AWESOME stories

BILL JAMES and SABERMETRICS



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Bill James, the baseball-numbers guy, is surrounded by many pages of baseball statistics (during his younger years). From his first "book" on baseball stats, which he self-published in 1977, he grew his numbers-based business—called "STATS"—into a large following. Fox News purchased STATS, for $45 million, in 1999. Bill voiced himself in *The Simpsons*—Season 22, episode 3 (entitled *MoneyBART*)—which aired in October of 2010

With time on his hands, and baseball on his mind, Bill James was a 6' 4" security guard working as a night watchman in Lawrence, Kansas. Initially employed by Pinkerton''s - a detective agency whose original motto was “We Never Sleep” - George William James covered the night shift at a Stokley-Van Camp plant which made "pork and beans."

At the University of Kansas, Bill had studied economics and literature. He loved numbers - especially about baseball - and he liked to write. Actually, he was obsessed with baseball numbers but found that he couldn't get all the statistics he wanted. It cost too much for a regular guy to buy the information from Elias Sports Bureau.

Bill began to accumulate whatever interesting baseball statistics he could find. He didn't gather those stats just for the fun of having them all in one place. He thought the numbers could be used to learn something about baseball. Raising an issue, then looking for evidence (for or against), he asked questions like this:

> *Baseball keeps copious records, and people talk about them and argue about them and think about them a great deal. Why doesn't anybody use them? Why doesn’t anybody say, in the face of this contention or that one, "Prove it?"* (Michael Lewis, quoting Bill James at page 75 of *Moneyball*.)

In 1977, Bill James wrote and self-published *1977 Baseball Abstract: Featuring 18 Categories of Statistical Information That You Just Can't Find Anywhere Else*. His "book" - sixty-eight mimeographed pages of narratives and numbers held together with staples - cost $3.50 per copy. He ran a short ad in *The Sporting News* to let potential customers know it was available.

Pleased that he'd sold seventy-five copies, Bill turned his ongoing work into an "annual" publication. In 1978, he sold 250 copies. By 1982, Ballantine Books was publishing his yearly stats and views in a book called *The Baseball Abstract*.

Realizing that baseball fans wanted more and more stats for lots of reasons - including a growing interest in baseball fantasy leagues - Bill invested in (and became the creative director for) a pre-existing company called STATS, Inc. He named his method of analyzing the numbers "Sabermetrics" (after SABR, the Society for American Baseball Research).

Dallas Adams - a baseball statistician - was an important thinking partner for Bill as he evaluated his own ideas. In 1985, while both men were in Switzerland, Bill and Dallas recorded an interesting joint interview about sabermetrics for the Armed Services Network. Rare recordings of those broadcast segments survive.

As interest in sabermetrics grew, so did the customer-base for STATS' products. Individual baseball fans weren't the company's only customers. So were major media businesses like ESPN and *USA Today*. In 1999, Fox News Corporation bought STATS for $45 million.

Some people, working inside Major League Baseball, were also reading Bill James. One of those people was Sandy Alderson, the general manager of the Oakland A's, who had collected almost everything Bill had ever written.

Alderson liked Bill's approach. It gave people in charge of professional baseball teams a way to use statistics more meaningfully. Maybe it would help Alderson to create a winning team.

Could past stats, for example, help a general manager more accurately value a player's worth? Could

individual stats help to guide the analysis when a team added new members? What about stats to more objectively evaluate a pitcher? Was this an entirely new way to think about baseball?

By the time Billy Beane became Sandy Alderson's assistant, he had never heard of Bill James. By the time he became the A's general manager himself, Billy had read all the *Abstracts* Bill had ever written.

Paul DePodesta, and his laptop computer, would fit right into the A's new approach to building and managing their team.

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Questions 2 Ponder

Do “Insiders” Have All the Answers?

Bill James was a baseball “outsider” when he self-published his first book on Major-League Baseball statistics. Why would someone “outside” a field believe that anyone “inside” the field should listen to (or implement) his/her suggestions?

Do you think that people who are "insiders" are the only ones with enough knowledge to cause change in their field? Why, or why not?

Do you think that the "fresh eyes" and insights of outsiders could be more helpful—instead of less helpful—in identifying and solving problems? Explain your answer.

How Do We Know When to Persevere or Give Up?

Bill James—like J.K. Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* books—believed in his own intuition and abilities when few people supported his early efforts. What does it take for someone to keep moving forward despite the apparent lack-of-interest (or even derision) expressed by others?

