

Catching up with Baseball History

Ryan Howard's Unique Journey to the Major Leagues

By

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“Any hitter who is destined to become a great ballplayer will reach the majors at an early age. I know of no clear-cut exception to this rule in the history of baseball.”

- Bill James, 1982

The words of Bill James have a way of turning into baseball doctrine. So when the czar of baseball stats offers his thoughts on the game, scores of fans stand and listen.

In “The Bill James Baseball Abstract,” vintage 1982, James observed that any ballplayer destined to become a superstar will crack a major league starting lineup by his early twenties, at the very latest. The underlying lesson is that *top-shelf talent* in baseball just doesn’t just sit around gathering moss on the bench or in the minors before manifesting itself. Greatness is an aura that tends to glow so visibly at the younger ages that it’s nearly impossible for it to slip through the cracks.

But a beautiful component of baseball is that the game thrives on deviation and surprise. Just when Lou Brock’s single-season stolen base record of 118 seemed far out of reach, along comes Rickey Henderson to trump Brock by ten percent. In 1992, Sports Illustrated listed the Roger Maris record of 61 home runs in a single season as one of the ten “truly inviolable” records in sports. Six years later, the record was smashed six times over a four-year span by three different players.

Bill James found no exceptions to his “late players arrive early” rule back in 1982. I’ve noticed three ballplayers that have bucked the trend since then.

In 1990, the Seattle Mariners gave up on the still young but quickly declining third baseman Jim Presley, turning the hot corner over to Edgar Martinez. Edgar went on to become the most prolific designated hitter in history, despite not becoming a starter until 27 – an age in which James and dozens of other researchers have determined statistically to be the peak of a baseball player’s career. Edgar’s offensive credentials – 309 homers, 514 doubles, a .312 batting average, a .418 on-base percentage, and a .515 slugging percentage – are on par with the some of the greatest batsmen ever.

Second baseman Chase Utley didn’t officially become a starter for the Philadelphia Phillies until June of 2005, when Placido Polanco was traded by the club. Chase was 26. With a career .298 batting average and 130 home runs going into his fifth full season in 2009, Utley appears primed to someday join Jeff Kent and Rogers Hornsby as a trio of the best hitting second basemen ever.

But the late arrival of Utley’s teammate, Phillie super-slugger Ryan Howard, defies all logic, considering what he has accomplished so far. Howard didn’t officially become the Phillies first baseman until six days after his 26th birthday, when they traded Jim Thome in November of 2005. Since then, Howard has hit 58, 47, and 48 home runs in his first three full seasons. Not only has he put up out of this world numbers, his power

to all fields is scary and unprecedented. At 29, Howard is the premier power hitter in the game today.

And that's what had me freaked out.

How could such a dangerous long-ball hitter get held up for so many years before making his mark in the big leagues? What were the Phillies not seeing, or what was Howard not showing, during the ages that have catapulted so many other sluggers to stardom?

A Superstar Stuck in Triple-A Purgatory

At 25, Ryan Howard was tearing it up for the Phillies' triple-A club at Scranton/Wilkes-Barre in Pennsylvania. But he wasn't going anywhere fast. Jim Thome was locked in as the Philadelphia Phillies first baseman since signing as a free agent in December of 2002. Ryan was beyond major league ready, but the Phils were committed to Thome, financially and otherwise.

Howard's big break came only with Thome's misfortune. After Thome struggled with back problems during the first half of the 2005 season, an elbow injury knocked him on the DL and out for the season on July 1. Howard took advantage, hitting 22 homers over the last half of the season and winning the Rookie of the Year award while filling in at first base. The Phillie brass assessed the damage caused by young Ryan's bat and finally realized they were holding on to an offensive time bomb ready to detonate. Adios to Jim Thome, traded that November, landing Howard on first base for good.

To spell out just how abnormal Howard's late arrival was, I compared the course of his career with the 43 major leaguers who have hit at least 400 home runs in their career going into 2009, along with five others – Jason Giambi, Vladimir Guerrero, Albert Pujols, Adam Dunn, and Mark Teixeira – who are projected to hit that many homers by the time they retire. Hitting home runs is Howard's claim to major league fame after all, so I thought it would be a great way to gauge his late start from a historical perspective.

