

BASEBALL HISTORY

by

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Desert Winds Revisited

Last year at this time I presented a paper which excoriated the Arizona Diamondbacks for their pathetic all-time Major League team strike out record of 1,529. But what a difference a year and a full season of Kirk Gibson as a manager made. In 2011 they bettered their dismal 2010 W/L record by 39 games, rising from the ashes of the NL West to the top of the heap. Additionally, in Game 5 of the NLDS, they were just one clutch hit away from advancing to the NLCS.

How did they accomplish so much in so short a period of time? The short answer is as follows:

1. A roster overhaul
2. A much improved pitching staff
3. A more disciplined approach to all aspects of the game

In 2010, 48 men saw action for the Rattlers. Only 18 of them – 9 position players and 9 pitchers – played for the Diamondbacks in 2011. For the most part the retainees and the newcomers performed more effectively in the field and at the plate. Led by Ian Kennedy, the pitchers reduced the team WHIP from 1.432 to 1.286 and in the process lowered their ERA from 4.81 (15th in the NL) to 3.80 (9th in the NL).

One aspect of the more disciplined approach transformed the team to be more patient and selective at the plate. Since strikeouts were the topic last year, a comparison to this year is in order.

As stated above, the Arizonians returned 9 position players from the 2010 campaign and one of them, Kelley Johnson, was traded on August 23rd to the Toronto Blue Jays. He was the leader of the pack with 132 Ks at that time and sported a poor .307 K-average. Also, over the previous winter, the front office had jettisoned Mark Reynolds (211 Ks in 2010) by trade and Adam LaRoche (172 Ks) by free agency, thus ridding themselves of 25% of the previous year's Ks in those two moves.

Table One						
	AB	H	K	BA	K Avg	Diff
2010	5,473	1,366	1,529	.250	.279	+0.029
2011	5,421	1,327	1,249	.250	.230	-0.020

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The 1,249 Ks represented an 18.3% decrease, which translated to a 0.49 KA improvement and thus more opportunities for effective at-bats. However, a number of the offensive peripheral numbers – including hits (H), batting average (BA), bases on balls (BB), runs scored (R), extra base hits (ExBH), on-base percentage (OBP), slugging percentage (SLG) and on-base + slugging percentage (OPS) – were very similar from season to season.

In addition to overhauling the roster, players such as J. Upton, M. Montero, G. Parra, and R. Roberts emerged as more patient and thus improved their BA/KA differential as noted in Table Two.

Table Two						
I: Improved D: Declined S: Same						
2010/2011	AB	H	K	BA	KA	Diff
M. Montero	297	79	71	.266	.239	-0.027
	493	139	97	.282	.197	-0.085 (I)
K. Johnson	585	166	148	.284	.253	-0.031
<i>(with D'Backs only)</i>	430	90	132	.209	.307	+0.98 (D)
S. Drew	565	157	108	.278	.191	-0.087
	321	81	74	.252	.231	-0.019 (D)
G. Parra	364	95	76	.261	.208	-0.053
	445	130	82	.292	.184	-0.108 (I)
C. Young	584	150	145	.257	.248	-0.009
	567	134	139	.236	.245	-0.009 (S)
J. Upton	495	135	152	.273	.307	+0.034
	592	171	126	.289	.213	-1.076 (I)
R. Roberts	66	13	17	.197	.258	+0.061
	482	120	98	.249	.203	-0.046 (I)
B. Allen	45	12	20	.267	.444	+0.177
	29	5	13	.172	.448	+0.276 (D)
C. Gillespie	104	24	29	.231	.279	+0.048
	6	2	1	.333	.166	-0.167 (I)

In 2011, 16 new batters wore the AZDB uniform. Overall their numbers also reflected the new Arizona approach to hitting. Table 3 features the 8 newbies who had 100 or more at-bats. Note the great differential numbers put up by Bloomquist, Hill and Burroughs.

Table Three						
	AB	H	K	BA	KA	Diff
W. Bloomquist	350	93	51	.266	.146	+0.120
X. Nady	206	51	46	.248	.223	-0.025
J. Miranda	174	37	48	.213	.276	+0.063
P. Goldschmidt	156	39	53	.250	.340	+0.090
M. Mora	127	29	24	.228	.189	-0.039
A.Hill	124	39	19	.315	.153	-0.162
S. Burroughs	110	30	15	.273	.136	-0.137
H. Blanco	100	25	21	.250	.210	-0.040

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Even the pitchers “pitched in” compared to last year:

Table Four						
	AB	H	K	BA	KA	Diff
2010	320	59	123	.184	.384	+0.200
2011	314	58	104	.185	.331	+0.146

There is another way to restate all of the previous numbers:

- In 2010, there were 13 swingers with 100 or more AB's and 7 of them (54%) had fewer hits than strikeouts.
- For the 2011 squad, using the same criteria, there were only 3 of 17 (18%) in that category.

Tellingly, their average strikeout rate per game decreased from 9.44 to 7.71. In the process, double figure K games were reduced from 73 to 42 and, inexplicably, the Diamondbacks won 21 of those contests compared to 2010's woeful 19/54 record while whiffing more than 10 times.

Finally, in a remarkable game in this day and age, the Valley of the Sun boys came up empty only twice on July 7th while besting the Cardinals, 4 – 1. But that was nothing compared to April 26th versus the Phillies when Montero was the lone Diamondback to go down swinging in a 7 – 5 victory.

