

## MLB: Making the Argument for Clutch Performers

Written by {ga=papabearjere}

Thursday, October 17 2013 12:00 PM - Last Updated Sunday, October 20 2013 6:17 AM

---



Over the past decade, and really dating back to the early days of [The Bill James Baseball Abstracts](#), baseball analysts have done an excellent job of systemically eliminating traditional narratives from baseball discourse. People are beginning to understand that things like pitcher wins, batting average, and errors are poor ways to judge player performance. The mystique of the [“proven closer”](#) and the [sacrifice bunt](#) is slowly fading. Nowadays, fans are more skeptical of the traditional, and statistically unproven, baseball tropes that have been propagated as baseball’s holy doctrine for over a century.

Since we’re in the midst of an incredibly exciting baseball playoff, the current baseball trope that’s being attacked is the idea of “clutch”. Many of the arguments are well outlined in [this piece from SI’s Albert Chen](#), but the main takeaway is this: There is no statistical evidence of players performing better in clutch situations. The guys that fans consider clutch, the Derek Jeters and [David Ortiz](#), don’t have the statistical profile late in games and in the playoffs that would indicate that they raise their performance in clutch situations. If there were such a thing as clutch performers, their “clutchiness” would show up in the data. Thusly, since there’s no evidence of clutch performers in the data, there can’t be such a thing as clutch performers.

But I don’t think that’s the case.

## MLB: Making the Argument for Clutch Performers

Written by {ga=papabearjere}

Thursday, October 17 2013 12:00 PM - Last Updated Sunday, October 20 2013 6:17 AM

---

For starters, the biggest issue in the debate about clutch performers is how do we actually define “clutch”? Many of the arguments out there use something along the lines of “late and close” statistics (Baseball Reference defines late and close situations as plate appearances in the seventh inning or later with the batting team tied, ahead by one, or the tying run at least on deck.) or playoff statistics.

But when it comes to defining clutch, a statistical approach is the wrong way to go about it. For one thing, baseball is a game of sample size. Even the most prolific postseason hitters only accrue around 300 postseason plate appearances in a career, which is not nearly enough to come to any concrete conclusions about a player. Throw in the fact that a disproportionate amount of these playoff and “late and close” at-bats come against either the opponent’s best starters or top relievers, and it is clear that there’s no use in trying to parse through the numbers to identify the clutch performers.

*Side note: Good luck finding an argument regarding clutch performers that actually mentions the pitchers. Pitchers are equally likely to come up big in a clutch spot as hitters. In fact, a hitter can do everything right in a clutch at-bat and still not get a hit because the pitcher made the pitches he needed to. Just another reason not to trust the statistics when it comes to evaluating clutch performers.*

So how do we define and identify clutch performers? A lot of the anti-clutch arguments, such as [this one](#) from the esteemed Keith Law (Insider only) will claim that it doesn’t make sense to think that players can magically improve their performance in clutch situations. This is undoubtedly true, but it also mis-frames the debate.

A few weeks back, I took a shot at explaining why [Michael Brantley was having more success with runners on base than with the bases empty](#). What I noticed after watching a multitude of Michael Brantley at-bats is that he was the exact same hitter with the exact same approach regardless of the situation. I think this is the key to defining what exactly it is to be “clutch”. Clutch performers shouldn’t be defined as “[raising the level of performance](#)”, but instead should be defined as a player consistently performing in clutch situations as he would in any situation.

## MLB: Making the Argument for Clutch Performers

Written by {ga=papabearjere}

Thursday, October 17 2013 12:00 PM - Last Updated Sunday, October 20 2013 6:17 AM

---

If clutch performers are defined like this, it makes a lot more sense to consider exactly what qualities a clutch performer may have. The thing that makes a guy like David Ortiz, or even a guy like Michael Brantley, more likely to succeed in a clutch situation is that they have the same approach in the ninth inning as they do in the first.

Ultimately, if we're going to say there's no such thing as clutch performers, then we have to say that there's no real difference between an at-bat in April versus an at-bat in October. I don't think that's true. There are a ton of emotions and pressures and challenges that are present in postseason at-bats that simply aren't there in April. I believe that managing and channeling those emotions and pressures and challenges is a skill, and some players are better at that skill than others. When viewed in this light, it would seem that there is a place for the clutch performer in baseball after all.

*Jeremy Klein is an unabashed Cleveland Sports fan who clearly had [way to much fun](#) at Syracuse this past weekend. You can follow him on Twitter*

[@PapaBearJere](#)

### Read More From Jeremy Klein:

[MLB: Wild Cards and Replay Review](#)

[Brian Hoyer and Keanu Reeves](#)

[Michael Brantley and Consistency](#)