



a matter of size

Professional players keep getting bigger,
and records continue to topple

by Rob Neyer

Track and field athletes aren't the only ones who continually push the physical limits of their sports. Although some curmudgeons might still try to argue that athletes in baseball and football aren't better than their forebears, it's pointless to suggest that they're not more physically gifted. Today's competitors aren't only bigger than ever, they're stronger and faster—and this development goes a long way toward accounting for the surge in record breaking in these games.

In the 1960s the best players in baseball were arguably Hank Aaron and Willie Mays, and in fact those two are now generally regarded as the greatest living ballplayers. Aaron, of course, finished

his career with more home runs than any player in Major League Baseball history; Mays is number three on the list, behind only Aaron and Babe Ruth. Hank Aaron stood six feet tall and weighed 180 pounds. Willie Mays measured 5' 11" and also weighed a modest 180 pounds.

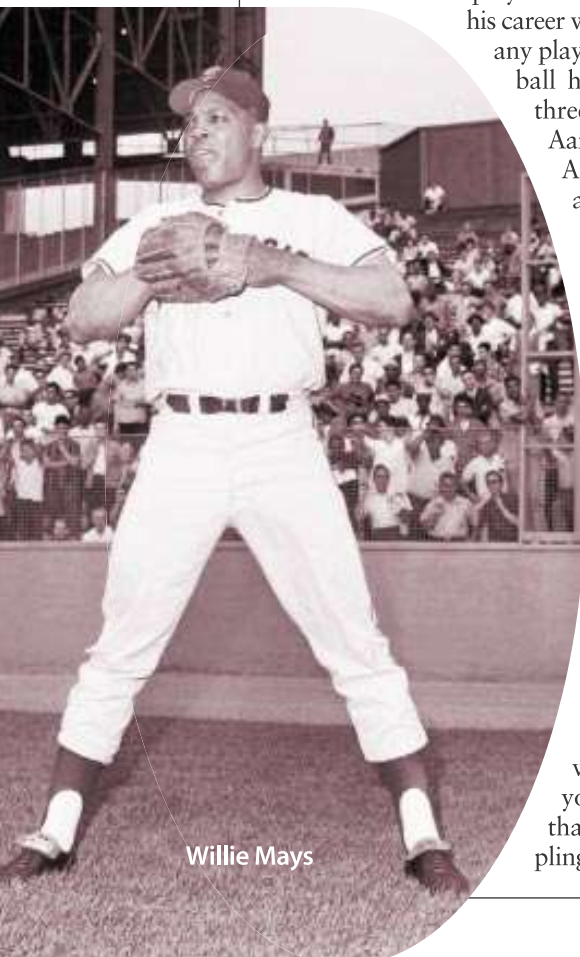
Now, fast-forward to the 1998 season, when Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa hit 70 and 66 home runs, respectively, and became the most famous baseball players on the planet. At 6' 5" and 250-plus pounds, McGwire resembles a refugee from the World's Strongest Man competitions. Sosa, like Aaron, reaches six feet. But he weighs 220 pounds, and if you've seen him you know that it's 220 pounds of rippling muscles.

These are, of course, isolated examples. The increase in the size of baseball players, though, has been steady and, of late, dramatic. In the 1900s the average baseball player weighed 174 pounds, compared with 186 pounds in the 1970s, an increase of 6.9 percent over that period. In the 1990s the average player weighed 198 pounds, a jump in size of another 6.5 percent in just two decades.

Clearly, these aren't your father's ballplayers. The incredible strength of today's players has contributed to a surge in scoring that might still have a ways to go. In the 1970s the average National League game saw 8.27 runs scored. In the 1980s that figure dropped ever so slightly (1.3 percent), to 8.16 runs per game. But in the 1990s National Leaguers scored 8.96 runs per game, a whopping 9.8 percent increase over the previous decade. This year a typical National League game has seen 10.6 runs, and the scoring boom shows no sign of abating. We can identify any number of factors that might be contributing to baseball's offense explosion. Smaller ballparks and the Incredible Shrinking Strike Zone are two of the more popular candidates. But watch a game on ESPN, then watch a pre-1990 game on ESPN Classic, and you'll be struck with the exterior physiological differences between the players then and the players now.

ENTER THE BASH BROTHERS

Unlike football, for many years baseball was not considered a strength sport. In fact, through most of the game's history, baseball players were generally discouraged from lifting weights, as the common wisdom held that they would become muscle-bound and lack the needed flexibility to bat and field. It wasn't until the late 1980s that everyone realized just how far pumping iron might take a team's performance. That was when Dave McKay, then the first-base coach for the Oakland Athletics and now Mark McGwire's batting-practice pitcher and first-base coach of the St. Louis Cardinals, took on the role of strength trainer for the A's at a time when nobody else had one. This move helped to propel the careers of the "Bash Brothers," hulking sluggers McGwire and Jose Canseco, as well as of smaller players such as Rickey Henderson



Willie Mays

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BUILDING THE ELITE ATHLETE

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and Walt Weiss, who were also avid workout fanatics.

In 1989 the A's beat the San Francisco Giants in the World Series, the second of three straight Series appearances for Oakland. "Other teams saw the value of weights and strength training when they saw those A's clubs, and suddenly all of them started hiring their own strength-and-conditioning coaches," remembers Billy Beane, now the general manager of the A's, who was finishing his playing career with the team at the time this bulked-up crowd emerged.

