



It used to take little more than one set of eyes to evaluate a baseball player. In today's world, it takes many, many sets of eyes, algorithms, computers, and, in some cases, a room full of people who never set foot on a baseball field while wearing a uniform. The days of traditional scouting have largely gone by the wayside as teams use sabermetrics and in-depth statistical analysis to evaluate players. All organizations still send scouts out to the dusty diamonds of the Midwest, the rocky fields of Latin America, and the Asian countries in search of talent, but sabermetrics has forever changed the landscape of baseball.

For Bernie Pleskoff, nothing can compare to actually seeing a player in action. Pleskoff was nice enough to meet with me prior to last Friday's Indians-Astros contest. He's a writer for MLB.com, producing some tremendous scouting reports on some of the league's most exciting young players. He's a former pro scout for the Mariners and Astros and a former Northeast Ohio resident, though he hides his Indians fandom well to remain impartial about the players he's writing about.

Though Bernie is a member of SABR, the Society for American Baseball Research, the namesake of sabermetrics, his old school way of thinking and past experiences in scouting gave me a different perspective in just the 20 minutes I spent talking with him. Some saber guys (not me) take baseball for granted, looking only at the numbers and blinding themselves from the game itself. Within the first couple minutes of talking with Bernie, it was apparent that he truly loved the game of baseball. He cherishes his role in the game and understands the evolution that has taken place. But to him, it's still about the story that the eyes tell.

When I told Bernie that I was into sabermetrics, he smiled. With an age difference of around 40 years between us, it probably went without saying that we would have differences on the ways we form opinions about players.

I asked Bernie what, exactly, he did in the scouting world. As a pro scout, he would go to the Major League ballparks scanning for players his organization may want to acquire via trade or sign in free agency the following offseason. As Bernie described it, he would be given a list of questions ranging from, “What’s the pitcher’s fastball velocity like?” to “What does the pitcher throw in this count?” For position players, he would look at things like bat speed, the catcher’s footwork, an outfielder’s first step, and a hitter’s plate discipline.

These are all things that sabermetrics can tell us in a roundabout way. Sabermetrics, at its core, is designed to hold value over a large sample size. Only certain sabermetric stats hold predictive value, so small sample sizes may not translate to the course of two months, four months, or the entire season. Scouts don’t have that luxury. They come and they go. They file their reports to their superiors based on three, possibly four, games worth of observations.

Players are graded in various categories on a scale of 40-to-80. As Bernie explained it to me, a 40 is a guy that just doesn’t have it. A 45 is a utility player. A 50 is an everyday player. A 55 is an above average player. A 60 is an All-Star. When you hear scouts talk about an “80 grade” anything, that’s an elite ability.

Bernie would be sent to scout a team for one series. He would have to create an entire scouting report on a player based on maybe 12 plate appearances. If he was sent to evaluate one specific player and he didn’t play, he would use batting practice to make his assessments. In particular, that was one of the things he told me that blew my mind. I have always viewed batting practice as a necessary part of the day to get some swings in prior to the game. Scouts view it in a much different manner.

Bernie ran down some of the things he’s looking for during BP. “Does he take it seriously or does he just screw around? Can he go opposite field in the first three swings? Can he bunt? Can he drive the ball?”

Personally, any time I’ve ever seen a guy put on a show in batting practice that makes people “ooh and ahh”, I dismiss it. It’s a controlled environment with no breaking balls. But, the scouts I follow on Twitter and beat writers who hear things from scouts will rave about a player’s batting practice if he impresses. I never thought much about batting practice before my conversation with Bernie. Suffice to say, I’ll look at it differently from now on.

Regarding players that don't play, we talked about Jake Elmore. Jake Elmore had no at bats in the series and will be best remembered for managing to get picked off of second base in a tie game in extra innings with nobody out on Thursday night, making him a perfect example for Bernie to use. About him, Bernie pointed to the roster sheet in front of him and said, "So, let's say I'm here to scout Jake Elmore, right? He probably won't get any at bats in the series. But, he pinch ran. He fell asleep out there. He didn't think about Yan Gomes's arm strength. He didn't think about Yan Gomes's footwork. That sticks with me."