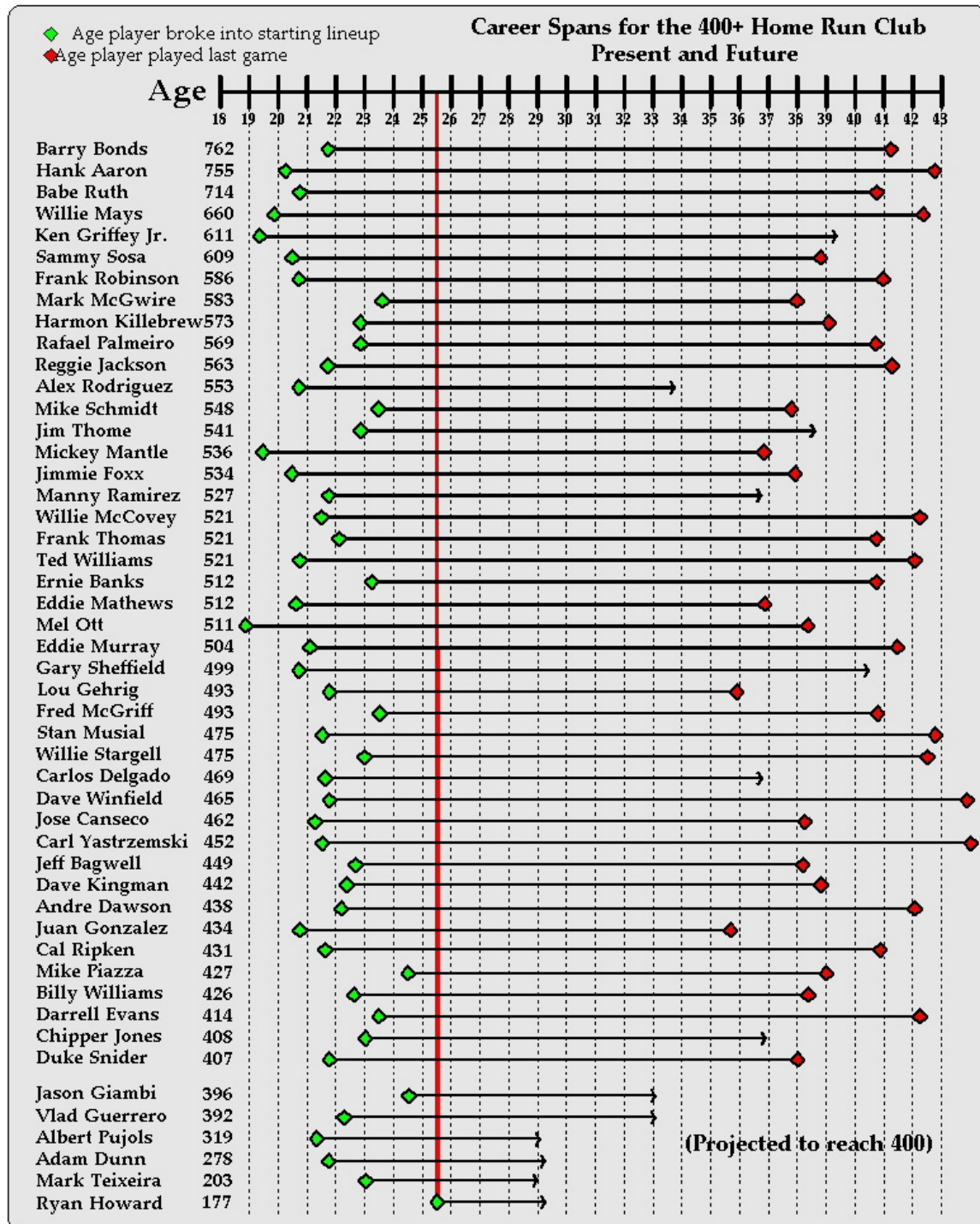
The comparison is shown in the graph titled "Career Spans for the 400+ Home Run Club." Each player's career path is shown as a black segment, with a green diamond indicating the age he first became a starter and a red diamond indicating the age he retired (if that player is still active, an arrow is shown instead of a red diamond). Howard's career path appears at the bottom of the graph, with a red vertical line corresponding to the age – 25 ½ – when he took over first base after Thome went down.

The only two players who come within two years of Howard's starting age are Mike Piazza and Jason Giambi. Both started at around 24 ½ years old.

Piazza was the longest of long-shots when he was drafted in the 62nd and final round of the 1988 draft by the Los Angeles Dodgers. Not counting a September call-up at the end of the '92 season, Piazza became a starter on opening day the following season. He went on to have a Hall of Fame career after establishing himself as the best offensive catcher in baseball history.

