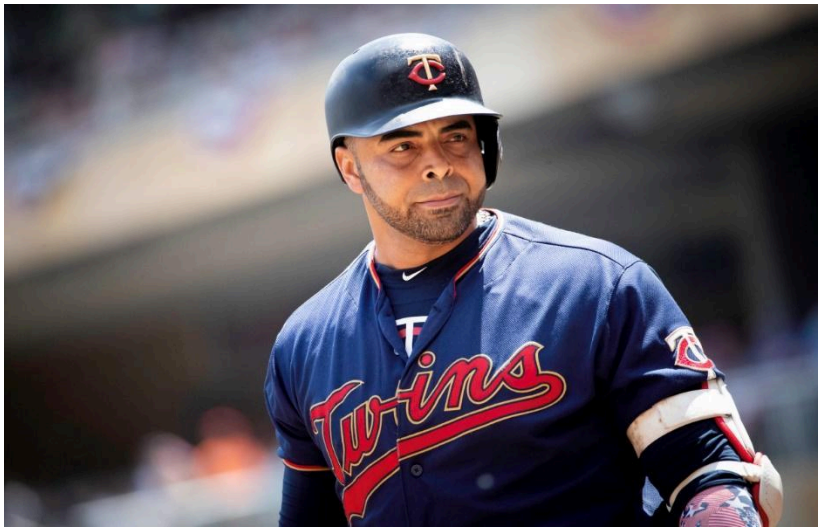
Some of Baseball's Most Underrated Seasons

By Jackson Downs

Baseball is known as the game of analytics. Mathematicians love it because it has the same start point for each event. The pitcher throws to a batter 90 feet away. This heavy focus on analytics has led to a lot of changes in baseball like shifts and openers, bullpen starters. However, it also leads to a lack of underappreciated players. By this, I mean that players with good analytic numbers are rewarded and given rightful praise because the sport is so analytic focused. It's rare that players have good seasons and go unnoticed.

Today, I task myself finding three undervalued players and explaining their stories from the 2017-19 seasons that you may have forgotten.

1. 2019 Nelson Cruz (MIN)



Nelson Cruz is the most appreciated player on this list. He was 9th in AL MVP voting and paid $14 million a year despite being in his late 30s, which was 79th in the MLB. He hit .311 with 41 HRs and 108 RBIs with a .392 OBP, none of these stats were top 8 in the MLB. However, we must dig deeper to show how valuable Cruz was.

Using Baseball Savant and Baseball Reference, we could see Nelson Cruz led the MLB in Average Exit Velocity (93.7 mph), Barrel Percentage[1] (19.9%) and Hard-Hit Percentage (51.5%). In simpler terms, Nelson Cruz hit the ball hard when he made contact, harder than anyone else.

[1] Barrell Percentage: A "barrel" is defined as a well-struck ball where the combination of exit velocity and launch angle generally leads to a minimum .500 batting average and 1.500 slugging percentage. Basically, you hit the ball with the barrel of the bat. This is good because it's usually the desired outcome when swinging. (New Statcast metric barrels has best-hit balls (mlb.com))

Additionally, his expected SLG[2] was .638 which was second in the MLB to AL MVP Mike Trout. His xwOBA[3], expected weighted on base average, was .416 which is 4th in the MLB. Lastly, his xISO[4], expected Isolated Power, was .348 which was second again behind Mike Trout. These numbers show that Cruz was an absolutely elite hitter in 2019.

Even in some of the more commonly used metrics, Cruz was still highly rated with an OPS+[5] of 168, 3rd in the MLB and 68% above league average. Additionally, Cruz was a DH so while he may not have had a positive defensive impact, he also didn't hinder the team in that area either.

Nelson Cruz's 2019 season is a reminder to fans that even great statistical seasons can be undervalued. However, our final two guys had more average looking seasons that were extremely underrated.

2. 2018 Zach Wheeler (NYM)

In 2018, Zach Wheeler finished with a 12-7 record, 3.31 ERA and no Cy-Young votes. His ERA+[6] of 112 was 12% above league average but nothing too phenomenal. However, the deeper we dig into the numbers, the better this season looks.

