

For Pitchers in Majors, One Through Nine Are Loneliest Numbers

They Are for Great Hitters,
Like Gehrig and Ruth;
Rob Bell Gives Back No. 6

By STEFAN FATIHS

When Rob Bell was traded to the Texas Rangers in 2001, he requested the lowest uniform number available. "I was thinking 10, 18, 12, something like that," he says. But when Mr. Bell joined the team, he found jersey No. 6 hanging in his locker. It felt strange, he says, "right from the moment I had it on my back.

Strange, but not good. Mr. Bell is a pitcher, and big-league pitchers just don't wear the numbers one through nine. Thanks to some peculiar and powerful wrinkles in baseball history, single digits are associated with legendary hitters: No. 3 is Babe Ruth, No. 4 is Lou Gehrig, No. 5 is Joe DiMaggio, No. 6 is Stan Musial, No. 7 is Mickey Vernon, No. 9 is Ted Williams.

Most of baseball's one-digit pitchers played in the 1930s and '40s. Since 1968, research shows, 82 or more pitchers have worn single digits in the same season just three times. This year is one of them. After signing with the Boston Red Sox last winter, David Wells chose No. 3 in honor of his hero, Babe Ruth, who inspired him to play for Boston's archrival, the New York Yankees. Josh Towers of the Toronto Blue Jays for the third straight year is wearing No. 7.

To players, club executives and hardcore fans, the sight of a one-digit pitcher is jarring. Steve Yaciniuk, the equipment and clubhouse manager for the Oakland Athletics, for instance, doesn't like the very idea of it. If a pitcher asked him for a single digit, he says, "I would probably try to talk him out of it." If the pitcher insisted, Mr. Yaciniuk says he would seek clearance from the team's general manager. Zack Mizansin, the Rangers' equipment and

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and their numbers is especially strong. Pitchers are the focus of every play and are seen in many a camera shot on television. Besides, with so many single-digit numbers retired by teams to honor past greats—the Yankees, for instance, no longer use the numbers 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8 and 9—seeing one on a pitcher today stands out even more.

"It looks weird," says the pitcher Mr. Bell. He didn't like the attention No. 6 attracted from teammates, coaches and media. "You better pitch well with a single digit on your back, and I didn't," he says. The next spring, he traded it in for the welcome anonymity of No. 30. Now with the Tampa Bay Devil Rays, Mr. Bell wears No. 61.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, big-league teams didn't number players. Club owners feared fans wouldn't buy scorecards to learn the starting lineup because they would be oblivious from seeing the players' uniforms. The Cleveland Indians, in 1916 and 1917, and the St. Louis Cardinals, in 1923, briefly put numbers on jersey sleeves. But the experi-

ments were denounced in the press as silly and needless. "The players were embarrassed all the time," Branch Rickey, a Cardinals executive at the time, wrote in a letter to a sports writer in 1962. "They really didn't want to show themselves on the field."

The tradition of double-digit pitchers dates to January 1923, when the Yankees announced they would put numbers on the backs of their jerseys. The team said the leadoff hitter would wear No. 1, the second batter No. 2 and so on. "This will probably work out so that Babe Ruth's big No. 3 will come to be as famous as the 77 once worn by Red Grange," the football star, United Press predicted.

In those days, the catcher usually hit eighth, so he wore No. 8. The pitcher batted ninth but was skipped numerically in favor of backup catchers. In 1929, Yankees pitchers wore Nos. 11 to 21. (The Indians, who copied the Yankees' idea, were the first team to wear numbers on their backs because New York's opening game was rained out.)

As other teams added numbers, the lineup-based numbering system gradually disappeared. But pitchers stayed in the double digits. Exceptions were predominantly rookies and short-timers. The most famous: future Hall of Famer Bob Feller, who wore No. 9 as a 17-year-old rookie with Cleveland in 1936 before graduating to double digits the following year. Only around 160 pitchers in big-league history have worn single digits. Today, the most popular numbers for pitchers are in the 30s, 40s and 50s, in that order.

One-digit pitchers never forget the experience. When he was acquired by the Athletics in August 1970, Dooley Wornack was assigned No. 3, apparently because the team's equipment manager wasn't sure what position he played. Mr. Wornack pitched the day he joined the team. In the locker room afterward, he says, outfielder Reggie Jackson barked, "Get him out of that single-digit number! That's for regulars!" Mr. Wornack switched to No. 16.

Bill Monthospapette drafted No. 8 when he was traded to the San Francisco Giants during the 1968 season. "I'm looking at this every day in my locker and saying, 'What the hell am I doing with No. 8?'" he says. Albie Hanzamer wore No. 7 with the Giants in 1985 after giving his No. 14 to a returning veteran, Vida Blue. He says he chose the single digit because "in God's eyes...seven is considered the perfect number." On the field, though, "it didn't do much for me," he says.

Mr. Towers, the Toronto pitcher, got No. 7 when he was called up from the minor leagues in May 2003. The Blue Jays wore on the road in Yankee Stadium. The team's equipment manager, Jeff Ross, had two extra jerseys: No. 68, in a size 50, and No. 7, in size 48.

The larger uniform was too big for



In honor of Babe Ruth, Boston Red Sox pitcher David Wells wears No. 3.

Mr. Towers. So he put on No. 7. After the game, Mr. Ross asked him, "What number do you want?" The pitcher says he thought to himself, "We're in New York, Mickey Mantle, yeah, I'm keeping it." He rebuffed an offer from Mr. Ross the next spring to switch to double digits.

At 188 pounds, Mr. Towers could pass for a typical single-digit player like a shortstop. The same can't be said of Boston's 250-pound Mr. Wells. "It looks like Babe Ruth's pitcher for us," Red Sox executive Charles Steinberg says. Ruth did pitch for the Red Sox,

Only around 100 pitchers in big-league history have worn single digits.

from 1914 to 1919, but the team didn't wear numbered uniforms then.

Mr. Wells, who is currently on the 15-day disabled list with a sprained foot, played for the Yankees in 1997-98 and 2002-03. After first joining the team, he told reporters he wanted to wear No. 7, which the team retired in 1941, and asked to wear 83 before settling for 33. He pitched an inning in 1997 in a Yankees cap once worn by Ruth that he had purchased for \$35,000.

Hero worship aside, the small number is lost on the back of Mr. Wells's Ruthian size 54 shirt. "I assumed if anything he'd go for three digits to fill out that jersey," says Theo Epstein, Boston's general manager. "There's a lot of white space there."

Journal Link: WSJ.com subscribers can see a list of pitchers who have worn single-digit numbers on their uniforms, at WSJ.com/JournalLinks.

The Count

Numbers worn by Major League Baseball's 361 active pitchers, as of yesterday.



*A second pitcher is on the 15-day disabled list.

Source: WSJ

clubhouse manager, says he's still embarrassed about giving Mr. Bell No. 6. "I just think I would brain dead that day," he says.

That "such a subtle, meaningless thing" can trigger a visceral response reflects the power of tradition in baseball, says Tom Sheiber, a curator at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. He compiled a history of uniforms for the Hall's Web site. Uniform numbers are "the one thing people associate with the players they watched as a kid," says Mark Szang, co-author of "Baseball by the Numbers," an encyclopedia of more than 50,000 jersey numbers from 1925 to 1982. "You don't always remember the guy's batting average." Players can get so attached to numbers they will buy their old teammates' backs; in 1999, Rickey Henderson of the Athletics bought Ron Hassey a new suit in exchange for No. 24.

The relationship between pitchers
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