

MLB Sunday

By Dave Sheinin

8 Games this season — including an active streak of five straight — in which Diamondbacks starting pitcher Brandon Webb has thrown at least seven innings of scoreless baseball. The 28-year-old right-hander (13-8, 2.63) has thrown 42 consecutive scoreless innings since he gave up two runs to the Cubs on July 20. In five games since, he has struck out 35 and given up just 23 hits and seven walks.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE . . .



. . . to go face-first into the wall to make a catch

On May 11, 2006, Philadelphia Phillies center fielder Aaron Rowand crashed into the wall at full speed to make an over-the-shoulder catch against the New York Mets. Only later — after Rowand was hospitalized with multiple fractures to his face and placed on the disabled list — did anyone realize the padding that was supposed to cover an exposed stretch of chain-link fence at Citizens Bank Park had not yet been installed.

You know how far you have until you start running out of room. Sometimes, if you know you're not going to catch up to it, you pull back and play it off the wall. But I knew I had a chance, so all I could do was brace myself and keep my eye on the ball.

The bases were loaded, first inning. Running back, I was thinking, first of all, "I need to make this catch." Honestly, I was thinking I needed to make the catch for [rookie pitcher Gavin Floyd] — for his confidence.

Once in college, I ran into a cinder-block wall, and another time I knocked myself out. Then, in 2001 [with the White Sox], I separated my shoulder going into a wall. You play the game at one speed. I don't know any other way to do it.

This time, I went into [the wall] face-first. Broke my cheekbone, my orbital bone in two places and shattered my nose. I knew it was bad. But even I didn't realize I had broken all the bones in my face. But I made sure to hold the ball up. It wouldn't have been worth it if I didn't catch the damn ball.

— Interview by Dave Sheinin

There's a Method to His Madness

It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World

Tony Batista's quirks would seem to put him in the Flake Hall of Fame, but really, he says, it all makes perfect sense.

Tony Batista's first-pitch ritual,

as he mans his defensive position, has nothing to do with an examination of the sun and wind conditions — even though he appears to stare into the sky and raise his hands as if practicing catching a pop fly. (If it WAS for that reason, we might be concerned, because he previously performed the daily ritual while playing for Toronto, Montreal and Minnesota, all of which had domed stadiums.) Instead, Batista explains, he is saying a prayer asking God to protect the health of all the players on both teams, as well as all the fans and everyone else in the stadium.



PHOTOS BY JONATHAN NEWTON — THE WASHINGTON POST

Batista Among Those To Carry Out Rituals

By DAVE SHEININ
Washington Post Staff Writer

You could certainly make a strong case for Tony Batista's inclusion in the Baseball Flake Hall of Fame, alongside ball-talker Mark Fidrych, licorice-chewer Turk Wendell, chicken-scarfer Wade Boggs and language-mangler Yogi Berra. The case for Batista, the Washington Nationals' reserve first baseman, could include:

- Possesses, without a doubt, the weirdest batting stance in baseball.
- Performs a bizarre, ballet-like ritual at his defensive position before the first pitch of a game, or the first pitch of his first inning if he enters in mid-game.
- Practices hitting daily by swinging at popcorn kernels tossed at him from the side.
- Has been known to startle opposing pitchers by taking a sudden first step toward the mound after being hit by a pitch, before making a right turn toward first base. (See: <http://youtube.com/watch?v=MyCksO5mk1Q>).
- Has been known to show up at random Catholic churches around the United States to make cash donations that sometimes reach five figures.

It is, indeed, a strong body of work, covering all the major criteria for flake consideration — sheer strangeness, mysteriousness, significant humor quotient, hints of borderline obsessive-compulsiveness.

All of it makes Batista, 33, one of our favorite players. However, we are here to tell you he is not a flake. How do we know this? Because we asked him. Yes, we confronted Batista with all the evidence we had amassed, but as it turns out, there is a perfectly plausible explanation behind each item.

■ The stance — which might be described as "extremely open" — helps him see the ball better, since he begins by facing the pitcher almost head-on, as opposed to from the side, or profile, view.

Batista said he began using the stance during the 1998 Caribbean World Series in a radical attempt to get himself out of a slump. It worked, and he has maintained it ever since. In 2000 with Toronto, he hit 41 homers and drove in 114 runs with that stance. "It may look strange," he said, "but when I start to swing, it's the same as anyone else's."

■ The ballet ritual is actually an elaborate prayer.

"That's my prayer to God," said Batista, a deeply religious man. "I pray for everybody in the stadium — the players, other team, the fans. I pray that nobody gets hurt and everybody plays their best game that day. A lot of people think I'm just messing around. But no."