According to Baseball Savant, Wheeler had the lowest exit velocity against, 86.1 mph, and hard-hit percentage against, 27.1%. Basically, Wheeler was better than any other pitcher in the MLB in stopping players from hitting the ball hard. Additionally, his HR/9[7] of 0.7 was tied for 3rd in the

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[2] SLG: Slugging percentage represents the total number of bases a player records per at-bat. Basically, how much power a player has but also values hits more than outs. xSLG is the expected average of that (Slugging Percentage (SLG) | Glossary | MLB.com)

[3] xWOBA: wOBA is a version of on-base percentage that accounts for how a player reached base -- instead of simply considering whether a player reached base. This basically values a home run over a single much more, because a home run is more bases. xwOBA is the expected wOBA a player would have. (Weighted On-base Average (wOBA) | Glossary | MLB.com)

[4] xISO: ISO measures the raw power of a hitter by taking only extra-base hits -- and the type of extra-base hit -- into account. Basically, it measures double, triples and home runs with home runs much more valuable than the other two. (Isolated Power (ISO) | Glossary | MLB.com)

[5] OPS+: OPS+ takes a player's on-base plus slugging percentage and normalizes the number across the entire league. It accounts for external factors like ballparks. It then adjusts so a score of 100 is league average, and 150 is 50 percent better than the league average. Basically, it measures how much power you have + how often you get on base, then compares you to the rest of the league (On-base Plus Slugging Plus (OPS+) | Glossary | MLB.com)

[6] ERA+: ERA+ is a statistic that takes a player's ERA and normalizes it across the rest of the league factoring in opponents and ballparks. 100 is league average and anything above is that percentage above or below league average. For example, an ERA+ of 105 would mean the player is 5% above league average in ERA (Adjusted Earned Run Average (ERA+) | Glossary | MLB.com)

[7] HR/9: Home Runs Per 9 innings represents the number of home runs a player allows on a 9 inning scale. (Home Runs Per Nine Innings (HR/9) | Glossary | MLB.com)

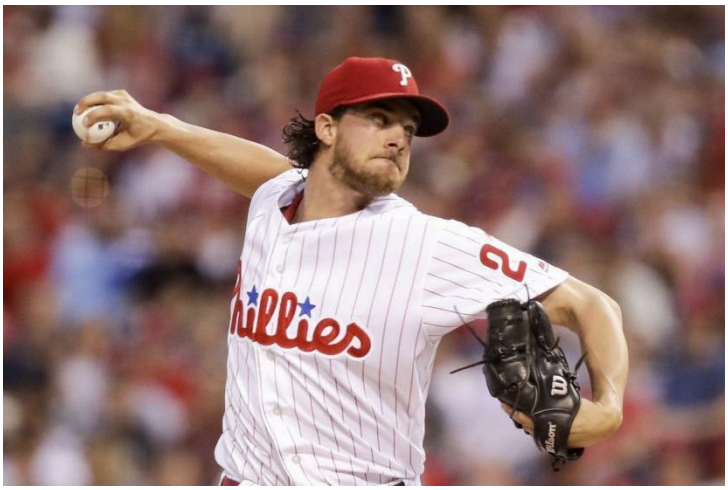
league. One of the reasons he may not have gotten more attention was because he was more of an out pitcher than a flashy strikeout pitcher, as his 8.8 SO/9[8] suggests.

Additionally, another talking point is ERA. Wheeler had the 18th best ERA in the league and the aforementioned ERA+ of 112 showing him as slightly above average. However, the problem with ERA and ERA+ is it doesn't take defense into account[9] Sometimes a defensive misplay or a play that should be made isn't ruled an error, but the pitcher is punished for it. In 2018, the Mets were bottom 7 in many of the key defensive statistics like Rtot[10] and Rdrs[11]. While defense will never be fully captured by analytics, this indicates the Mets had a poor defense. Instead, we should use FIP, which only captures events pitchers has control over - hit by pitchers, unintentional walks, strikeouts and home runs[12]. Wheeler ranks 12th in FIP which is very impressive considering that as we mentioned before he isn't a strikeout pitcher. With a better defensive team behind him, Wheeler's stats may have been much better.

Additionally, did I mention Wheeler was being paid a measly $1.9 million, 395th in the MLB. Wheeler was arguably a top 10 MLB pitcher being paid almost nothing. These statistics would be an indication of Wheeler's future success as he left New York for the Phillies 2020. In his first season in the City of Brotherly Love, he was 12th in Cy-Young voting before coming 2nd in 2021 while also making the all-star team.