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ADDENDUM

Here's some more information gathered during the research for this paper.

- Despite their vast improvement, the Diamondbacks still have work to do. There were only 7 teams that K'd more than they did. A similar improvement in 2012 will vault them among the top teams in the NL.
- The ML total K mark was broken for the 4th consecutive year. This year's final tab was 34.488. This represents a 1,149.6 average and a 6.1 increase per team.
- Three teams – Pittsburgh (1,308), San Diego (1,320), and Washington (1,323) – became the 10th, 11th, and 12th clubs to K more than 1,300 times since 2001.
- San Diego (1,320/1,284), Seattle (1,280/1,263), and Washington (1,323/1,319) were the 3rd, 4th, and 5th teams to have more Ks than hits in Major League history, joining the 2001 Brewers and the 2010 Diamondbacks.
- Three teams K'ed less than 1,000 times – Chicago AL (989), St. Louis (978), and Texas (930).
- In 2011, Drew Stubbs became only the second player to fan more than 200 times in a season – 205 to be exact.

Table Five						
	AB	H	K	BA	KA	Diff
2011	604	147	205	.243	.339	+0.096
Career	1,298	326	422	.251	.325	+0.074

What else did the Reds get for their \$450,000 plus incentives? 22 doubles, 3 triples, 15 home runs, and a whopping 44 RBIs!

- Austin Jackson, in his 2nd season, tied for 25th on the single season strikeout list with 181. Unfortunately for the Tigers they chose to leave him in the lead-off spot. He rewarded them with 22 doubles, 11 triples, 10 home runs, 45 RBIs, 22 stolen bases, and a .317 OBP.
- Mark Reynolds, a 3-time 200K man, fell a tad short in 2011, but still managed to lead the American League with 196 treks back to the dugout. At this rate, he will pass Babe Ruth late in the summer of 2013, and, if any owner is crazy enough to keep paying him, he'll pass Reggie Jackson in 7½ seasons.

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- Jim Thome, who once appeared to be a lock to overtake Reggie, appeared in only 93 games and for the second year in a row whiffed less than 100 times. At age 41, he may decide this is one record he'd rather not break.
- Babe Ruth (1,330), the first man to 1,000, now stands 99th on the all-time list having been passed by Chipper Jones, David Ortiz, Scott Rolen, and Alfonso Soriano. Torii Hunter (1,301), Carlos Pena (1,292), Johnny Damon (1,230) and Lance Berkman (1,229) are the next active players in line.
- Mickey Mantle (1,710) dropped down 2 spots to 23rd when he was surpassed this year by Bobby Abreu and Adam Dunn. Waiting in the wings are Andruw Jones (1,677), Derek Jeter (1,653) and Derrick Lee (1,622).
- The following list is comprised of retired players who are among the top 1,000 base hitters – a significant accomplishment – but have more K's than hits. They are arranged by the highest BA/KA Differential to the lowest.

1	Jose Hernandez	+0.049
2	Dave Kingman	+0.036
3	Jay Buhner	+0.026
4	Dean Palmer	+0.021
5	Jose Canseco	+0.009
6	Greg Vaughn	+0.006
7	Tony Clark	+0.005
8	Richie Sexton	+0.005
9	Jesse Barfield	+0.003
10	Reggie Jackson	+0.001
11	Cecil Fielder	+0.00058

Troy Glaus did not make a ML appearance this year. I do not know if he retired. If he did, he should appear in the 12th spot with a +0.00037 differential – 1,375 hits and 1,377 K's.

- No active player who made it to the top 1,000 hitters in 2011 had more K's than hits. The list below is updated to reflect the active players who previously met the criteria.

Player	AB	H	K	BA	KA	Diff
Adam Dunn	5,390	1,312	1,809	.243	.336	+0.093
Pat Burrell	5,503	1,393	1,594	.253	.284	+0.031
Mike Cameron	6,839	1,700	1,901	.249	.278	+0.029
Jim Thome	8,259	2,287	2,487	.277	.301	+0.024

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If he recovers from his disastrous injury, Ryan Howard will join the above group sometime next season.

- Kelley Johnson was able to right his ship to a degree with the Blue Jays. Below are his numbers with Toronto as well as for the year.

	AB	H	K	BA	KA	Diff
Toronto	115	31	31	.270	.270	0
Year	545	121	163	.222	.299	+0.077

- Finally, what happened to Adam Dunn? His numbers look like something out of Dante's Inferno.

	AB	H	K	BA	KA	Diff
2011	415	66	177	.159	.426	+0.267

Now Dunn has been a premier home run and RBI man throughout his career and he is only 31 years old. Hopefully he can bounce back in 2012. But to have 2.68 times more K's than hits is just downright awful.

Also, he was just 6 plate appearances (PA) shy of qualifying for the batting championship. If he had, he would now reign as having the worst batting average ever for a full-time player.

Somewhere Rob Deer (.179 in 1991) is either smiling and/or empathizing. In his grave, Jim Canavan (.166 in 1892), still the owner of the worst average, is rolling over.

And, oh yes, in December 2010 the Chicago White Sox signed Dunn as a free agent to a 4-year contract for a mere \$56 million.