

FROM THE BULLPEN

Official Newsletter of the

NEBRASKA HOT STOVE LEAGUE

2023: Our 39th Season

Edition No. 32



October 27, 2023

OWNERS:

Ted Bridges
("PAwesome")
Wahoos
Returning Champion

Jeff Bechtolt
("Screech")
Monarchs

Jon Blongewicz
("Sunny")
Blues

Denny Bontrager
("SloPay")
Bears

Jim Buser
("Tirebiter")
Redbirds

Rick Drews
("Big Guy")
Tigers

Dave Ernst
("Skipper")
Senators

Bob Hurlbut
("Underbelly")
Tribe

Scott Krause
("BT")
Saints

Mike Morris
("Mouse")
Bombers

Mitch Pirnie
("Magpie/Tricko")
Bums

Chuck Sinclair
("Shamu")
Cubs

John Thielen
("Itchie")
Skipjacks

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Dave Ernst

Webmaster and
Assistant Editor
Linda "Chief" Koftan

SO MAYBE PITCHING ISN'T EVERYTHING?






Gentlemen:

For your intellectual stimulation and enjoyment, I provide hereinbelow a season-ending list of the top 25 pitchers in the Hot Stove League, their team at the end of the season, their total points for the season, the round that they were picked in and their overall draft position:

	Pitchers	Roster	Pts	Rnd Picked	Overall Draft Position
1.	Gerrit Cole	Bombers	779.0	1	6
2.	Spencer Strider	Tigers	726.0	2	17
3.	Zac Gallen	Bears	681.0	3	38
4.	Blake Snell	Skipjacks	680.0	7	86
5.	Logan Webb	Tribe	649.0	5	62
6.	Luis Castillo	Blues	644.0	5	55
7.	Kevin Gausman	Bombers	635.0	4	60
8.	Chris Bassitt	Senators	618.0	8	124
9.	Corbin Burnes	Senators	611.0	1	7
10.	Zach Eflin	Redbirds	610.0	24	308
11.	George Kirby	Blues	601.0	10	120
12.	Logan Gilbert	Bums	599.0	6	71
	Justin Steele	Monarchs	599.0	22	291
14.	Kyle Bradish	Monarchs	585.0	FA	
15.	Kodai Senga	Redbirds	565.0	12	152
16.	Merrill Kelly	Tigers	562.0	16	199
17.	Mitch Keller	Saints	559.0	26	336
18.	Freddy Peralta	Cubs	546.0	15	184
19.	Jordan Montgomery	Bums	545.0	15	190
20.	Jesús Luzardo	Saints	541.0	10	120
21.	Aaron Nola	Tigers	534.0	3	36
22.	José Berríos	Senators	526.0	16	202
23.	Max Scherzer	Senators	510.0	3	33
24.	Justin Verlander	Tigers	496.0	1	10
25.	Kyle Gibson	Monarchs	483.0	23	291



NOTES/COMMENTS/THOUGHTS

-  Kudos to Screech for being the only Hot Stove League manager to scoop up a free agent pitcher (Kyle Bradish, May 13) who finished in the top 25 pitchers. Most years, there are several different free agent pitchers who land in the top 25.
-  Of the four pitchers taken in the first round (Cole, Burnes, Alcantara and Verlander), all but Alcantara finished in the top 25. Pretty savvy.
-  Congrats to Itchie for picking up Blake Snell in the 7th round, and having him finish as the 4th best pitcher. What? Someone said that he was drafted by someone else and then dropped? Preposterous.
-  The drafting of Justin Steele by the **Monarchs** in the 22nd, Kyle Gibson by the **Monarchs** in the 23rd, Zach Eflin by the **Redbirds** in the 24th, and Mitch Keller in the 26th by the **Saints** were all excellent late-round picks. Smart cookies.
-  You will note, if you're paying attention, that the **Monarchs**, **Senators** and **Tigers** finished with the most pitchers in the top 25 with four apiece. The **Monarchs** finished in 4th, the **Senators** in 10th, and the **Tigers** in 12th. On the other hand, the **Wahoos** had 0 pitchers in the top 25, the **Cubs** had 1, and the **Bums** and **Saints** each had 2. And of course, we all know where they finished. Which begs the question, is our league really all about pitching? Demonstrably not.

Next week: The breakdown of the top 25 hitters.