After getting called up in July of '95, Giambi got progressively better as a hitter over the next several years. He reached his pinnacle in 2000, winning the AL MVP award with 43 homers, 137 RBIs, a .333 batting average and an incredible .476 OBP. Giambi has had several great seasons since then, but his entire career is now viewed under a

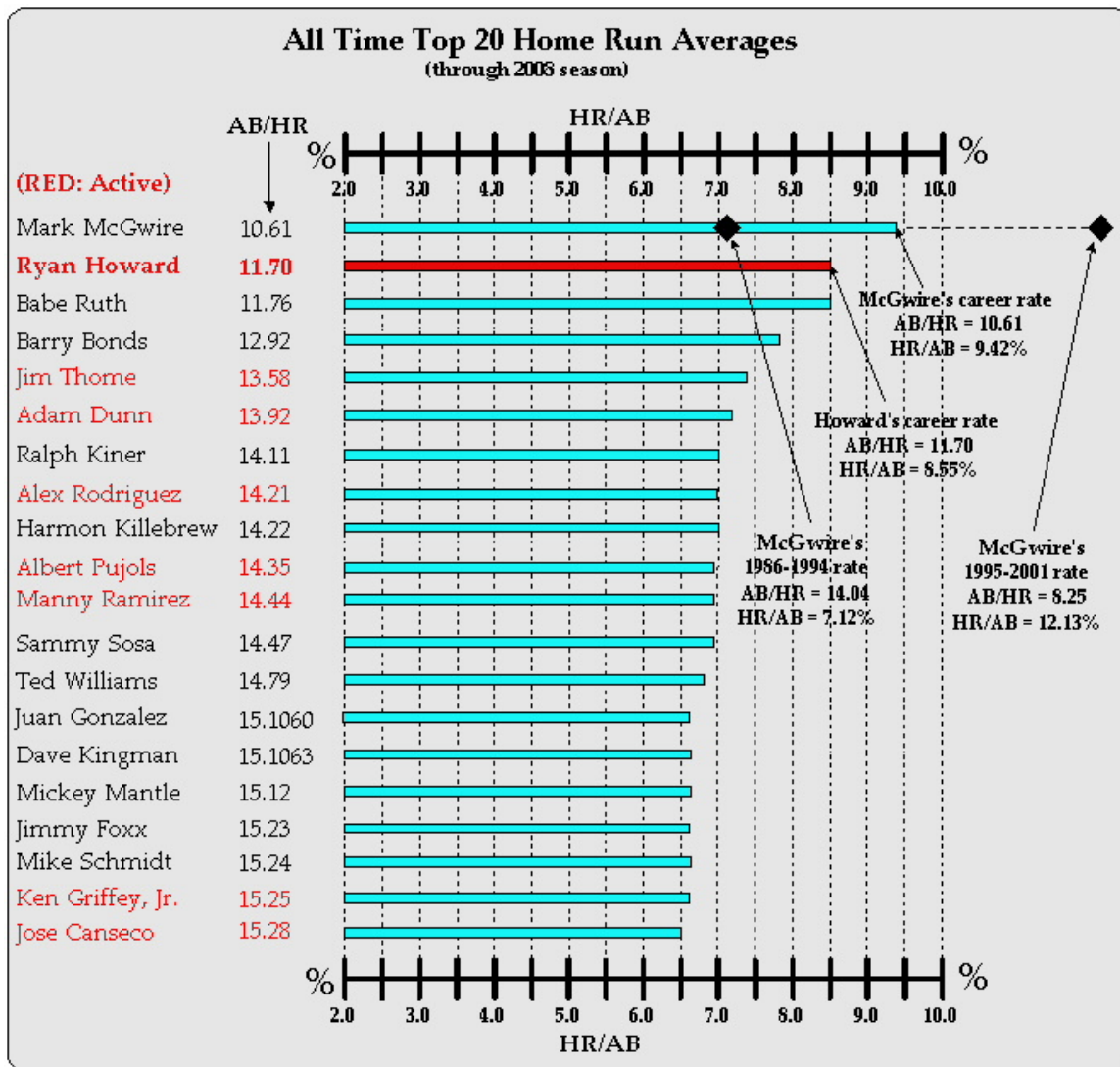
shroud of doubt since he admitted using steroids and human growth hormone. It's possible that Giambi wouldn't have made this list if he "just said no."



So even with the "one in a million" Mike Piazza and the suspiciously enhanced Jason Giambi, Ryan Howard started in the majors at least 1-3 years later than any of the 48 best home run hitters in history. This in itself is amazing. Then consider that so far in

his career, Ryan Howard has hit home runs *faster than practically anyone else who ever played*.

It's one thing to go against Bill James' rule and become a late-arriving superstar. But Ryan Howard isn't your average superstar. In terms of home run hitting frequency, the man has outperformed every power hitter to ever step to the plate except Mark McGwire. He even has the Babe by a few percentage points. The chart below shows how Howard ranks in history.