■ The popcorn-kernel drill is actually quite popular, to the point of being almost universal, in Batista's native Dominican Republic. However, Batista acknowledges not everyone performs it every day, without fail, like he does.

■ He is not trying to scare the pitcher when he takes off toward the mound after being drilled. It is merely an instinctive reaction to the pain.

"It just clears my mind and shakes off the pain," he said. "I run because it hurts. I'm not trying to run to the pitcher. I'm just trying to run."

■ Out of every dollar he earns, 20 cents goes to the church. Immediately. If payday comes while his team is on the road, he takes a cab to the nearest church and hands over a stack of cash, or sometimes a check.

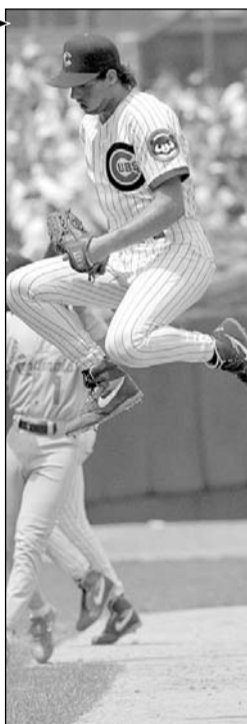
Batista has earned around \$19 million as a major leaguer (before taxes), which means he probably has donated somewhere in the neighborhood of \$2 million to the church.

"The Bible says the tithe should be 10 percent," Batista said. "But God has blessed me so much, I give 20."

Other Quirks that Made Sense at the Time (To at Least One Person)

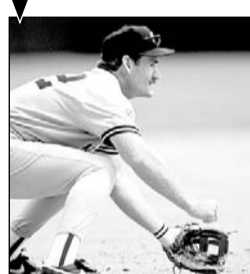
Turk Wendell, P
1993-2004

Where to begin? He requested that the umpire roll him the ball and, if denied, would intentionally miss the throw and pick the ball up off the ground. He would wave to his center fielder before each inning and would not pitch until the center fielder waved back. When his catcher stood, he crouched down. He leapt over the foul line on his way to and from the mound. He chewed black licorice on the mound and often brushed his teeth in the dugout between innings.



Wade Boggs, 3B
1982-99

Perhaps the most superstitious player in history (most notably for his eating chicken before every game), his on-field rituals included taking exactly 150 ground balls during batting practice and tracing the Hebrew word "chai" ("life") in the batter's box before each at-bat.



Mike Hargrove, 1B
1974-85

He was nicknamed "The Human Rain Delay" for his batter's box routine of adjusting (in order) his helmet, gloves, uniform sleeves and pant legs — before every pitch.

Mark Fidrych, P
1976-80

He talked to the ball on the mound. He got down on all fours before an inning and "manicured" the mound, fixing cleat marks and other imperfections. He demanded balls be removed from the game mid-inning because "they had hits in them."

Kevin Rhombert, OF
1982-84

He appeared in only 41 games, but made his mark with odd compulsions, most notably a need to touch anyone who touched him first. Often, he chased down infielders who had tagged him out. If he couldn't get to someone, he would send a letter saying "this constitutes a touch."

BY DAVE SHEININ AND BONNIE BERKOWITZ — THE WASHINGTON POST

NEWS & NOTES

Phillies Won't Ask Myers To Start Over

The Philadelphia Phillies used to hate their bullpen and love their rotation. Now it's the other way around, thanks to a rash of injuries to starters (Freddie Garcia, Jon Lieber and Adam Eaton all are on the disabled list) and a couple of successful scrap-heap pickups in June that shored up their middle relief (Jose Mesa and J.C. Romero, both with sub-2.50 ERAs).

However, one obvious solution to the new imbalance apparently won't even be considered. If you were the Phillies, wouldn't you at least think about moving closer Brett Myers back to the rotation?

"No," Manager Charlie Manuel said. "First of all, getting [Myers] stretched out and ready to start would be almost impossible. But at the same time, we look at him as someone who has a chance to be special as a closer."

When it was pointed out to Manuel that, if the Phillies were fortunate enough to make the playoffs, their No. 2 postseason starter behind ace Cole Hamels likely would be 44-year-old Jamie Moyer, he agreed — but said he still isn't tempted to move Myers.

"It's not tempting at all," Manuel said.

Myers, who has one of the best arms in the league, originally was moved to the bullpen in mid-April as a means of fixing the team's worst problem, a move that now must be considered a success.

But in the meantime, unlike Atlanta's John Smoltz — who spent his 3½ seasons as a closer lobbying to return to the rotation — Myers has grown attached to the new role.

"I like playing every day," Myers said. "Sitting around for four days [as a starter] is tough to do, especially if you have a bad start and that's all you can think about for four days."