D-DAY AND OMAHA BEACH

In September the Fam took a trip across the pond and on said trip experienced a one-day excursion from Paris to Normandy and Omaha Beach and back, with the benefit of a private tour guide to inform us about some of the eye-opening and jaw-dropping challenges and circumstances waiting for the invading Allied Forces on June 6, 1944. Prior to this trip, I had read a couple of books about D-Day, but it had been a few years and the facts were no longer fresh in my mind, and seeing the actual place where it happened and hearing about it from an experienced guide was nothing short of amazing.

One fun fact that I learned is that the "D" in "D-Day" doesn't stand for anything other than the start of battle. I had always assumed that the "D" stood for the word "deploy" or "disembark" or "death" or "destruction," or some dang word that starts with a "D." Apparently not. Somewhere along the way somebody apparently started referring to the start of the battle as "D-Day," and it stuck.

The code name for the operation was "Operation Overlord," but I'm not sure who cooked up that sobriquet. But it's a good one.

There is so much that could be said about Omaha Beach and the preparations for the most colossal invasion of all time, but what struck me the most was seeing the cliffs surrounding the area which had to be scaled by the elite ranger forces in the face of enemy fire so that they could attempt to take out German artillery encasements and ammunition depots to pave the way for all of the infantrymen coming ashore in landing crafts. That and the abject fear that



had to be in the hearts and minds of all of the invaders at Omaha Beach knowing that a ridiculously high percentage of them would be killed within seconds, minutes or hours of coming ashore, or attempting to come ashore. The loss of lives at Omaha Beach, and at some of the other of the five beaches that were invaded during Operation Overload, was staggering.

One of the rather key pieces of history that I learned about on this tour to Normandy was that there had been a previous cross-channel invasion (code named Operation Jubilee¹) primarily involving the Brits and the Canadians which was a disastrous failure. ² This earlier invasion occurred on August 19, 1942, at a place called Dieppe, and it resulted in a complete fiasco in which 3,623 of the 6,086 Allied soldiers who landed were killed, wounded or became prisoners of war. The Royal Air Force lost 106 aircraft to 48 for the Germans. The Royal Navy lost 33 landing craft and a destroyer. It was considered a complete victory for Germany, but important lessons were learned which helped Operation Overlord achieve success.

In addition to our visit to Omaha Beach, we went to the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial located in Colleville-sur-Mer located on a bluff above Omaha Beach, which constitutes the final resting place of almost 10,000 soldiers who gave their lives in the battle for Normandy. It is an amazing, utterly sobering memorial. What I saw there, and what I felt when I was there, I will never forget.

In the aftermath of our Normandy visit, I was motivated to read more about D-Day, and so I purchased what the internet said is the definitive work on D-Day, authored by Antony Beevor, a British historian, and published in 2009. There are a million fascinating facts in this book, which I have almost finished, and which I will share more about later.



¹ As it turned out, one of the poorest choices of code names for a military operation of all time.

² I have to tell you, I felt pretty ignorant when I learned about this earlier cross-channel invasion. I could only wonder to myself if I had missed that day in Mr. Mueller's history class back in 10th or 11th grade. Or maybe that old knucklehead didn't know about it either? Anyway, now we all do.





ANOTHER FALL CLASSIC?

This morning on NPR they were talking about the World Series matchup between the Arizona Diamondbacks and the Texas Rangers, and they referenced the fact that the Rangers have never won the World Series and have not played in it since 2011, when they lost to the St.



Louis Cardinals. Many of you will remember, as I do, the heroics of David Freese of the Cardinals, who had a clutch two-run triple in the bottom of the 9th inning with two outs to tie Game Six (which occurred on October 27, 2011, **exactly twelve years ago today**), and then an epic walk-off home run in the bottom of the 11th to propel the Cardinals past the Rangers and into Game Seven, which the Cardinals won.

I was reminded of all this last week when I read Chapter 22 of *Why We Love Baseball*, which I share with you now:

DAVID FREESE LIVES HIS BEST LIFE

October 27, 2011, St. Louis

"The majority of American males put themselves to sleep by striking out the batting order of the New York Yankees."

—AUTHOR JAMES THURBER

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

I cannot tell you that baseball inspires more dreams than other sports. But I can tell you that baseball dreams, yes, they're at the heart of the game. Tell me: Did you ever practice the pose you would strike for your baseball card? I thought this was something ridiculous that only I would do, but then I put up a poll on Twitter and found that more than 70 percent of people who voted used to do this, too.

In 1952, the Topps Company invented the modern baseball card. The John and Paul of baseball cards were two men who apparently didn't care much for each other, Sy Berger and Woody Gelman. Together they came up with pretty much all the features that would thrill young baseball fans for generations: new designs every year; statistics on the back; obscure facts about the players; autograph replicas, etc.