We can't wrap up this discussion of home run rates without noting that McGwire's career is the story of two incredibly different power-hitting profiles. During his first nine seasons (1986-1994), Big Mac hit home runs about as often as Adam Dunn – once every 14.0 at bats. That's a very impressive rate, shown by the first diamond in his career segment above. Then in 1995, McGwire's bombs started to reach unimaginable distances. Suddenly, he was putting up numbers that got fans and statisticians cranking on their calculators trying to project what was humanly possible if he could just stay healthy and put in a full season. For the last seven years of his career (1995-2001),

McGwire's home run rate soared off the charts...literally. The second diamond in his career segment corresponds to a rate of a home run every 8.25 at bats. Putting the two halves together makes McGwire the only ballplayer faster than Ryan Howard at hitting home runs.

Those Colossal Numbers

Once he got to the majors, Ryan's rise to the top of the power-hitting class was instant. The table below shows how his homers compare with the start of Ralph Kiner's career. Kiner was the original king of early power-hitting greatness, winning the NL home run title in each of his first seven seasons.

Ryan Howard's Career Statistics and Awards								Ralph Kiner	
YR	AGE	G	HR	RBI	AVE	SLG	AWARDS	Age	HR
2003	23	--	--	--	--	--	Fla. State League MVP	--	--
2004	24	19	2	5	.282	.564	Eastern League MVP	--	--
2005	25	88	22	63	.288	.567	ROY	23	23*
2006	26	159	58*	149*	.313	.659	MVP, SS	24	51*
2007	27	144	47	136	.268	.584	MVP-5	25	40*
2008	28	162*	48*	146*	.251	.543	MVP-2	26	54*
TOTALS		572	177	499	.279	.590			168

*led NL

ROY: Rookie of the Year

MVP: Most Valuable Player

SS: Silver Slugger

Howard's first five seasons are right in step with Kiner's career start. Fittingly, it was a colossal home run by Howard on June 27th of the 2007 season that broke Kiner's 59-year-old record for the fastest to 100 career home runs. Howard did the feat in 325 games, 60 games faster than Kiner. The blast landed in the Wall of Fame area at Citizen's Bank Park, and then bounced into Ashburn Alley, the centerfield walkway. Contrary to the accounts of that day, which tagged the home run at 505 feet, a "true distance" of 461 feet was measured by the website *hittrackeronline.com* using atmospheric factors and physics calculations. Greg Rybarczyk, who runs the site, correlated his theory to eyewitness accounts, which described Howard's blast as taking at least two healthy bounces to the 482-foot sign on the backside of the alley walkway – which would make a 500-foot measurement pretty much impossible. So when it comes to home run distance measurements, be careful of your source!

Howard has more than enough hardware to authenticate his legend. He won minor league MVPs in 2003 and 2004. He won the Rookie of the Year award in 2005.

In 2006, Howard became king. He was voted NL MVP in his first full season after walloping 58 homers, 149 RBIs, and hitting .313. That same year, he won the All-Star Home Run Derby in July, and in November capped off his amazing year with yet another MVP trophy for leading the MLB All-Stars in a five-game sweep of the Japan stars. Howard would have matched Maris' 61 home runs if the league didn't stop pitching to him after September 8th. He had 56 homers, and by that time pitching staffs had seen enough. Out of his 100 remaining plate appearances, Howard was walked 28 times, 14 intentionally. It was the vintage 'Barry Bonds' treatment.

Howard's top five MVP finishes in 2007 and 2008 have ingrained his hold as a serious MVP candidate every year. Considering that a strong benchmark for being voted into the Hall of Fame is how a player fares in MVP voting throughout his career, Ryan Howard is off to a pretty good start in that department.

The Ballpark Effect: Fact or Fiction?

There are a few myths about Ryan Howard that have grazed the shine of his armor, such as the assumption that playing at Citizen's Bank Park gives him a huge advantage in padding his HR totals.

There's no doubt the Phillies' home field is a hitter's park. Since the very first pitch in 2004, the site has consistently ranked in the top ten for home runs allowed. But a quick check of Ryan's home run totals at home and on the road shows that the big guy isn't particularly partial to where he plays. Since his September call-up in 2004, Ryan's home/road home run splits are *practically* 50/50.

