

### Not Enough for a Series

You would be wrong to reflect on the World Series exclusively when choosing this season's MVP. After all, the championship has its own MVP. Southpaw Clayton Kershaw last week sealed the MVP and the Cy young award in the National League from the Baseball Writers Association of America for his performance over the 2014 season, edging out competition from Giancarlo Stanton, otherwise known as the million dollar baby, and Andrew McCutchen, whose Pirates can't keep pace with the abilities of their team captain. The MVP award reflects the individual abilities of players in each of the leagues, and playing something of a devil's advocate, maybe this measurement has run its course.

Let's speak plainly about the goals of each season. Management brings together nine guys on the field to play the game 162 days over the course of the year. During that time we will be tracking, as faithful statisticians, the highs and lows of each player. Moreover, we can put together individual statistics in aggregate and measure how teams perform together. It is this second option that I think is where the MVP award has skewed our understanding of the player and their dynamic on and off the field. Ticket and jersey sells might track with these high selling names, but without playoff berths and series rings, it hardly seems like individual's success seems to pertain to much of anything.

What of Madison Bumgarner? As a pitcher whose performance is the series we have not stopped thinking about since he threw the final pitch, whose resulting pop fly Pablo Sandoval caught before collapsing overjoyed to the ground, my reluctance to give the award to Kershaw does not come from feeling like the workhorse of the world series was robbed of his proper place, but merely that when it comes down to it, Kershaw's leadership was a missing ingredient from the year, whereas Bumgarner drove his team to the end. His peculiar stoicism amidst a worn arm and the largest game of his career adds merit to some claims that he is baseball's finest pitcher, and it's not only people in San Francisco talking about it.

And the performance of Kershaw was 2013 played on repeat in his debacle against the Cardinals. The set-up for his loss was nearly pound for pound identical with his failed effort for the Dodgers only a year earlier. When it comes time to compete, Kershaw still appears young and making the same mistakes. The penurious batting averages of their foes were traits among both pitchers, but it was the season ERA of 1.77 that propelled him to recognition (compared to Bumgarner's still impressive 2.96).

I think the yardstick is appropriate for a game of numbers, as baseball has and will be, but inciting a little debate among fans never hurt anybody. Only one of the aforementioned pitchers has a world series, and pitching a perfect game is individual recognition enough to merit lone-serving credit.

The MVP award acts as more of a stamp of indignation for the player who wins it and does not have a championship victory at the end of the year. Take the sum total of their regular season and post-season and Bumgarner stands out as someone who delivers through until October. Kershaw is like an orchid; with enough sunlight and attention he is as shocking in his performance as he is consistent in his competition, but against high stake or unfavourable climates, he wilts. Add the lowest ERA in postseason history and you have a pitcher who adds the right pieces to the equation.

Jayson Stark for ESPN asked a number of baseball leaders who they would take for the next five seasons. He correctly points out, after a series of answers to the question point to Kershaw's performance in the *previous* five seasons, that Bumgarner may be the pitcher who has a future in the postseason. The NL is an embarrassment of riches as far as how to choose a pitching staff. It's easy to boil it down to who had more wins on the season, but as Buster Posey will tell you, there are some guys in situations you want on the mound more than others.

Unfortunately, I think the perspective on individualism in baseball is precisely why teams like the Giants are able to pull away in the postseason while watching Miguel Cabrera and his stock plummet once they are put in this kind of crunch situation. Don't think about it as choosing between having a clutch hitter like Sandoval or a consistent regular season hitter like Joe Mauer. Bumgarner in the regular season was still a top tier pitcher, and although the records set by Kershaw speak to the player's enormous arsenal, you have to take in all the stats of the team before you can determine the most valuable player.

This metric is not popular, but I will stand by it until convinced otherwise, if the quest each of these franchises undertake in the months leading up until the fall is to get the best record in order to win the World Series. Those who doubt this way of monitoring player ability are the same ones who would sign on a player like Giancarlo Stanton for an unprecedented \$325 million. That same amount of money would pay for Bumgarner's salary ten times. Kershaw makes a even \$250,000.00 more than Bumgarner. Despite the pitcher's life resting in more treacherous injury-ridden waters, pulling up the Fish with a single player sounds like a great way for him to think he is worth every penny while the rest of the club scratches their head at their win-loss record. Management is economics, but baseball is collectivist politics.

The best defense Kershaw fans have in their repertoire is the fact that the Cardinals seem to act as postseason Kryptonite against the pitcher. We won't know until next season, or in seasons beyond, how Kershaw will respond to this kind of pressure in the playoffs. If we check the stats, however, this thinking would have to assert that its something about the Cardinals franchise, not their players, that Kershaw has a hard time playing against.

Vince Robbies, who according to his Facebook works in maintenance at the Keystone Mountain Resort,<sup>1</sup> wrote in the comments section of Stark's article: "...you can keep the cy youngs I'll take the rings." And until the trend reverses, maybe the awards should reflect the whole package instead of only part of the story.

-Lenhardt Stevens

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<sup>1</sup> I trust this is not a location along the selfsame pipeline where workers can get a boilermaker and lapdance.