I don't believe that Berger and Gelman came up with all the baseball card poses themselves, but in time there were five that emerged as the go-to poses for ballplayers.

Pose 1: A pitcher with his arm stretched out in front, as if he had just thrown a pitch.

Pose 2: A batter on one knee with a bat on his shoulder.

Pose 3: A batter in hitting stance directly facing the camera.

Pose 4: A pitcher holding his glove and pitching hand above his head.

Post 5: A fielder holding out his glove as if asking an infant to toss the ball.

I preferred Pose 3, and I practiced it often, dreaming not of one specific thing, but of a million little things, a million big-league



ballplayer things of making a diving play, of punching a single up the middle, of chattering with the stars in the dugout, of hearing the roar of the crowd, of seeing my own baseball card in the same pack with Tony Gwynn, Dan Quisenberry, and Jack Fimple.[*]

And like everyone, I dreamed of being the World Series hero for my hometown team.

But dreams like that don't ever really come true, do they?

David Freese grew up in Wildwood, Missouri, about 30 minutes west of St. Louis via I-64. The family attended many Cardinals games. A 16-year-old David was in the crowd when Mark McGwire hit his 500th home run. That was a good day for dreaming. David did a lot of dreaming when he was that age; he wanted to be a hero for the Cardinals.

Freese was a good slugger himself for Lafayette High School. In his senior season, he hit a school-record 23 home runs. But after that, he was kind of tired of baseball. He'd spent his entire childhood on traveling teams, in batting cages—he'd had enough. He went to the University of Missouri to study computer science. The school offered him a full baseball scholarship. He turned them down.

"I was burned out," he would say. "And I'd lost my love of baseball."

He spent a year away from the game. Then the summer after his freshman year, he was back at Lafayette, working on a school maintenance crew. As he walked around the school, he watched the baseball team practice. And he felt it. He wanted to play again. He called the baseball coach at local St. Louis Community College at Meramec and asked if he could try out for the team. He then left Missouri, played at Meramec, became a Junior College All-America, went to the University of South Alabama, hit like crazy, was named conference player of the year, and was drafted in the ninth round by the San Diego Padres.

Yeah. That was fast.

And before he ever played a single game for San Diego he was traded to, yes, his hometown St. Louis Cardinals.

Freese just kept on hitting through the minor leagues, and in 2011, at age 29, he won himself a starting spot as the Cardinals' everyday third baseman. He crushed the ball. It was all happening. And then on May 1, he was hit by a pitch, it broke his hand, and he missed the next two months. When he came back, he was a shell of



himself. The Cardinals were playing uninspired baseball. It looked like a lost season.

Then all sorts of weird things happened. The Cardinals started playing better—they won 12 of 14 at one point. It shouldn't have mattered: The Atlanta Braves seemed to have the wild-card slot all wrapped up. But the Braves collapsed, losing their last five games, and St. Louis sneaked into the postseason on the final day of the year.

The Cardinals were supposed to be easily dispatched by the Philadelphia Phillies, who boasted what many had hyped as the greatest starting rotation ever. Instead, St. Louis won with great pitching, and the Cards were underdogs again when they faced Milwaukee in the National League Championship Series.

Cue: David Freese. He put on a six-game light show, hitting .545. He carried the Cardinals to the World Series against the Texas Rangers. In the decisive Game 6, he went 3-for-4 with a double, a homer, and three RBIs. The Cardinals were going to the World Series. Hometown hero David Freese had led them there.

"What can I even say?" he gushed after the game. "It's a dream come true."

Right. How can anything beat that?

Rain delayed Game 6 of the 2011 World Series by a day. That gave the Cardinals' players time to reflect on how they were blowing the series. The Cardinals had lost a ninth-inning lead in Game 2. Their bats failed to show up in Game 4. And in Game 5, they squandered another lead and then failed to come through in the biggest moment.

Specifically: David Freese failed to come through. In the seventh inning, with the score tied, Freese came up with the bases loaded. On the first pitch, he lofted an easy fly ball to end the threat.

"If he sees a good pitch, it's his job to swing at it," Cardinals' manager Tony La Russa insisted. "He needs to keep swinging."

Foreshadowing.

Game 6 of the 2011 World Series was a freewheeling carnival of a game, one of the wildest and weirdest and funnest in baseball history. Was it a great game? Maybe not. It was more like the description film critic Pauline Kael had for *Star Wars*: "A box of Cracker Jack which is all prizes."

