SundayReview  |  OPINION

What Happens When Baseball-Stats Nerds Run a Pro Team?

By SAM MILLER  APRIL 23, 2016

In 2015, the Sonoma Stompers, the team with one of the lowest payrolls in the Pacific Association, a professional baseball league near San Francisco, did something desperate: It handed its baseball-operations department to a couple of stat-savvy writers with no baseball-management experience, Ben Lindbergh and me.

We are devotees of the statistical school known as Sabermetrics, a word coined by Bill James and made mainstream by “Moneyball.” In short, number crunching. What we lacked in experience we made up for with a long paper trail of claims about how baseball teams should be run.

Theo Fightmaster, the Stompers general manager, hired us. In spring training, he introduced Ben, a writer for the website FiveThirtyEight, and me as “experts in statistical analysis.” We addressed the players and laid out our goals for the season: to lead the league in the first half, and in the second half, to go undefeated.
We were in charge of roster building and team strategy. We signed and cut players, built a scouting department with a volunteer staff of eight, installed high-tech cameras to track pitches on our home field and told our fielders precisely where to stand.

With the advantage of data and a willingness to subvert baseball orthodoxy, we could play the kind of baseball we’d only theorized about: efficient, imaginative, weird. Bring on the all-reliever pitching staff, the algorithm that would tell our pitcher which pitch to throw in each count and the clunky swinger whose exceptional college stats put him atop our spreadsheet-generated wish list.

Sure enough, with a talented team of returning veterans and spreadsheet discoveries, we won the first-half crown, with a record of 26-11.

But in the second half, when we should have been leveraging our data, our team began to collapse. The more data we had, the worse we played.

How had we gotten this so wrong?

Looking back with a year’s distance, we can pinpoint our first mistake. We should never have introduced ourselves with the words “expert,” “statistical” or “analysis” — nor invoked “data,” “numbers” or “Sabermetrics.” We should have come up with a better story.

Everybody on a baseball field is telling a story. Take, for instance, a shortstop on the rival Vallejo Admirals, a slick fielder and fast runner who would dive headlong for a ground ball even in the eighth inning of a blowout. Ben and I wanted to trade for him. But we found out our players despised him. They said he wore his uniform accessories — stirrups, sunglasses, compression sleeve — too ostentatiously, and he bunted too often. The Stompers called him Johnny JuCo, for “junior college.”

We shelved our trade plans, not because we thought there was anything
wrong with Johnny JuCo — Doesn’t everybody wear compression sleeves? Isn’t bunting often the sign of a selfless or smart player? — but because our team would never accept him. Johnny JuCo couldn’t control his story, and these otherwise neutral details became what defined him.

Our story — before we knew we were telling a story — had been similarly distorted. To us, “experts in statistical analytics” meant we were competitors, open to any data that would give us an advantage. But to the players it telegraphed elitism, self-certainty, nerdery.

Sure, we were nerds. We had built a database of statistics that were unheard-of in the Pacific Association. We could tell a batter that the home run he’d hit had come against an 85.26 miles per hour cut fastball, .847 feet from the center of the strike zone, and traveled 95.39 m.p.h. off his bat.

Yet most of our work was dedicated to the oldest of old-school disciplines: scouting. Every night, one of us would watch our next opponent and chart pitches. We’d note patterns, like the starter who tipped his lethal split-finger fastball by wiggling his glove. I condensed this information into scouting reports, written on whiteboards and propped up on our dugout bench each game.

This is not nerd stuff. But to many of our players, it was ignored as such simply because we, the nerds, were doing it.

We sold our story as something imposing — “data analytics” — and we made it about us. We should have sold it as providing them information, and made it about the team. That would have fit into their view of the sport — that we were trying to give them the same resources major-league players like Miguel Cabrera and Clayton Kershaw get. With other sabermetricians, more data wins arguments. In the dugout, a good story does.

We didn’t figure out our mistake until too late, and it cost us. Some of our team’s veterans ignored the video that we offered, or belittled our whiteboard
scouting reports. We fought our manager for six weeks over how he used our bullpen. “This is Baseball 101 because you haven’t played it!” he yelled as he stomped out of one meeting.

We had a winning team, but we didn’t have their trust. Early in the second half, when we signed a new outfielder who had hit .538 in college but flunked a tryout with a big-league club — our ideal recruit — some of our players and coaches badmouthed him before he’d even arrived.

The Stompers players settled on the new guy’s story — “The stat guys signed him. He must not be very good” — before he had the chance to tell his own. He was another Johnny JuCo. They lacked confidence in him, and he lost confidence in himself.

Then we lost confidence in ourselves and became too passive about following through on our vision for the team. Our dreams shrunk. Plans for the pitch-calling algorithm faded.

In the season’s final weeks, we changed course, focusing less on data and more on story. When we brought our left fielder in to reinforce our infield against a batter who hit only ground balls, we sold it as fun and adventurous. When we started using our closer in tight spots as early as the fifth inning — instead of the ninth, as every other team does — we kept our message as simple as could be: The game is on the line, so let’s take the bad pitcher out and put the good one in.

Who could argue with that? We still used reams of charts and graphs to make these decisions, but those stayed between me and Ben.

That’s when our team played something similar to the style of baseball we had envisioned — extreme defensive shifts, flexible pitching roles, lineup decisions guided by advanced stats instead of seniority. More players studied the whiteboard and thanked us for the video scouting we provided. Our team’s three aces in the final month were all spreadsheet signees, and nobody held
that against them.

Still, it had taken us too long to find our story. We did not go undefeated in the second half.

But we did make news. One of our spreadsheet discoveries was a pitcher named Sean Conroy, a soft-tossing, sidearming right-hander from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, a Division III college in upstate New York.

Despite impressive college stats, all 30 major-league teams passed him over in baseball’s amateur draft.

We trusted our numbers, though. He started the season as our closer and rewarded our faith in him: He had the league’s fourth-best earned-run average among those with at least 30 innings and won the award for the Pacific Association’s best relief pitcher.

Early in the season, Conroy mentioned to a few teammates, then to the team’s owner, then to the world, that he was gay. Professional baseball had never had an active, openly gay player. For years, when reporters would ask big leaguers whether the sport was ready, concern trolls in the clubhouse would say that the distraction would be too much. That the sport isn’t ready.

BUT Conroy took control of his own story. He didn’t announce himself to the team as “the first gay ballplayer” — an amazing story, perhaps the most important one in the entire sport last summer, but one that really would have offended many in our conservative, hypermasculine clubhouse. He announced himself to the team first with his performance as “ace reliever,” and that’s the story our team judged him on.

By the time local and national media descended on Sonoma to ask him what it was like to make history, Conroy was firmly part of the team.

Baseball was ready for him. Our club embraced every aspect of his wildly successful summer, and players who had once been so casual with
homophobic slurs now thanked him for the attention he brought to the Stompers.

Conroy did what we failed to do. He didn’t make his story seem scary, and he didn’t make it about himself. He made it about the team. If we’d started our season thinking about the story we were telling, maybe we would have made history.

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