Ryan Howard's Career HRs Home/Away

YR	HOME	AWAY	TOTAL
2004	1	1	2
2005	11	11	22
2006	29	29	58*
2007	23	24	47
2008	26	22	48*
CAREER	90	87	177
SPLIT	50.8%	49.2%	

*led NL

If you want to see what a *real* ballpark effect looks like, look no further than Dante Bichette's numbers. The table below shows his home run totals at home – at Coors Field in Colorado – and on the road between 1995 and 1999. Coors has had arguably the greatest impact for jacking up baseball offense in baseball history. Bichette's home run splits show a 72/28 bias toward his home field, a clear signature of Denver's thin air. Either that or Dante never wore his contact lenses on the road.

Dante Bichette's HRs Home/Away

YR	HOME	AWAY	TOTAL
1995	31	9	40*
1996	22	9	31
1997	20	6	26
1998	17	5	22
1999	20	14	34
CAREER	110	43	153
SPLIT	71.9%	28.1%	

*led NL

The *rate* a player hits home runs – often shown by the AB/HR ratio – is a better measure of home run hitting ability than using raw home run totals because of its impartiality to the number of at bats. The table below, which contains Howard's home run rates at home and on the road, indicates a slight favoring toward Citizen's Bank Park throughout his career.

**Ryan Howard's Home Run Rate
(AB/HR)
Home/Away**

YR	HOME	AWAY	TOTAL
2004	13.0	26.0	19.5
2005	13.0	15.4	14.2
2006	9.7	10.3	10.0*
2007	10.9	11.6	11.3*
2008	11.5	14.1	12.7*
CAREER	11.0	12.5	11.7

*led NL

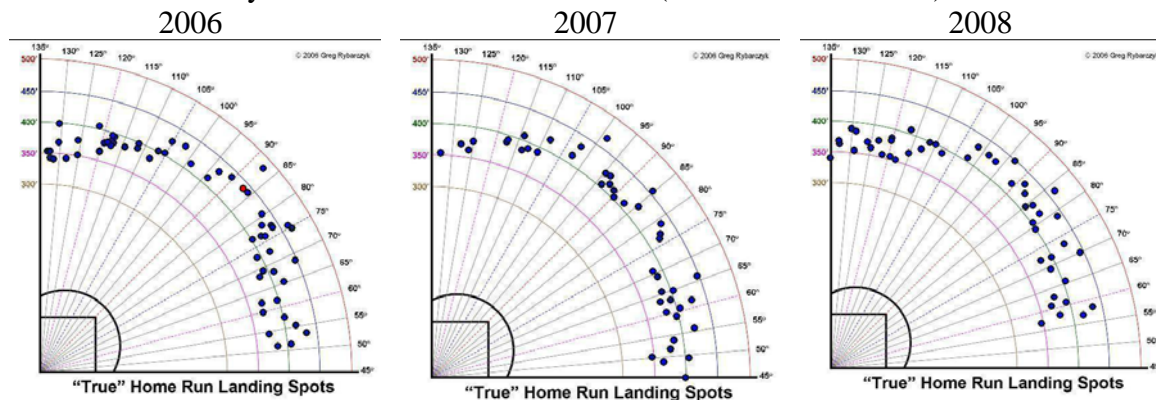
But let's not overestimate this difference. Howard's career AB/HR ratio of 12.5 on the road, while inferior to his 11.0 rate at home, is still good enough for a 48 home runs in a 600 at bat season.

Ryan Howard is a monster home run hitter *anywhere*.

Spreading the Bombs

Howard's uncanny power-hitting prowess is probably best exemplified by his home run scatter charts. From the very cool web site hittrackeronline.com are the following three charts which show Howard's amazing spread of homers to all fields. And I mean, *to all fields*. He couldn't get a more even distribution if he walked along the warning track and threw the baseballs into the seats.

Ryan Howard's HR Scatter Plots (hittrackeronline.com)



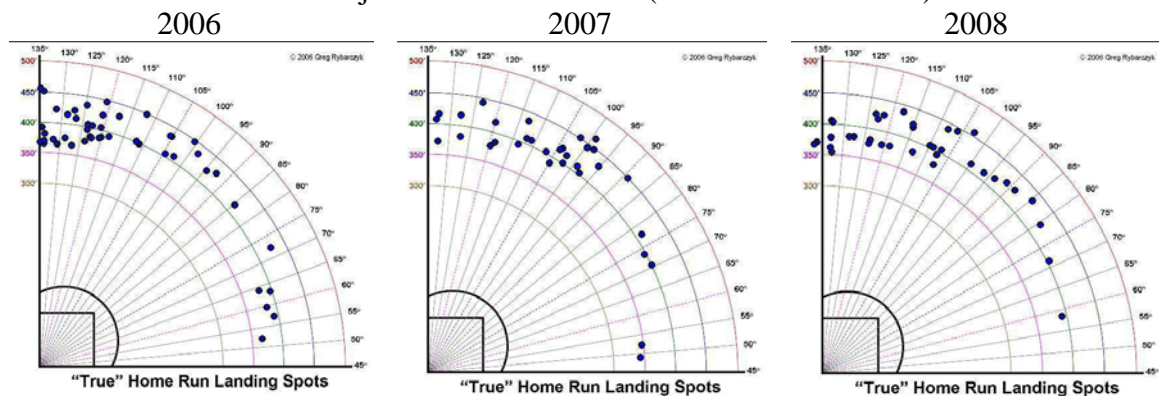
"True" home run landing spot is the field-level location the struck ball landed if it reached that point uninterrupted. If it was interrupted, it is the field-level location the ball would have landed if it wasn't interrupted.

