick.**

The Volquez thing was deeply embarrassing all around, yes, but it was a mistake, nothing more. Unless you're suggesting that the three writers in question, rather than being misinformed and/or lazy, were actually conspiring to elect a non-rookie as Rookie of the Year, in which case: Worst. Conspiracy. Ever.

And "howling ethical malfeasance"? It makes you sound like the crazy guy on the street corner with the "The End is Near" sandwich board. (Who, by the way, totally voted for Pujols.)

**Ryan Howard - who has added a World Series ring to his 2005 rookie of the year and 2006 MVP trophies - will survive this voting nicely. The process that produced it should not.**

And it will be replaced by a March Madness-style single-elimination competitive eating tournament featuring the 65 players with the most RBI in September. Howard, with his 6-4, 230-pound frame, will no doubt win handily.

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