Top of the first inning, the Rangers took a 1–0 lead.



Bottom of the first, St. Louis took the lead themselves.

Top of the second, Texas tied the game.

The Cardinals committed a brutal error in the fourth and Texas took the lead 3–2.

The Rangers committed a brutal error, and the score was once again tied.

The Cardinals committed *another* error—this time it was David Freese dropping an easy pop-up—and Texas had the lead again.

Texas committed an error in the sixth, and the score was tied.

Finally in the seventh inning, the Rangers seemed to put an end to the nonsense. Third baseman Adrián Beltré launched a long home run to right field. Nelson Cruz followed with an upper deck shot of his own.

And the Rangers carried a two-run lead into the ninth. They sent in one of the hardest throwers in baseball, Neftalí Feliz, to clinch the game and a Rangers championship. Feliz gave up a double to Albert Pujols and walked Lance Berkman.

David Freese came up with two outs and two runners on.

Neftalí Feliz threw a 98-mph fastball on the outside half of the plate. David Freese poked it to right field.

What strikes me about the moment now, looking back, is that when the ball left the bat, nobody knew how it would turn out. Freese hit it well but not *too* well. When he hit it, the ball had a chance to be anything—a home run, a routine fly out, a double, a triple, a fantastic catch . . .

All any of us could do was watch.

Texas right fielder Nelson Cruz drifted back on the ball. He seemed to have a play. But something about the trajectory of the ball fooled him. He reached up, but the ball carried over his glove and crashed into the wall, ricocheting back to the infield. By the time the Rangers chased it down, the Cardinals had scored the tying run. And David Freese stood on third base.

He'd already lived his biggest dreams.

And now this!

But the game went on. Freese had only tied it. In the 10th inning, the Rangers took the lead right back on a two-run home run by Josh



Hamilton. In the bottom of the inning, the Cardinals scored two runs of their own on a barrage of bloopers and grounders.

A Cracker Jack box with all the prizes.

Then it was the bottom of the 11th inning, the score was tied, and David Freese stepped to the plate. He told himself: "Just put the ball in play."

Rangers' reliever Mark Lowe threw him a 3-2 fastball over the heart of the plate.

Freese put the ball in play. He hit it some 420 feet to center field.

And THAT was the dream.

"We'll see you tomorrow night," broadcaster Joe Buck said, echoing the call his father Jack Buck had made in Game 6 of the World Series 20 years earlier. Goose bumps.

The Cardinals won the World Series the next day; Freese was named World Series MVP.

In the end, David Freese had a fine career. It was not a Hall of Fame career. But he got a thousand hits and hit more than a hundred home runs. He made an All-Star team. A fine career.

But those are just numbers. David Freese lived the dream. Do you know how many players grew up rooting for a team and then ended up playing for that team and then led that team to the World Series, then saved that team from defeat and then hit the walk-off home run that won the biggest game? I can think of only one. I suspect David Freese wouldn't trade places with anybody.

[*] In 1984, the Topps Company, without telling anyone, printed four times as many Jack Fimple cards as the others, guaranteeing you would get at least one in each pack. I don't know if that was a true statement, but I do know I got a lot of 1984 Jack Fimples.

Wow. What a great story, and extremely well told. Until being enlightened by Mr. Posnanski, I don't remember being aware that Freese was a homegrown Cardinal who grew up in Missouri or that he had turned down a baseball scholarship to the University of Missouri because he was "burned out" on the game. A classic yarn, and one worth retelling.



HSL HALLOWEEN DEADLINE DRAWS NEAR

As the October 31 deadline for registration for the 2024 Hot Stove League Draft draws ever nearer, to date written, blood oath commitments have been received from the following HSL owners:

Big Guy
Sunny
Shamu
Mouse
Tirebiter
Underbelly
Screech

Perhaps more will arrive in the mail this weekend, or through the magic of the internet, but as this issue of *From the Bullpen* goes to press, the following HSL owners are in serious jeopardy of being shut out from next year's Draft and Trip:



For all of you procrastinators out there, it is time for action. Just sayin'.

* * * * *

Next edition:

- 1) Book report on Antony Beevor's *D-Day*; and
- 2) *Shut Up, Shut Up, Shut Up!* (the end of Democracy as we now know it?).

Have a great weekend.

Go Big Red!

Skipper

³ Although Denny has indicated that he will be in attendance, we anxiously await receipt of the signed form.