What I'm especially impressed at is that even when Howard hit a sub-par .251 in 2008, his home run range was as broad as ever. Notice the empty space down the right field line that year – Howard's pull field!

Baseball historian Bill Jenkinson has cross-examined the distances and trajectories of home runs for the game's greatest long-ball hitters going back to the days of Babe Ruth. Although Jenkinson has studied the monstrous opposite-field power from legends such as Dick Allen and Jimmie Foxx, he speculates that Howard's impartial scattering of homers beyond the arc of the outfield fence is unique in all of baseball history.

Howard's scatter plots tell us that he is equally dangerous throughout the entire horizontal direction of the strike zone. When he is on his game, there isn't a safe spot on the plate to keep him in the ballpark. Your typical home run hitter tends to pull the ball for distance by ripping a pitch that enters his "wheelhouse" zone, usually from the middle of the plate in. Even the great Albert Pujols, with his own prodigious power, high batting average, and low strikeouts, has pull tendencies when it comes to his home runs, as shown by his own scatter plots for the last three seasons:

Albert Pujols' HR Scatter Plots (hittrackeronline.com)



"True" home run landing spot is the field-level location the struck ball landed if it reached that point uninterrupted. If it was interrupted, it is the field-level location the ball would have landed if it wasn't interrupted.

The Light Switch

Ryan Howard strikes out a ton. You might as well write down 180 to 200 Ks every year for him. Luckily, his production makes up for all that air-conditioning he provides at home plate. Phillies manager Charlie Manuel gives his approval, saying, "He doesn't strike out because he strides too quick and tries to hit the ball too hard...he strikes out because he waits to see the ball. He lets the ball get too deep on him, and he kind of rushes. And that's a good sign. That's very good."

Howard is far from alone in this dubious category. Adam Dunn has led the league three times (Howard has one strikeout crown). Mark Reynolds is now the single-season record holder after whiffing 204 times in 2008. And with a punch-out every 2.43 at bats going into the 2009 season, Jack Cust strikes out more often than any of them.

This brings us to another Ryan Howard myth, and it has to do with those swings and misses.

It's often speculated how much better a hitter Ryan Howard would be if he cut down on his strikeouts. The theory goes that Howard's enormous amount of home runs come at the expense of the strikeouts and batting average.

Notice that the Phils aren't trying to change him. Manager Charlie Manuel and hitting coach Milt Thompson ask Howard only to be more selective with his pitch recognition. If it's September and October, they'll *beg* for him to be more selective. Because they know Ryan has *always* struck out a lot, even when his average hovers around the .300 mark. Looking back at his 2006 season, he hit 58 homers, batted .313, *and* struck out 181 times.

So I'm not buying into the myth. Let's dig deeper into his numbers and you'll see why, too.