How hard is it to be ignored—but to keep plugging-along—if we really believe what we’re doing is right? Explain your answer.

Does there ever come a time when it's better to give-up than to persevere? If so, how do we figure-out the right path?

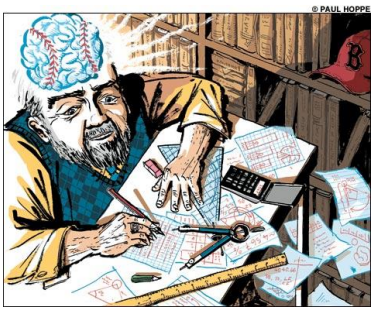
Media Stream



Bill James

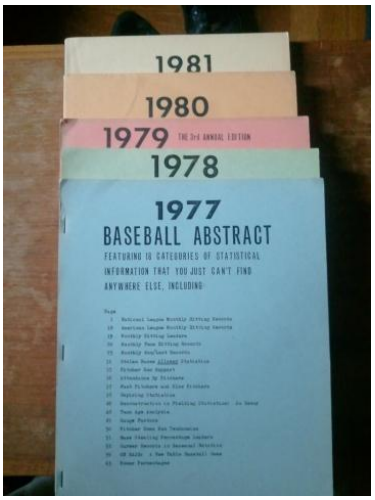
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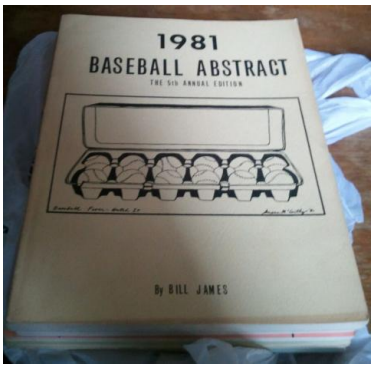
Bill James - Caricature by Paul Hoppe

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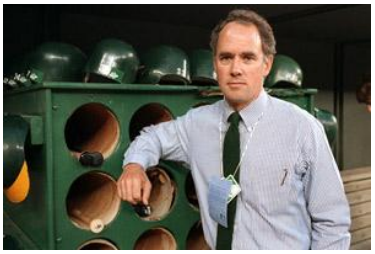
Bill James - 1977 Baseball Abstract

Image of Bill James' Baseball Abstract, online courtesy Craig Glaser.
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Bill James Invents Sabermetrics

Image of Bill James' 1981 Baseball Abstract, online courtesy Craig Glaser.
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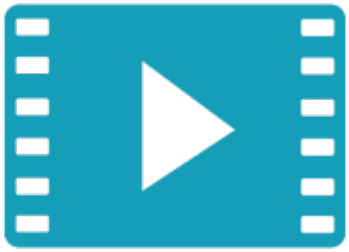


Sandy Alderson - Former GM of the Oakland A's

Photo of Sandy Alderson, as GM of the Oakland Athletics, by AP/Rusty Kennedy. Copyright, Rusty Kennedy, all rights reserved. Provided here as fair use for educational purposes.
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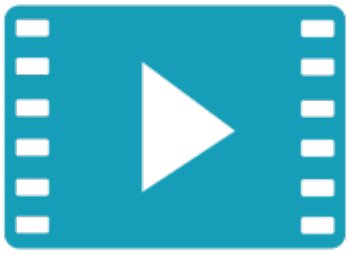
Bill James - 1985 Interview about Sabermetrics

Clip of AFN's June, 1985 recorded interview with Bill James, online courtesy Tracy Thibeau and Armed Forces Network (via YouTube).
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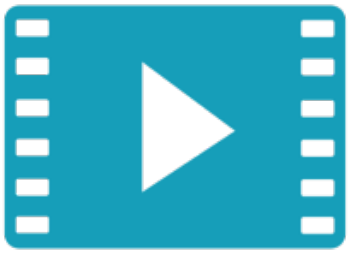
Bill James - 1985 Interview, Part 2

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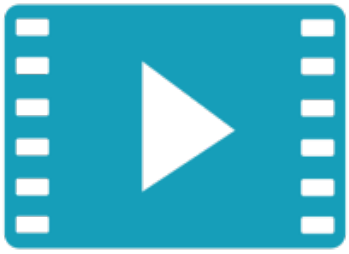
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Bill James - 1985 Interview, Part 4

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Bill James - 1985 Interview, Part 5

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