■ **A 'DIFFERENT' ORTIZ:** One consequence of David Ortiz's nagging shoulder injury is that the Boston Red Sox slugger no longer pulls the ball with as much frequency or authority, a fact that was underscored when Tampa Bay abandoned the "3-4" defensive shift (three infielders on the right side and the third baseman playing as a fourth outfielder) they used to employ against Ortiz.

"He's just a different hitter," Devil Rays Manager Joe Maddon told reporters. "It's just an entirely different [spray] chart than last year."

THE LIST: Players who will be The Deciders down the stretch

Entering the weekend, 17 teams were within six games of a playoff spot — including 10 in the National League — with every race still up for grabs. That's a far cry from last year at the same date, when three division leaders had leads of bigger than six games.

Who will be the difference-makers during this year's stretch drive?

1 JOEL ZUMAYA, TIGERS

Detroit's bullpen hasn't been the same since Zumaya, right, their dominating setup man, ruptured a tendon in the middle finger of his throwing hand on May 1. But he hit 99 mph on the radar gun in his most recent rehab outing and is slated to return on Tuesday, just as the Tigers open a critical three-game series against rival Cleveland.



2 MARK TEIXEIRA, BRAVES

The biggest trade-deadline acquisition in baseball, he has the ability to tilt the three-way NL East race in his RBI's direction. He hit five homers with 15 RBIs in his first 14 games in the NL, but the Braves entered the weekend no closer to the Mets (3½ games back) than they were on July 31.

3 RUSSELL MARTIN, DODGERS

On July 15, the all-star catcher was hitting .317 with an .885 OPS (on-base plus slugging), and the Dodgers led the NL West by a game. Entering the weekend, his numbers were down to .289 and .819, and L.A. had dropped to fourth place. Did the team blow out its engine by playing Martin too frequently? Or does he have enough left to carry them to the playoffs?

4 MANNY RAMIREZ, RED SOX

Mysteriously, his OPS is down nearly 180 points from 2006, but with David Ortiz's shoulder ailing and with the Yankees' Red Sox to within striking distance, the Red Sox are desperate for Ramirez to regain his power stroke.

5 CHRIS CAPUANO AND BEN SHEETS, BREWERS

Milwaukee has gotten nothing from its top two starters in recent weeks. Capuano is a staggering 0-10 since mid-May, while Sheets (broken hand) hasn't pitched since July 14. But if the Brewers are to hold off the Cubs and Cardinals in the NL Central, Sheets (due back in the next two weeks) and Capuano must contribute.

3 UP & 3 DOWN

Jack McGeary
Nats' sixth-round draft pick gets \$1.8M bonus, will still attend college. Guess this means his entire freshman dorm gets to upgrade from Pabst to Heineken.

Iron Man
Hall of Famer Ripken takes special "sports envoy" position with State Dept. Almost instantly, his approval rating nosedives from 100 percent to 28 percent.

Giambi
Commissioner Selig decides not to punish Yankees DH for steroid admission, saying "the 'blind-eye' strategy has worked so well thus far, why change now?"

Jose Offerman
Former big league LF attacks pitcher, catcher with bat in independent league game. In related news, we have confirmation: Jose Offerman still exists!

Bonds
Giants LF hires attorneys to sue critics for defamation. In D.C., Pants Lawsuit Guy files legal brief deploring the potential actions as "frivolous."

Bobby Cox
Braves manager earns 132nd career ejection, breaking major league record. Tries to celebrate at local restaurant, but gets kicked out during salad course.

THE WEEK AHEAD

INDIANS AT TIGERS
Tuesday through Thursday
Comerica Park, Detroit
Since June 30, these AL Central leaders have not been separated by more than two games, and this will be their last meeting until mid-September.

BREWERS AT D-BACKS
Tomorrow through Wednesday
Chase Field, Phoenix
It's hard to know what to make of the Diamondbacks, who have seized the NL West by going on a 19-5 tear entering the weekend, despite having just one elite performer — ace Brandon Webb. The Brewers, on the other hand, are 8-18 since July 20.

BRAVES AT CARDINALS
Friday through Sunday
Busch Stadium, St. Louis
The Cardinals were eight games out of first place on Aug. 5. Now? After sweeping the Brewers by a combined 28-7, they entered this weekend only 2½ games back. Never, ever question the Genius of Tony La Russa, you fools. Ever.

YANKEES AT TIGERS
Friday through Aug. 27
Comerica Park, Detroit
After going 4½ months without playing each other, the playoff-contending Yankees and Tigers face off eight times in a 12-day stretch. You know what that means: lots of opportunities for Gary Sheffield and Joe Torre to hug it out.