

BASEBALL HISTORY

by
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Hitting Machines

In a season full of surprises in 2004, perhaps the biggest (the Boston Red Sox World Series victory notwithstanding) was Ichiro Suzuki's 262 hit season. It was not so much that Ichiro broke the record, but that anyone had. Previously the last serious assault was in 1930 when Bill Terry and Chuck Klein had 254 and 250 hits respectively. In the intervening 74 years, the Red Sox at least made World Series and playoff appearances.

With his leap to the top of the pack, Suzuki now owns the number one and number ten spots on the season hit list. The man he replaced, George Sisler, is now at number two and number nine. The top ten are as follows:

Rank	Name	Hits	Year
1	Ichiro Suzuki	262	2004
2	George Sisler	257	1920
3	Lefty O'Doul	254	1929
	Bill Terry	254	1930
5	Al Simmons	253	1925
6	Rogers Hornsby	250	1922
	Chuck Klein	250	1930
8	Ty Cobb	248	1911
9	George Sisler	246	1922
10	Ichiro Suzuki	242	2001

Bold denotes Hall of Famer

Despite Ichiro's season-long pursuit, outside of Sisler's 1920 record, little was said about the rest of his magnificent career.

George Sisler was a baseball prodigy and as such was signed to a major league contract in 1911 – illegally as he was underage and did not have his parent's permission.

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Four years later, because of the previous shenanigans, he became one of baseball's first free agents. Eventually he signed with the St. Louis Browns and was reunited with his college coach, Branch Rickey, who was then the Brownies' manager.

Oddly enough, Sisler began his major league career in 1915 as a left-handed pitcher à la Babe Ruth. And like Ruth, he was much too valuable as a batsman not to play every day. However, in his 24 pitching appearances – 15 in 1915 – he garnered two complete game victories over the incomparable Walter Johnson.

Likewise his versatility was displayed in his defensive play as a graceful and sure-handed fielder. Seven times he led American League first basemen in assists, compiling a record 1,529 assists by a first-sacker for his career. That record still stands. He also played 37 games in the outfield and a couple of games both at second base and third base. His career fielding percentage was a fine .987.

Speed afoot was also an important element of his overall game. Tangible proof of this is four seasons (1918, 1921-22, and 1927) that he led the league in stolen bases.

But it was at the plate, swinging his 42-ounce club, that he really stood out – six 200+ hit seasons, 2 batting titles (.407 in 1920 and .420 in 1922) and twice leading the league in triples. In his final season of 1930, he batted .309 cracking the .300 barrier for the 13th time in his 15-year career. Currently, Sisler is tied for 15th with Lou Gehrig with a .340 career batting average.

The magnitude of his playing accomplishments is increased when you consider that in 1923 – in the prime of his career – he suffered a serious eye infection that caused him to miss the entire season and threatened to prematurely end his career. Most baseball historians say he was never the same after that and the statistics seem to lend credence to this. In his first eight seasons he averaged .361, but only .320 in the final seven seasons.

In his first game back in 1924, he went 2-for-4 on his way to a 194-hit season. Not at all shabby for someone with decreased visual acuity.

Finally, with all due respect to Ichiro, I would like to compare his 2004 season with Sisler's 1920 season. I have extrapolated Sisler's numbers

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to reflect 161 games as opposed to the 154 games he actually played.
It's a variation of the asterisk thing.

		Age	G	AB	H	R	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	SB	BA	SA
GS	1920	27	161	661	269	143	51	19	20	128	48	20	44	.407	.632
IS	2004	30	161	704	262	101	24	5	8	60	49	63	36	.372	.455

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