I'm not arguing that Wheeler should have contended for the Cy-Young in 2018, as his teammate Jacob DeGrom was on another level. However, this season was extremely underrated once you get past the basic stats.

3. 2017 Aaron Nola (PHI)



Similar to Wheeler, Aaron Nola had a 12-11 with a 3.54 ERA in 2017 with No Cy-Young consideration and the Phillies finished 66-96 in dead last in the NL East. However, like his future teammate, Nola's underlying numbers showed this was actually a great season and an indication of his dominant 2018 season where he was an all-star and 3rd in Cy-Young voting.

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[8] SO/9: Strikeouts Per 9 innings represents how many strikeouts a pitcher has for every 9 innings pitched (Strikeouts Per Nine Innings (K/9) | Glossary | MLB.com)

[9] Be careful when using earned run average when projecting pitcher stats for fantasy purposes (espn.com)

[10] Rtot: This statistic is The number of runs above or below average the player was worth based on the number of plays made. Basically, a positive number means they saved more runs than the average player. Also an important note, the link is just to show where I got the definition. The ranking list included has no impact on the article (Career Leaders & Records for Total Zone Runs | Baseball-Reference.com)

[11] Rdrs: Defense runs saved above average is a statistic that try to quantify how many runs above average a defensive players performance has saved (Defensive Runs Saved (DRS) | Glossary | MLB.com)

[12] Fielding Independent Pitching (FIP) | Glossary | MLB.com

When we get to Baseball Savant, we see that Nola was in the top ten in the MLB in a lot of key statistics. Nola was top 10 in xBA[13] with .224 (10th), xSLG[14] with .360 (9th), xwOBA with .279 (8th), xOBP, expected On-Base Percentage, with .281 (10th) and Exit Velocity with 85.7 mph (3rd). Additionally, his xISO was .136 which finished 11th. And when I say Nola has the third exit velocity or tenth xBA, it means he has the 3rd lowest exit velocity allowed or 10th lowest xBA allowed, same with the other statistics.

Moving over to Baseball Reference, Nola had an ERA+ of 122 which was 20th in the MLB. However, we explained in Wheeler's section why ERA and ERA+ aren't entirely reliable: defense. And what do you know, the Phillies were bottom six in Rtot and Rdrs. Instead, we look to FIP, Nola's was 3.27 which was 9th in the MLB and only 0.26 better than his 2018 season where he nearly won the Cy-Young.

These statistics would seem to indicate that Nola was more of an out pitcher than a strikeout pitcher. And some numbers indicate this, Nola had a GB% of 50.4 which is 12th in the MLB. However, Nola's SO/9 was 10.0 ranking him 14th in the MLB. Nola was able to strike out a guy an inning while still being to limit the amount of fly balls he allowed, hence his great FIP. In simple terms, Nola was the perfect combo of a strikeout and ground ball pitcher in 2017.

Lastly, Nola had a 4.4 WAR which was 15th in the MLB ahead of 2018 Cy-Young winner Jacob DeGrom and only 0.5 behind Clayton Kershaw who finished 2017 second in NL Cy-Young Voting with an 18-4 record and 2.31 ERA.

The crazy thing about all of this was that Nola was making a mere $544,000. This was 695th in the MLB! The Phillies were getting borderline ace level production from a guy making near the league's minimum.

Overall, Nola proved in many statistics that he was a top 10 level pitcher in 2017, whether through FIP, Exit Velocity or other expected numbers. However, his poor record masked his ability, which was due to the Phillies being terrible. Additionally, he had a solid ERA+, but that masked his ability as well due to the Phillies terrible defense. Aaron Nola's 2017 season is one of the most underrated in recent MLB history.

References:

For our reference, we mainly used the players' Baseball Savant and Baseball Reference pages along with the MLB seasons' Baseball Savant and Reference page. All statistics and rankings found in here are on those pages. Additionally, each definition that might not be known to the casual baseball fan was linked as well.

[13] xBA: A metric that measures the likelihood a batted ball will become a hit. A lower xBA the better for a pitcher (Expected Batting Average (xBA) | Glossary | MLB.com)

[14] xSLG: Expected Slugging Percentage is more indicative of a player's skill than regular slugging percentage, as xSLG removes defense from the equation. Once again, the lower the better for a pitcher. (Expected Slugging Percentage (xSLG) | Glossary | MLB.com)