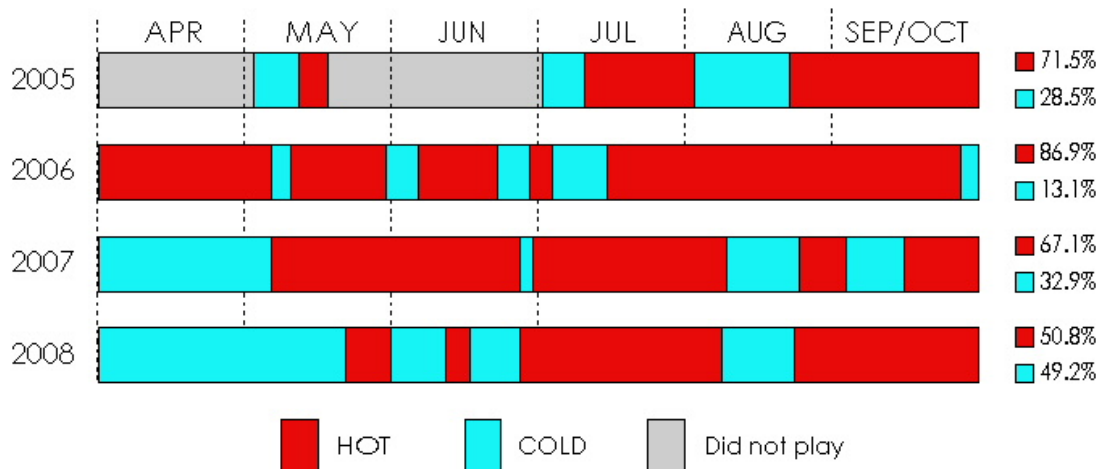
Ryan is what you might call a 'schizophrenic' hitter – he can be very hot or very cold. I took advantage of this trait by breaking up his career numbers into a sequence of hot and cold streaks to see if there is some correlation between his batting average and strikeouts to his home runs. Using his game-to-game numbers, I qualified each Ryan Howard hot streak as any group of games that included at least two or more multi-hit games, no consecutive O-fers, and a smattering of home runs. A hot streak could last from several games to a month or more.

This type of analysis can't be done very easily – if at all – with players like Albert Pujols, Tony Gwynn, or even Stan Musial. The consistency of those batters would make it very hard to tell when they were transitioning from hot to cold, and vice versa.

With Ryan Howard, this was custard pie easy.

The image below shows the breakdown of Howard acting like a light switch throughout his career, blinking red-blue-red. Each horizontal band represents a season. The red blocks indicate hot streaks, the blue blocks his cold streaks, and the gray blocks represent the time Jim Thome was manning first for the Phils.

Note that during his 58-homer 2006 season, Ryan was 'tuned in' an amazing 86.9% of the time. His poor starts in 2007 and 2008 stand out as a painfully long stretch of blue at the beginning of those seasons.



Adding up his hot and cold numbers, Ryan's signature as a hitter is revealed like fingerprints exposed by a UV lamp. His batting average, as it turns out, is *very* proportional to his home run hitting. And even when he's groovin' at the plate, Howard *still* strikes out an awful lot. His totals *in the red* are 1,393 at bats, 155 homers, and 421 strikeouts. These numbers project to 67 HRs and 181 Ks per 600 ABs, and a .334 batting average. Bam!

When Howard is *blue*, there are probably members of the grounds crew who could strike him out. During those spells, he has totaled 639 at bats, 20 homers, 258 strikeouts, and a starved .160 batting average.

Ryan Howard's HOT & COLD Stats

Career Totals						Per 600 ABs	
	SPLIT	AB	HR	AVE	K	HR	K
HOT	69%	1393	155	.334	421	67	181
COLD	31%	639	20	.160	258	19	242

The data says that Howard has an approach at the plate that makes him just about the most dangerous power hitter imaginable – but just 69% of the time. When Howard's switch is *on*, he hits for a high batting average and awesome power. On the flip side, when he's *off*, he might as well go up to the plate holding the bat by the barrel.

Despite his sinking batting average the last couple of years, fans shouldn't be misled into thinking that Ryan Howard is starting to circle the depths of one-dimensional sluggers like Gorman Thomas, Rob Deer, or Dave Kingman. When he batted .251 in 2008, his four 'hot streaks' joined together produced a .335 batting average with 37 home runs and 84 RBIs in just 355 at bats.

RH is a different breed indeed.

So what took him so long?

Ryan Howard has created some huge footprints in the world of baseball so far in his short career.

So what took him so long to get there?

Jim Thome was clearly his number one hurdle. But after examining the career paths of the 48 greatest home run hitters, we recognize that there must have been some other factors involved that delayed Howard, because *greatness always finds a way* – just like Bill James told us almost three decades ago.

It turns out that Howard apparently wasn't all that special in the early stages of his professional career. He lacked the necessary baseball skills. "Can't miss" prospect? With Howard, it was more like can't field, can't run, and can't make contact.

Howard was drafted by the Phils in the fifth round of the 2001 draft, behind the likes of first basemen Taggart Bozied, Brad Nelson, Stefan Bailie, and Aaron Rifkin. Out of this eclectic-sounding group, only Nelson has ever seen a major league pitch. Howard was supposed to go much higher, but he struggled during his junior year at Southwest Missouri State. Mike Arbuckle, Phils assistant GM during Howard's rise through the

minors, now an assistant GM for the Kansas City Royals, said that Howard suffered from "draft-itis" that year. "Ryan had contact issues. Right before the draft, he had a terrible junior year where he practically never made contact," Arbuckle said. "We took a little flier on him."