Weight training is just one "artificial" enhancement, along with specialized diets and the use of anabolic steroids. What's more, any disincentives to increase strength are falling by the wayside. Although putting on muscle may, in some instances, diminish a baseball player's speed and agility, those attributes have become less important with the construction of new, smaller, hitter-friendly baseball stadiums, where pure strength has become perhaps the most important quality in a batter. Unfortunately for the balance of power in baseball, the embrace of strength training largely excludes a team's pitching staff. "You can only build up so much strength without compromising flexibility, so there is definitely a finite limit," says Lewis A. Yocum, team physician for the Anaheim Angels. "You're simply not going to see the geometric progression you see with the pitchers as you see with the hitters."

The result, as we have witnessed lately, is prodigious power hitting, with home-run records falling all the time as batters are increasingly "selected" for their ability to hit a baseball with authority. Although various home-run records fall with apparently programmed regularity, no hitter has seriously threatened to compile a .400 batting average in recent years. What would happen, though, if a supremely talented hitter like McGwire concentrated on batting average rather than power—aiming for hits instead of home runs? We'll probably never know. As Atlanta Braves pitcher Greg Maddux put it so eloquently in a Nike commercial last year, "Chicks dig the long ball."

HOW BIG A LINEBACKER?

Size matters in football, too. Last year the St. Louis Rams blew away most competition on their way to a victory in Super Bowl XXXIV with an offensive line that averaged 6'5" and 306 pounds. That compares with an average of 6'3" and 246 pounds for the 1967 Green Bay Packers, considered the best team of its decade. Football also has its equivalent of baseball's balance of power. Whereas defensive linemen and linebackers are selected, in part, on the basis of their size and strength, quarterbacks are chosen mostly for their intelligence and their ability to throw the football. The result, many pundits suggest, is an ever-increasing injury rate encountered by quarterbacks. These days in the National Football League, it's considered crucial to

have an experienced backup quarterback, because you can almost predict that your starter will be injured at some point in the season.

Where will all of this end? When asked that question, Dallas Cowboys strength-and-conditioning coach Joe Juraszek replies, "I have no idea where it's going to stop. I guess there must be a limit to all of it. But in my lifetime? I'm not sure I'll see it."

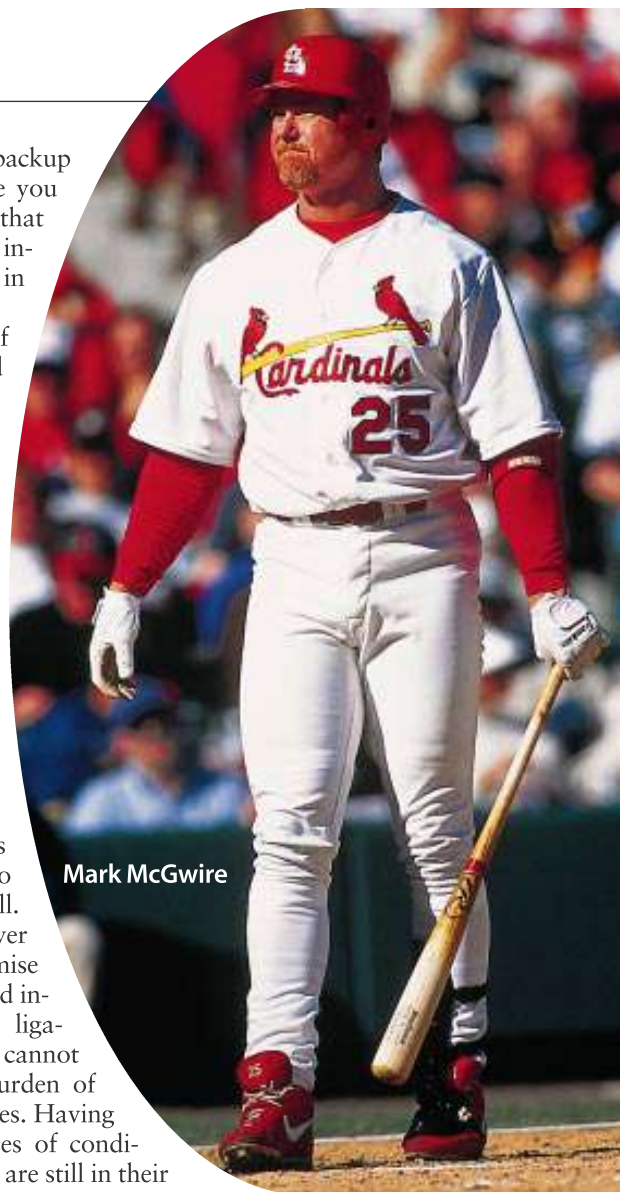
Some upper barriers must exist. It's unlikely that we'll ever see a linebacker weighing 450 pounds or a shortstop who looms seven feet tall. At some point, a player starts to compromise speed and agility—and injuries mount when ligaments and tendons cannot accommodate the burden of overdeveloped muscles. Having said that, the sciences of conditioning and nutrition are still in their relative infancies, so one can only assume that today's giant professionals will continue to develop in the three dimensions of size, strength and speed.

But this phenomenon isn't new. In his book *In the Pocket*, former NFL quarterback Earl Morrall wrote, "I think a primary reason for the increased number of knee injuries is the fact that players are bigger and faster than ever before. It's a case of a larger mass traveling at a greater speed. When they hit, they hit hard and something has to give." That was in 1969. Now we're entering the 21st century, and wouldn't you know it, here we are talking about how big and strong and fast professional athletes are.

ROB NEYER is a senior writer with ESPN.com and recently co-authored *Baseball Dynasties*, published by W. W. Norton.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Major League Baseball's Web site (www.majorleaguebaseball.com) includes an extensive database of player statistics.



Mark McGwire