Brett Wallace's name came up. That became the old school versus new school conundrum. Bernie told me that Wallace keeps getting chances because of sabermetrics. He's 26 years old, has played in four different organizations already, and has a career Major League slash line of .242/.313/.391/.704. In the minor leagues, Wallace posted a .383 on-base percentage. "He'll never make it at this level," Bernie said. "But teams keep taking a chance on him." All 308 of Wallace's Major League games have been with the Astros, who Bernie says rely almost exclusively on sabermetrics now.

Bernie's work for MLB.com included profiles of [Trevor Bauer](#) and [Clint Frazier](#), the Indians first-round pick in 2013. I asked Bernie about Bauer first. "I was right about that one, wasn't I?" he smiled. We talked about the Indians' middle infield depth allowing the team to trade Didi Gregorius in that three-team deal and he praised Gregorius, while also talking about how great Francisco Lindor and Dorsyss Paulino are. I told him that I thought the Indians would try to trade Bauer this offseason for 50 cents on the dollar, cutting ties with Bauer and letting him be somebody else's problem. He shook his head. "They're not the type of organization to do that," Bernie replied. "They'll let him hang himself before they do that, if you know what I mean."

The conversation shifted to Frazier. Bernie, as he stated in the scouting report linked above, recalled how Frazier nearly crushed his hand when they shook hands. He said Frazier had forearms like Popeye. I asked if the reports were true about Frazier's bat speed. Bernie nodded, but continued talking about his raw strength. Like the scouting report says, Bernie's concern is with Frazier's outfield defense.

But, I walked away from the conversation even more excited about Frazier. Scouts have a language all to themselves. When Bernie fixated on Frazier's strength, it told me that he expects Frazier to be a guy that hits for power at the Major League level. The kind of guy that can drive the ball out of any ballpark. Hitters can lift weights to increase strength, but Frazier is naturally strong with a good body type to continue to mature into. He obviously has some holes in his

swing with a high number of strikeouts in his first year of pro ball, but the way Bernie emphasized his strength was very telling.

The final thing we discussed was the holes that the Indians have entering next season. We talked, off the record, about how the team would go about filling those holes. One player we discussed was Lonnie Chisenhall, who I have very little hope for because he doesn't walk and can't hit lefties. When I told Bernie that I just don't see him getting it, he shook his head. "Within the next two years, he'll get it," he answered. I gave my rebuttal and he simply replied, "I like his swing." We agreed that he's not good enough at third base defensively, but Bernie made it clear how much he likes his swing.

The Chisenhall discussion is another example of sabermetrics versus the eye test. I see a guy who makes too many outs since he doesn't walk. His fielding metrics are poor. All of the stats say he's a platoon player at best. But, Bernie's watched a lot more baseball than I have. He sees something there. He sees Chisenhall's hit tool and thinks it can still blossom. I'll defer to the man who has watched a lot more baseball than I have and I'll hope and pray that Bernie will be right.

One of the things I liked the most about Bernie is how clear it was that he loved talking about baseball. He was candid, open, honest, and even spoke off the record, even though we were talking in person for the first time. Bernie was actually in town for his high school reunion, which he admitted he would have not flown in for had the Indians not been in town. It was apparent that his life revolves around baseball and that's clearly something that I can appreciate.

Something that will stick with me from our conversation happened within the first couple minutes of chatting. When I mentioned I was into sabermetrics, Bernie tapped his chest above his heart. He said nothing more. There is a sabermetric stat for almost everything, except for the one thing that still makes the game entirely human. Sabermetrics don't measure heart.

***Follow Bernie on Twitter, [@BerniePleskoff](https://twitter.com/BerniePleskoff)***

(Author's note: A sincere thank you to Bernie for allowing parts of our chat to be included in this column and for taking the time to meet with me to talk baseball, the game that we both love.)

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