Jeff Manto, Ryan's Single-A manager for the Lakewood Blue Claws, was a prolific bomber in his own right, smashing 243 minor-league home runs over 16 years. According to Manto, Ryan at 22 was far from a sure thing. "Ryan was just so raw," Manto said. "He was far from major league ready in all phases of the game. He had a funky glove, swing, and approach. Nothing was intact. There was no finesse. He was the type who definitely had to hit his way into the majors."

Manto said that Howard challenged him as a coach, and it was particularly gratifying to see him progress, such as when he started picking up on turning on the inside pitch. "He was a developmental joy. He was all eyes and ears for the coaches, and always willing to learn."

Regarding Howard's defensive liabilities, Arbuckle concurred with Manto. They believed Howard needed to make great strides with the glove regardless of how he hit if he wanted to get anywhere near major league pitching.

There was also the business side to how things went down with the Phillies and the burgeoning Ryan Howard. The Phils have rarely been accused of rushing a prospect. "It takes time to develop a player," Arbuckle preached. "It's the Phillies philosophy." Most Phillie fans are quite familiar with the tune of that song. With Howard and Chase Utley as two of those rare violators of the Bill James rule, their enormous success makes one wonder how much their delays were due to the winds of baseball fate and how much was simply misjudgment on behalf of the ball club. What are the odds of this happening in the same clubhouse, at practically the same time?

The new ballpark at Citizen's Bank Park was another twist in the Howard saga. With a scheduled move-in date of April of 2004 closing in on the Phils, the team viewed 32-year-old free agent Jim Thome as a key marketing piece for their new home. With a career OBP of .414 and having just hit 101 homers and 249 RBIs over his previous two seasons, Thome was a humble all-star veteran created in the type of blue-collar mold that Philly fans go crazy for. The Phils envisioned that the Thome package would translate into many more season ticket orders than if they rolled the dice with Howard, a high-risk prospect at the time who would be certain of but one thing – to challenge the league lead in strikeouts.

In the fall of 2002, Howard just finished his first Single-A season, hitting 19 homers and knocking in 87 RBIs in 493 at bats with an OBP of .367. Impressive for a 22-year-old, yes. But was it enough to be considered a star in the making? The Phils weren't so sure. So they chose to let that side of the fence play out on its own as they ushered Jim Thome into town that December with a six-year, \$85 million contract.

Over the next two years, Howard blossomed and dominated minor-league pitching. His bat made one thing clear: He deserved a shot in the majors *somewhere*. Meanwhile, Thome continued to produce in Philly, averaging 44 homers and 118 RBIs over the 2003-04 seasons. The Phils tried to trade Howard in 2004, but were cold-shouldered. Despite enjoying his greatest professional season – Howard hit .291 with 46 homers and 131 RBIs while splitting time between Double and Triple-A – the Phils couldn't get any takers, at least for the high price they were setting. The Pittsburgh

Pirates rejected a Howard offer for pitcher Kris Benson. Tampa Bay wouldn't move outfielder Rocco Baldelli for him either.

The beef about Howard was the usual – he still had a big hole in his swing. Even during that breakout 2004 season in which he won his second consecutive minor-league MVP, he struck out 166 times. If the Phils had doubts about Howard's future against big league pitching, they weren't alone. "It's not just us," Arbuckle said. "Other clubs were concerned as well."

So the Phils stood pat with the conflicting situation. "Let the chips fall where they may," was the company line of Arbuckle and GM Bill Wade, not willing to blink in the Thome-Howard standstill. "We'll let [Howard] continue to play, and at some point we may or may not have to deal with that issue," Wade said. "The luxury we have right now is that we have a superstar-caliber first baseman playing here, and a kid who looks like he has the credentials to be a very good player at the big-league level also."

But Ryan wanted it bad, and he wanted it now. Who could blame him? He was heading toward the peak of his athletic career, before even getting his major league career started. "Jim Thome is great, and the organization is," Howard said at the time. "But when you look at things realistically, the ultimate goal is to get to the big leagues, and trying to get there, it's ultimately blocked. I'm just trying to get to the big leagues and make an impact and play."

On July 1, 2005, the next chess piece was moved. Lucky for Ryan, he was the one calling out "check." That was the day the Phils placed Thome on the disabled list. Thome eventually recovered after undergoing surgery for a frayed elbow tendon, but was traded to the Chicago White Sox that November.

Ryan Howard's career was finally granted the freedom to prosper in the big leagues.

Checkmate.

- *John Cappello*

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